Guide to the Argus Book Shop Correspondence

YCAL MSS 427

by Sandra Markham

2010

P. O. Box 208330
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http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/

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Collection Overview

**REPOSITORY:** Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library  
P. O. Box 208330  
New Haven, CT 06520-8330  
beinecke.library@yale.edu  
http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/

**CALL NUMBER:** YCAL MSS 427

**CREATOR:** Argus Book Shop (Chicago, Ill.)

**TITLE:** Argus Book Shop correspondence

**DATES:** 1857–1955

**BULK DATES:** 1930–1944

**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** 7 linear feet (18 boxes)

**LANGUAGE:** English

**SUMMARY:** The Argus Book Shop Correspondence consists of the shop’s “author correspondence” files holding letters between Ben Abramson and his staff and more than four hundred writers, artists, printers, critics, and illustrators. While some of the folders hold single or just a few letters, Abramson had more extensive relationships with many writers and artists, including John Austen, Faith Baldwin, March Cost, Frederic Dannay, Norman Davey, Rhys Davies, August Derleth, Robin Douglas, Joan Marshall Grant, W. G. Hardy, Claude Houghton, William McFee, Henry Miller, Frank Cheyne Papé, Louis Paul, Frederic Prokosch, William Saroyan, Harold Sinclair, and John Steinbeck. Hundreds of Abramson’s typed carbon replies are present in the files; in them, he discusses business and literary concerns, along with his philosophies and opinions on a wide range of topics. While the lack of financial, inventory, vendor, and publishing records keep the collection from being a complete record of the Argus Book Shop, the correspondence files present reveal how Ben Abramson developed business and personal relationships with authors, illustrators, and shop patrons, and in particular with British authors, the obstacles he encountered while conducting business during World War II.

The collection also includes, in Series II, more than forty undated literary essays, poems, and book reviews which may have been submitted for an “Argus miscellany” that Abramson often discussed in his correspondence but apparently never produced. The writings do not appear in Abramson’s journal Reading and collecting, and likely date after 1938. The Argus Book Shop correspondence files were acquired by Philip D. Sang (1902-1975), a Chicago businessman, philanthropist, and collector of historical and literary manuscripts, who then donated the material to Yale.

**ONLINE FINDING AID:** To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: http://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.argus
Requesting Instructions

To request items from this collection for use in the Beinecke Library reading room, please use the request links in the HTML version of this finding aid, available at http://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.argus.

To order reproductions from this collection, please send an email with the call number, box number(s), and folder number(s) to beinecke.images@yale.edu.

Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b. box
f. folder

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition
Gift of Philip D. Sang in 1955 and 1956.

Custodial History
Deborah B. Covington’s biography of her father, The Argus Book Shop: a Memoir (1977), reveals that Abramson’s will instructed that “all records were to be destroyed and the stock sold within six months after his death” (p. 50). She wrote that “Going through six four-drawer file cabinets of correspondence was a big job. The author correspondence Ralph Newman purchased and arranged to have donated to Yale, Ben’s favorite university” (p. 52), a choice likely influenced by Abramson’s long friendship with Argus patron Norman Holmes Pearson (1909-1975), a professor of English at Yale University. Ralph Newman (1911-1998) was proprietor of the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop in Chicago. Philip D. Sang (1902-1975), the donor of the collection, was a Chicago businessman, philanthropist, and collector of historical and literary manuscripts. Sang appears to have transferred the bulk of Abramson’s “author correspondence” to Yale in 1956, but had given a few letters the previous year with another part of his manuscript collection. Covington mentioned in a 1957 letter to Yale curator Donald Gallup that Abramson had given some of Steinbeck’s letters to collectors. The New York Public Library holds three folders of Abramson’s correspondence with authors whose names begin with L through Z (MSS Col. 5).

Conditions Governing Access
The materials are open for research.

Boxes 15-18: Restricted fragile material. Reference surrogates have been substituted in the main files. For further information consult the appropriate curator.

Conditions Governing Use
The Argus Book Shop Correspondence is the physical property of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Literary rights, including copyright, belong to the authors or their legal heirs and assigns. For further information, consult the appropriate curator.

Preferred Citation
Argus Book Shop Correspondence. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
The Argus Book Shop Correspondence was formerly two separate collections which were created by the library’s curators after Philip Sang donated the papers to Yale in 1955: “Za Sang-Abramson” held letters between Abramson and American writers and was kept in the Yale Collection of American Literature; “Uncat MS Vault Argus” held those with British authors and was kept in the Yale University Library’s Rare Book Room. The two collections were moved into the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library when the building opened in 1963, and were reconstituted as the Argus Book Shop Correspondence in 2010. Eleven letters to Ben Abramson from John Dos Passos, Henry Miller, William Saroyan, and John Steinbeck, a gift from Philip Sang in 1955, were retrieved from the YCAL Za Letter File and incorporated into those authors’ files.

