

*Selected  
Letters of*  
**WILLIAM  
FAULKNER**



*Edited by*  
**JOSEPH BLOTNER**

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## Introduction

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Ten years ago, on the advice of my friend Lawrance Thompson, who was then working on his biography of Robert Frost and his edition of Frost's letters, I suggested a collection of Faulkner letters to Mrs. William Faulkner and her daughter Jill. Their immediate reaction was that William Faulkner would not have wanted such a volume. His personal letters were never remotely intended for publication. He had made his desire for privacy clear in many ways. "I'm old-fashioned and probably a little mad too," he had written to Malcolm Cowley. "I don't like having my private life and affairs available to just any and everyone who has the price of the vehicle it's printed in, or a friend who bought it and will lend it to him." And, "It is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished and voided from history, leaving it markless, no refuse save the printed books; I wish I had had enough sense to see ahead thirty years ago and, like some of the Elizabethans, not signed them. It is my aim, and every effort bent, that the sum and history of my life, which in the same sentence is my obit and epitaph too, shall be them both: He made the books and he died." But he had signed the books, and fame had found him out. He had wanted recognition as a young writer, but the full measure of it to which the work entitled him was slow in coming, and when it did come he sometimes regarded it with irony and contempt. Yet he did not shirk what he felt to be the responsibilities that came with that fame, and so he raised his voice, upon a surprisingly varied number of rostrums, both for his craft and for his country. He remained withal, of course, a very private man.

It fell to his daughter and literary executrix, Jill Faulkner Summers, finally to confront this paradox of the towering achievement and the creator who in his private life wanted something like anonymity. When I wrote *Faulkner: A Biography*, she allowed me to quote as I wished from his writings, including his letters. Although I quoted liberally, there remained much more from his correspondence that I would have included had not the study been already very lengthy. So a book of selected Faulkner letters was a logical next step. All who admire William Faulkner as artist and man will be grateful once more to Mrs. Summers for making possible this further insight into the mind and life out of which came the

art that willy-nilly carried the man himself along to be a part of the inevitable intensive scrutiny.

These are selected letters rather than complete letters, a collection meant to be representative rather than inclusive. Numerous Faulkner letters are unavailable in sequestered collections. I have excluded some which treat material covered in other letters or which constitute substantially the same type of letter already represented. I have also omitted those published in *William Faulkner: Essays, Speeches and Public Letters*, edited by James B. Meriwether. The main purpose of this collection is to provide a deeper understanding of the artist, to reveal as much as possible what one can see in the letters about his art—its sources, intentions and process of creation—and beyond that to reveal attitudes basic to that art: aesthetic, philosophical, social and political. The letters also reveal different facets of the man: his relationship with family and friends and those whom he knew primarily in his capacity as a writer—fellow writers, publishers, editors, agents, directors, producers and readers.

There are omissions in these letters which are indicated by ellipses. (Faulkner himself used this device sparingly, and it will be clear to the reader at which points the ellipses appeared in the original.) Some of the omissions are of inconsequential day-to-day material which has no bearing on Faulkner the artist, on his work, or on any revealing facet of his personality. Other omissions are of repetitive material sometimes almost identical with that in other letters. Maurice Coindreau recorded Faulkner's remark about the composition of *The Sound and the Fury*: "Écrit alors que l'auteur se débattait dans des difficultés d'ordre intime." Characteristically, this reticent artist did not reveal what those difficulties of an intimate nature were with which he was struggling. Among the letters printed here some intimate passages have been omitted. Many of these, however, are treated in *Faulkner: A Biography*, where there was space to set them forth in relation to the situations which elicited them. Some of these omissions are of the sort to be found in the published letters of James Joyce—material much less intense and sparser in quantity, however, than in the case of the great Irish writer. In any event, one hopes that the reader will not begrudge the artist this shred of privacy at this stage in the history of the Faulkner corpus. One day, very possibly, he may stand as utterly revealed as do some other twentieth-century writers, but that day seems far off. One reason is that the editor and biographer must take what he can get. Some who knew William Faulkner refused to supply any information. Others who were willing to help sometimes supplied only excerpts rather than complete letters from him. This was their privilege, and one can only be grateful to them for providing as they did glimpses into William Faulkner's mind and life as they related to his art. I hope that the reader who admires the work and respects the man will concur.

