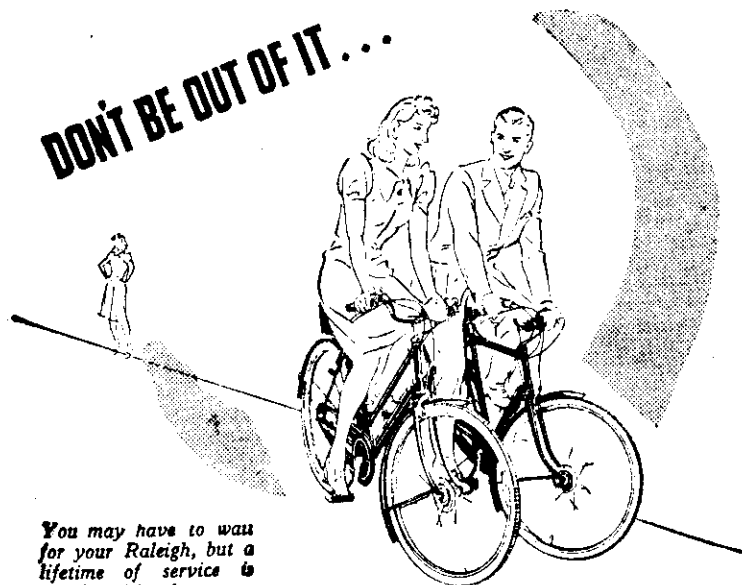


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ENGLAND'S FOREMOST LETTER-WRITER

World Quest for Horace Walpole's Letters

FROM an ABC talk by DR. W. LEWIS, Chairman of the Advisory Council of the U.S. Library of Congress and a trustee of Yale University, who visited Australia recently at the invitation of the University of Melbourne. Dr. Lewis is the Editor of the Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's letters. Walpole's eminence in the field of English diarists and letter writers is the subject of an afternoon programme to be heard from 2YA this Sunday (August 17).

IN any talk about Horace Walpole it is perhaps wise to say at the outset who he was not. He was not the Prime Minister; that was his father, Sir Robert Walpole. And he was not the late novelist; that was his distant cousin, Sir Hugh Walpole. Horace Walpole was the letter-writer, the foremost English letter-writer of all time.

It is possible to enjoy his letters without understanding exactly what he is talking about, because they are exceedingly witty and entertaining, but scholars of the 18th Century have come to realise that they have a more serious aspect, that they are documents of great historical importance.

The conscious goal and object of Horace Walpole's life was to transmit to posterity—that is, to-day—an accurate and readable picture of his time. He was a man placed at the centre of affairs who was not only a keen and sensitive reporter, but an original and brilliant writer as well, and he reported and wrote for more than 60 years.

Fortunately, he realised that more important than anything else was accuracy, and that unless posterity found his statements true when it came to examine them all, his labour would have been in vain.

Reliable Guide

Posterity has found that Walpole is a reliable guide; that, indeed, we learn more about the 18th Century from him than from any other man. His letters were first printed in 1798, the year after his death, and have been appearing ever since, but until recently they had never been edited: that is to say, the allusions and references with which they abound had never been explained.

It was clear that an edition of the letters which solved all these puzzles would be an invaluable work of reference for students of the period. I embarked on this undertaking, the Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence, in 1933, with the assistance of an Advisory Committee, composed equally of Americans and Englishmen.

Among the latter were the King's Librarian, the Director of the National Portrait Gallery, and the Deputy Keeper of MSS. of the British Museum. Twelve volumes of the Edition have now appeared. We have 40 more to go.

My first job was to find the originals of the letters to and from Walpole. It is a cardinal rule of editing mss. that one must if possible edit them from the originals or photostats of the originals, for only in that way can one be certain of editing from an accurate text.

Even the most careful scholar will make errors of transcription. Walpole's

printed letters were full of them, errors in dates and proper names, bad guesses at illegible words, and former editors had not hesitated to delete passages they considered improper or, in the case of two editors, passages they considered dull.

My guess was that there were in existence something more than 7,000 letters to and from Horace Walpole. I knew of the whereabouts of fewer than half of them. How was I to find the rest? This treasure hunt has led me around the world.

Six From Six Hundred

Letters and mss. may be found in the hands of three sorts of persons: booksellers, librarians, and private owners. Of these the booksellers are, not surprisingly, the most co-operative, but unfortunately, they have the fewest letters.

Of the 6,000 and more letters to and from Walpole which I have found, fewer than 3 per cent. have come from booksellers. But in bookshops as well as elsewhere one may find letters and mss. which the owners do not know they have.

Not long ago I was in the shop of the most famous bookseller in America. His assistant showed me a ms. of Gray, the author of the *Elegy*, who was Walpole's intimate friend at Eton and Cambridge.

"There are some verses on the back," the assistant pointed out to me, "but they are of no importance."

In spite of this I was glad to take the ms. away with me, for the verses "of no importance on the back" were in Horace Walpole's hand.

Nearly one-third of Walpole's correspondence is in public libraries, with the Bodleian and the British Museum in the lead. I realised that other libraries throughout the world must have Walpole's letters, for collectors have always wanted at least one of them and wherever Britons and Americans have gone, they have carried their collections with them.

Some of these undoubtedly had got into public libraries in remote parts of the earth. So I had printed a letter asking for help, which I sent to 600 libraries all over the world. In answer I had just six replies, and of these six only one announced a letter.

Librarians, I now realise, feel such circular letters as I sent out are an imposition on their time and good nature: if the seeker is in earnest, they think, let him come and look for himself.

I now agree with them, but I naturally have a very warm feeling for that library which helped me in such a friendly way at the outset of my work. The library was the Public Library of Victoria, Melbourne.

And now for the letters which are privately owned, the hardest-to-win prizes

NEW ZEALAND LISTENER, AUGUST 15