Six letters and two postcards to Abramson from John Steinbeck had been retained by Deborah Covington, daughter of Ben Abramson; photostats of these items were made for Yale in June 1957 and are present in the Steinbeck folders. The original letters and postcards are now in the John Steinbeck Collection at the Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

Ben Abramson and his Argus Book Shop

The American book seller and publisher Ben Abramson was born in Lithuania in 1898, and immigrated to the United States with his parents after the turn of the century. The family settled in Chicago, where Abramson attended the Jewish Training School, a special academic and manual training program for underprivileged children of refugees. In 1916 he took a job as a clerk at the Economy Bookstore, where he learned enough about the trade to establish his own business, the Argus Book Shop, at 434 South Wabash Avenue in 1920. The shop moved to 333 South Dearborn Street in October 1928, and in February 1940 to 16 North Michigan Avenue. Abramson sold new and second-hand books, specializing in modern literature and rare books including fine bindings, first and limited editions, and private press volumes. In addition to selling books, he was a publisher and literary agent for several writers, and was the editor and publisher of Reading and Collecting: a Monthly Review of Rare and Recent Books, which he issued from 1936 to 1938. Also interested in the visual arts, he regularly exhibited prints and paintings in his shops, and in 1942 made a notable acquisition of over 1,300 original wood blocks engraved by Thomas Bewick.

In 1944 Abramson closed his Chicago operations and moved to New York; on November first of that year he opened the Argus Book Shop at 3 West 46th Street. By 1947 he began to suffer what would become chronic health and financial problems. Acknowledging that much of his business was accomplished through the mail, Abramson moved with his daughter Deborah Benson Covington to Mohegan Lake, near Peekskill, New York, in April 1949. However, country life held little appeal and he returned to Chicago in March 1953 to reopen the Argus Book Shop at 218 South Wabash Avenue. Deteriorating health and financial situations continued to plague him there, and Abramson died by his own hand on July 16, 1955. He was survived by five siblings, his wife Mollie, and their daughter Deborah.

Throughout his career Abramson employed several assistants who interacted with patrons and authors in person and through the mail. One employee was George M. Dashe (1904-1984), who left Argus to open his Georgian Book Shop on South Michigan Avenue in Chicago in 1940.

Scope and Contents

The Argus Book Shop Correspondence consists of the shop’s “author correspondence” files holding letters between Ben Abramson and his staff and more than four hundred writers, artists, printers, critics, and illustrators; the remainder of the shop’s records were destroyed following instructions he had written into his will. While some of the folders hold single or just a few letters, Abramson had more extensive relationships with many writers and artists, including John Austen, Faith Baldwin, March Cost, Frederic Dannay, Norman Davey, Rhys Davies, August Derleth, Robin Douglas, Joan Marshall Grant, W.G. Hardy, Claude Houghton, William McFee, Henry Miller, Frank Cheyne Papé, Louis Paul, Frederic Prokosch, William Saroyan, Harold Sinclair, and John Steinbeck. Hundreds of Abramson’s typed carbon replies are present in
the files, and discuss business and literary concerns, along with his philosophies and opinions on a wide range of topics. To many of the writers with whom he became close, Abramson freely dispensed personal advice. On the business end, his letters show that he regularly recommended and shipped literature to Argus patrons, including Alfred Kinsey and other scholars and authors, as well as searched for and obtained from other vendors books specifically requested by patrons. Contracts in the folders for John Anthony Carr and Stanley Marks reveal the existence of the Argus Agency: A Service for Writers, wherein Abramson acted “as a personal representative for authors and as an agent for any and all literary, dramatic, motion picture or other such material produced by them.” The largest group of letters present is those between Abramson and the writer Henry Miller (1900-1968), which cover in detail many aspects of Miller’s career, finances, and travels between 1937 and 1955. Abramson published some of Miller’s writings and sold most of his publications, as well as providing a mail-order service for sending Miller (and Miller’s friends, on Miller’s account) his own works and new titles by other authors. With the Miller correspondence is a folder holding Connecticut Anthroposophical Society membership lists and redacted letters from people across the country who were attempting to purchase Miller’s Tropic of Cancer (1938). In addition to publishing and retailing books, Abramson handled the sale of literary manuscripts for authors such as W. Somerset Maugham, whose file contains a price list of works available for purchase at Argus.

The collection also includes, in Series II, more than forty literary essays, poems, and book reviews which may have been submitted for an “Argus miscellany” that Abramson often discussed in his correspondence but apparently never produced. They do not appear in Abramson’s journal Reading and Collecting (1936-1938), and likely date after 1938.

While the lack of financial, inventory, vendor, and publishing records keep the collection from being a complete record of the Argus Book Shop, the correspondence files present reveal how Ben Abramson developed business and personal relationships with authors, illustrators, and shop patrons, and, in particular with British authors, the obstacles he encountered while conducting business during World War II.

Arrangement

The files contain two-way correspondence between Abramson (and his staff) and the shop’s patrons, primarily occurring during the period when the store was located in Chicago. The earliest item in the collection, and a true outlier, is an 1857 demand note enclosed in a letter from author Helen Headland; otherwise, the material in the series dates from 1920 to 1955, the span of Abramson’s career.