One should not conclude without a few words about William Faulkner as a letter-writer. He often said he was not "a literary man." By this he meant that he was not in what he called "the establishment of literature," as is, for instance, Malcolm Cowley. He was not a literary critic, historian or scholar. And though he wrote some literary criticism, principally as a young writer, I believe he also meant to differentiate himself from literary men such as André Gide and Thomas Mann, who not only composed fiction but discussed it formally and at length. His judgment of himself is borne out in these letters. There is relatively little of the purely literary here in content or in tone. There is nothing like the self-consciousness one finds in the correspondence between authors whose letters sound as though they were written with an eye to future publication.

This is not surprising. Apart from his basic temperament, Faulkner's indifference—sometimes his aversion—to correspondence was intensified by his work as postmaster at the University of Mississippi for the better part of three years, a time of trial for both himself and his patrons. His feelings were still fresh when he wrote his first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*: "There was a general movement into the post office. The mail was in and the window had opened and even those who expected no mail, who had received no mail in months must needs answer one of the most enduring compulsions of the American nation." Thirty years later, having mislaid a letter, he spent half an hour searching for it. A friend asked if it would not be easier to write a new one. "It's bad enough to have to write letters," Faulkner replied. "It's inexcusable to lose one that's already written. To have to rewrite one is intolerable!" In a different mood, he advised his wife that the fewer pieces of paper one signed, the less vulnerable one was.

For all these reservations, his letters make good and surprisingly varied reading. Some have a quaintly old-fashioned ring to them, as when he begins by telling his correspondent: "Yours at hand." There are actually a few which sound a bit like literary exercises, such as the one he wrote in 1925 to his Aunt 'Bama about an Italian village. But for him letter-writing was not—as it sometimes was with Hemingway—an exercise after composition, like the hot-walking of a horse after a race. There are letters Faulkner wrote for amusement, such as the one he sent from Paris to his mother about vacationing relatives. In some letters he savors a story, as when he wrote his wife about a comedy of medical errors in which he played a part. Still another—this to his stepson from Hollywood during World War II—has him remarking, like a social historian or anthropologist, what may be the passing of both an age and a culture. He could write tender letters to his family when he was away from home. Most often, however, he wrote business letters (and here one thinks of Joyce again), letters bearing on his craft and the problems of making a living from it. He would write his publisher asking for advances

on royalties and would usually tell him what he could expect to receive ultimately for the advances. It was this practice that gives us remarkable previews, sometimes years before their composition, of novels such as *Absalom, Absalom!*, the whole *Snopes* trilogy, and even his last novel, *The Reivers*. We see books as they grow and develop, from the careful construction of *The Hamlet* to the long ordeal of *A Fable*. Precise aesthetic concerns come through as well, from the punctuation of *The Sound and the Fury* to the initial and final titles of *The Wild Palms*.

William Faulkner could be a hurried letter-writer but he was not a careless one. His handwritten letters, especially the early ones, are usually clear and often graceful. As time went on, he used the typewriter more and more. With it he would often cancel a phrase or a line and start over again for greater clarity and sometimes for style. It was not usually his high style, his "rhetorical" style. But these letters were always distinctive, by turns melancholy, angry or amusing. They sound in his own authentic voice, and in reading them we are privileged to know somewhat better one of America's foremost artists.

JOSEPH BLOTNER

## *Editorial Notes*

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Alterations have been kept to a minimum. Idiosyncratic punctuation, abbreviation, capitalization and the like have for the most part been retained, with changes made only for clarity. The designation [sic] is used in the rare instances where confusion might otherwise result. Faulkner's frequent misspellings of proper nouns have been remedied, while the variant spelling of his own name—a characteristic of his family—has been left unchanged. Obvious typographical errors have been corrected silently, and paragraphing has been regularized.

When Faulkner signed a letter, he almost always did so in script. The symbol [t] designates the few cases where he typed his name, either as the sole signature or together with his handwritten one [s]. Dates are often difficult to assign and are based on varying degrees of evidence. Footnotes are supplied wherever they seem necessary. In such instances of need where they do not appear, the necessary information was not available to provide them.

MS. and TS. designate manuscript and typescript letters, both ribbon and carbon copies. The following abbreviations are used for repositories:

- ACLT Academic Center Library, University of Texas at Austin
- FCVA William Faulkner Collections, University of Virginia Library.  
Materials from other collections there are designated "Virginia."
- JFSA Jill Faulkner Summers Archive.
- NYPL New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.
- RH Random House, Inc.

Letters at university libraries other than those above are designated by the name of the university.

A chronology and genealogy have been included at the back of the volume, with the purpose of providing a contextual reference to Faulkner's life and family relationships.



SELECTED  
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WILLIAM  
FAULKNER



*On 9 July 1918, William Faulkner arrived at the Royal Air Force-Canada Recruits' Depot in Toronto with the rank of Private II to begin training as a Cadet for Pilot. After preliminary basic training, he was posted on 26 July to Cadet Wing, at Long Branch, to undergo further training and to study specific Air Force subjects. Next he would go to the School of Aeronautics in Toronto. He wrote home on stationery with the RAF crest. Fragments of one letter survive.*

To Mrs. Murry C. Falkner  
Friday [probably 6 Sept. 1918]

MS. JFSA  
[Long Branch]

I got the paper, also the bath towel and the cigs and sox. It's great, seeing the old Commercial Appeal again. Still cold and I am wearing all my sweaters and my shirts. I have to wear them all under my shirt, so I look like this.<sup>1</sup> Some one remarked today that this life certainly agreed with me, I have gained so much. . . .

....  
Lieutenant Todd is not here; being an officer, he doesn't have to go to ground school. He is at the S. of A, where we go in two weeks, I hope.  
....

<sup>1</sup> Faulkner had done a caricature-like drawing of himself.

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*From the time of his return to Oxford, Faulkner would occasionally visit friends in Memphis, among them Estelle Lake. Mrs. Donelson Lake made a copy of his thank-you note to Estelle.*

To Estelle Lake  
[received 2 Sept. 1919]

MS. MRS. DONELSON LAKE  
[Oxford]

Dear Miss Lake

May I thank you again for the trouble you went to for me and my eccentricities? I am sending you a drawing<sup>1</sup> which, when I have become famous, will doubtless be quite valuable.

Please give my regards to your Aunt.

Sincerely  
W. Faulkner

<sup>1</sup> The drawing illustrated a poem and apparently does not survive.

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*Faulkner's closest friend was Oxford lawyer Phil Stone. His older brother, W. E. "Jack" Stone IV, lived with his wife and children in Charleston, Mississippi, where Faulkner would sometimes stay as their guest. He addressed one thank-you note to Jack's wife, Myrtle.*

To Mrs. W. E. Stone IV  
Tuesday [postmarked 5 Sept. 1922]

MS. MRS. THOMAS LEATHERBURY  
[Oxford]

Dear Miss Myrt—

I want you to be sure and know how much I appreciate yours and Mr. Jack's kindness to me during my vacation. It's been so nice, being able to pick up and go to Charleston at any time, as I have done.

My hired man's vacation begins today, so I have really gone to work at last. I had a delightful trip home last night, reaching Oxford at eleven exactly.

Please give my regards to Mr. Jack, and my love to little Myrt and young Jack.

Sincerely,  
Bill F.

---

*Faulkner had been writing poetry since eighth grade. In the years after his return from Canada, he published a number of individual poems and amassed enough work to think of publication in book form.*

To The Four Seas Company, Boston, Mass.  
20 June 1923

TS. FCVA  
University, Miss.

Sir:—

I am sending you today under separate cover a manuscript entitled 'Orpheus, and Other Poems.'

Enclosed find postage for its return if the manuscript be not accepted.

Respectfully,  
[t] William Faulkner  
[s] William Faulkner

---

*Four months passed and Faulkner received no word. In early November, he wrote again.*

To The Four Seas Company

TS. FCVA  
University, Miss.