Series I is arranged alphabetically by correspondent.

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| b. 5, f. 160 | Ferber, Edna | 1941 Nov 26 |
| b. 5, f. 161 | Ferguson, J. De Lancey (John De Lancey) | 1943 |

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See: Falstaff, Jake

<p>| b. 5, f. 162 | Ficke, Arthur Davison | 1941 Apr 15 |
| b. 5, f. 163 | Fineman, Irving | 1939–1942 |
| b. 5, f. 164 | Finney, Charles G. (Charles Grandison) | 1939–1948 |
| b. 5, f. 165 | Fischer, Martin | 1937–1941 |
| b. 5, f. 166 | Fisher, Vardis | 1946–1950 |
| b. 5, f. 167 | Fletcher, John Gould | 1944 Jun 21 |
| b. 5, f. 168 | Fodor, M. W. | 1941–1942 |
| b. 5, f. 169 | Foster, Michael | 1939 Jun 4 |
| b. 6, f. 170-171 | Fraenkel, Michael | 1939–1948 |
| b. 6, f. 172 | Frederick, John T. (John Towner) | 1941 |
| b. 6, f. 173 | Freehof, Lilian and Solomon Bennett | 1942–1944 |
| b. 6, f. 174 | Frost, Robert | 1941–1942 |</p>
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b. 8, f. 289  Marks, Stanley J.  1943–1944
b. 8, f. 290  Martin, George Victor  1941–1944
b. 8, f. 291  Martin, John Bartlow and Frances R.  1942–1944
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b. 8, f. 293  Mason, Walt  undated
b. 8, f. 294  Masters, Edgar Lee and Marcia  1935–1943
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b. 8, f. 300  Mencken, H. L. (Henry Louis)  1927–1955
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b. 8, f. 303  Millay, Edna St. Vincent  1933, 1941

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b. 9, f. 304-314  Correspondence
See also: Houghton, Claude (1944)
Includes photograph of Anais Nin (1941)  1937–1955, undated

b. 9, f. 315  Connecticut Anthroposophical Society letters and membership lists
Holds letters requesting copies of Miller’s book *The Tropic of Cancer*  1938–1940

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b. 10, f. 317  Millspaugh, C. A. (Clarence Arthur)  1939
b. 10, f. 318  Moore, Doris Langley  1933 Feb 17
b. 10, f. 319  Moore, E. E.  1932 Jul 19
b. 10, f. 320  Moore, Harry Thornton  1942 Jan 28
b. 10, f. 321  Moore, Ward  1941–1942
b. 10, f. 322  Morley, Christopher  1932–1943
b. 10, f. 323  Morris, Constance Lily  1937
b. 10, f. 324  Morrison, Nancy Brysson  1947–1948
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Includes a printed circular letter from Abramson to his shop patrons (undated); a typed carbon copy of a letter from Van Wyck Brooks to “Max” (1941); press release for book on shells by Maxwell Smith (1941); letter from Abramson to “Percy” [Loring?] (1943); collation of edition of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (undated)
**Series II. Manuscrits**

*0.42 linear feet (1 box)*

The series is comprised of a group of literary essays, poems, and book reviews, predominantly original typescripts, that were likely submitted for Abramson’s proposed “Argus miscellany.” Some of the manuscripts include photographs meant to be used as text illustrations.

Series II is arranged alphabetically by author.

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Selected Search Terms
The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library’s online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

Subjects
Authors, American
Authors, English
Booksellers and bookselling -- United States
Bookstores -- United States
Publishers and publishing -- United States

Names
Abramson, Ben
Austen, John
Bailey, J. O. (James Osler), 1903-1979
Baldwin, Faith, 1893-1978
Cost, March, -1973
Dannay, Frederic, 1905-1982
Davey, Norman, 1888-
Davies, Rhys, 1901-1978
Derleth, August, 1909-1971
Douglas, Robin, 1902-
Eisenschiml, Otto, 1880-1963
Fraenkel, Michael, 1896-1957
Grant, Joan, 1907-1989
Hardy, W. G. (William George), 1895-1979
Houghton, Claude, 1889-1961
Maugham, W. Somerset (William Somerset), 1874-1965
McFee, William, 1881-1966
Miller, Henry, 1891-1980
Morley, Christopher, 1890-1957
Nin, Anaïs, 1903-1977
Papé, Frank Cheyne, 1878-1972
Paul, Louis, 1901-1970
Prokosch, Frederic, 1908-1989
Rascoe, Burton, 1892-1957
Sang, Philip D.
Sang, Philip D. -- Ownership
Saroyan, William, 1908-1981
Sinclair, Harold, 1907-1966
Steinbeck, John, 1902-1968
Tice, Clara, 1888-1973
Walton, Evangeline
Welch, Patrick

Corporate Body
Argus Book Shop (Chicago, Ill.)