Sir:—

Some time ago I sent you a book of verse in Mss. entitled 'Orpheus, and Other Poems.' Will you be kind enough to inform me if such a Mss was received; and if so, what disposition has been made of it? I am under the impression that I enclosed postage for its return.

Respectfully,  
William Faulkner

---

*Four Seas responded promptly, enclosing a copy of their letter of 26 June 1923 which had failed to reach him. They had liked his poems—though there were "echoes of Housman and one or two other poets perhaps"—but could not afford to publish them entirely at their own expense. If he could pay the manufacturing cost of the first edition, they would pay a royalty on each copy sold which would return his investment when the edition sold out. Should the book be a success, they would issue subsequent editions at their own expense.*

To The Four Seas Company  
23 November 1923

TS. FCVA  
University, Miss.

Dear Sir:—

Your letter of 13 November enclosing a copy of your previous one has been received. As I have no money I cannot very well guarantee the initial cost of publishing this mss.; besides, on re-reading some of the things, I see that they aren't particularly significant. And one may obtain no end of poor verse at a dollar and twenty-five cents per volume. So I will ask you to please return the mss.

Thank you for your kind letter.

Sincerely,  
William Faulkner

---

*A little more than half a year later, Faulkner's friend Phil Stone encouraged him to try again. When Four Seas made essentially the same offer to publish the new manuscript, entitled The Marble Faun, Faulkner decided to pursue the matter with Stone's help.*

To The Four Seas Company  
19 July 1924

TS. FCVA  
Oxford, Miss.

Sir:—

In reference to contracts for the publication of The Marble Faun, by William Faulkner, enclosed in a letter regarding this Mss. to Mr Phil Stone, of Oxford.

I believe I shall be able to supply the guarantee of \$400.00, but before the matter is definitely settled, I wish to get the following information:

In clause ten of the contract it is stated '—provided that he shall pay the manufacturing cost of such plates—' Could this be changed to read 'the actual value of the melted plates?' Or, if this may not be done, can you give me an approximation of the manufacturing cost of the plates?

Could you include in this contract some definite date before or upon which the book will be offered for sale?

Yours sincerely,  
William Faulkner

---

*Four Seas agreed to Faulkner's request and stated that if the contracts were signed within the next week or two they would consent to publish*

the book not later than 1 November 1924. Although Faulkner at first balked at their idea of publicity photographs, Stone saw to it that they were made.

To The Four Seas Company  
9 September 1924

TS. FCVA  
Oxford, Miss.

Dear Sir:—

As you requested, I am to-day sending you, under separate cover, two photographs. You will also find enclosed a short biographical sketch.<sup>1</sup> I hope these will be satisfactory.

Sincerely yours,  
William Faulkner

<sup>1</sup> The sketch read as follows:

Born in Mississippi in 1897. Great-grandson of Col. W. C. Faulkner, C.S.A., author of "The White Rose of Memphis," "Rapid Ramblings in Europe," etc. Boyhood and youth were spent in Mississippi, since then has been (1) undergraduate (2) house painter (3) tramp, day laborer, dishwasher in various New England cities (4) Clerk in Lord and Taylor's book shop in New York City (5) bank- and postal clerk. Served during the war in the British Royal Air Force. A member of Sigma Alpha Epsilon Fraternity. Present temporary address, Oxford, Miss. "The Marble Faun" was written in the spring of 1919.

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The Marble Faun was not ready for publication in November and Faulkner chafed at the delay, for he had meanwhile determined to go to New Orleans to take passage for Europe. He planned to support himself by writing articles while he continued with his more serious work in the hope that he might begin to make his reputation abroad, as Robert Frost and Ernest Hemingway had done.

To The Four Seas Company  
16 December 1924

TELEGRAM ACFT  
Oxford, Miss.

IF YOU HAVE NOT SHIPPED MY TEN FREE COPIES MARBLE FAUN AND IF CAN BE SHIPPED FOR GODS SAKE SHIP THEM AT ONCE AS THIS IS HOLDING UP MY SAILING EVERY DAY. WILLIAM FAULKNER

---

In early January of 1925, Faulkner left Oxford for New Orleans but on his arrival took a room in the Vieux Carre instead of sailing. He met novelist and short-story writer Sherwood Anderson and got on well with him. Together they composed tall tales and wrote about the characters they created. On 7 July of that year, Faulkner sailed from New Orleans with architect William Spratling, whose apartment he had shared, and on 2 August they debarked at Genoa, preparing to travel through Italy and Switzerland to France. Faulkner's first post card was sent to his two-year-old nephew.

To James M. Falkner  
[postmarked 5 Aug. 1925]

POST CARD JFSA  
[Rapallo/Genoa]  
[picture: "Rapallo/vista da  
Montallegro"]

Brother Will says 'Hello, Jimmy.' Love to your mother and daddy. Starting out tomorrow to walk to Paris. I have a knapsack—le sport baggage, they call it.

Brother Will

To Mrs. M. C. Falkner  
Thursday Aug 6

MS. JFSA  
[Pavia]

Italian locomotives look like this.<sup>1</sup>

There is a place just behind the cab where they can carry a scuttle or so of coal. Heaven knows where the water tank is. Maybe they do without it. Anyway, they go about 60 miles per hour. The conductor leans out and plays a few bars on his horn, the engineer retaliates, and the train rushes off. An Italian train has 2 speeds—0 and 60 m.p.h. The engines go either way—they never bother to turn them around, and the engineer and fireman stand up all the time. That's because they will be wherever they are going in 20 minutes.

I left Genoa for Milan—where Prof Mossaglia came from—when I looked out and saw Pavia. A bridge, where the German army got to in 1917, and a cathedral. It is a lovely place—quite old, little narrow streets, all cobbled, and only about two automobiles in town. It is so quiet and provincial—you pass an old wall and a door, and carved over the door is a date—1149 or something. All roofs are tile, and the women do their washing in the river. You see them kneeling, soaping the garments, then slapping them with wooden paddles. I am at le Pesce-d'Oro (the golden fish) built about 1400. The floors all are stone, and the father, mother, and 3 boys under 14 in evening clothes run the hotel. The older son is head



waiter and two daughters are maids. You must make formal application for use of the bath, but it costs 10 lire (about 40¢) per day. Breakfast—coffee, bread, butter, 2.50 lire (10¢) dinner, 16 L. (50¢) You are conducted with honor to a vine-covered court, all around are old, old walls and gates through which mailed knights once rode, and where men-at-arms scurried over cobble stones. And here I sit, with spaghetti, a bowl full of a salad of beans and pimento, tomatoes, lettuce, a bowl of peaches, apples, plums, black coffee and a bottle of wine, all for 50¢.

It is grand—so old and quiet. No automobiles, and people enjoy themselves so calmly—no running about at all. It seems to be part of the day to do as little work and have as much calm pleasure as you can. I was in a wine shop at noon today, where all the boatmen on the river go to dinner. Instead of gulping down their food and running back to work, they were there until the one o'clock whistle blew, laughing and talking about politics and music and so forth. I ate with them. People in Italy all think I am English. Which is good, because Americans are charged two prices for everything.

I would not have missed seeing Pavia for anything. Tomorrow I am going by Milan to a little town called Spezia, on the Italian lakes, then by Switzerland to France. Paris by Aug 25.

Billy

<sup>1</sup> Drawing by Faulkner, with arrow to "coal car."

To Mrs. M. C. Falkner  
[postmarked 7 Aug. 1925]

POST CARD JFSA  
[Milano/Centro]  
[picture: "MILANO—Piazza del Duomo"]

This Cathedral! Can you imagine stone lace? or frozen music? All covered with gargoyles like dogs, and mitred cardinals and mailed knights and saints pierced with arrows and beautiful naked Greek figures that have no religious significance whatever. Going to Stresa tonight.

Billy

To Mrs. M. C. Falkner  
[postmarked 11 Aug. 1925]

POST CARD JFSA  
[Stresa]  
[picture: "Panorama di Stresa"]

I have been 2 days at a grand village on an Alp above Stresa. Awful nice—the padrone and his wife protecting me. I am writing a series of travel things. Leaving today for Monternone, Switzerland, then to France. In Paris by Aug 25 anyway.

Billy