

Sybille Bedford:

An Inventory of Her Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator: Bedford, Sybille, 1911-2006

Title: Sybille Bedford Papers

Dates: 1914-2001 (bulk 1940s-1980s)

Extent: 52 boxes, 2 oversize boxes, 1 galley folder (21.84 linear feet)

Abstract: Correspondence, typescript drafts, handwritten notes, photographs, clippings, drawings, address books, date books, calendars, and diaries document the life and work of Sybille Bedford from the early 1940s through the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Call Number: Manuscript Collection MS-00299

Language: English, German

Access: Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition: Purchases 1993 (R12954), 1996 (R13542), 2001 (R14933)

Processed by: Lisa Jones, Stephen Mielke, 2000-2003

Repository: [Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin](#)

Biographical Sketch

Sybille Bedford was born in 1911 at Charlottenburg, Germany, to Maximilian von Schoenebeck and Elizabeth Bernard. Her parents divorced in 1918 and her mother moved to Italy, but Bedford remained with her father in the southern German village of Feldkirch, where she had been raised since infancy. When her father died suddenly in 1920, Bedford went to Italy to live with her mother, who soon remarried and sent Bedford to live with acquaintances in London.

To escape Mussolini's Fascism, Bedford's mother and stepfather relocated from Italy to the South of France in the mid 1920s. Moving often as a child between Italy, England, and France, Bedford received little formal education, but could read and write in several languages and experienced a wide exposure to art and "haute culture" during her travels. As a teenager, Bedford spent increasing time with her mother and socialized with the growing community of artists in Sanary-sur-Mer on the French Mediterranean coast. It was there in 1930 that she first met and befriended Aldous Huxley, whom she had idolized since first reading him in 1925.

After Hitler's rise in the early 1930s, numerous German writers and artists moved to the Sanary area. Bedford came to know many of them, including Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, and Julius Meier-Graefe. Following their examples, and under Aldous Huxley's influence, she began to seriously pursue literary ambitions. Her early, unpublished fiction focused on the upper class German and French social life of pre- and post-World War I that she had experienced growing up. She wrote throughout the 1930s, without commercial success, and continued to travel Europe. In 1935, she married Walter Bedford, an English army officer, but the marriage was short lived and they soon divorced.

In 1940, Bedford fled the German occupation of France and settled with the Huxleys in California. She worked as secretary, translator, and itinerant journalist, and completed three novels by the late 1940s, none of which were published. Her first literary success did not occur until the publication of her non-fiction work *The Sudden View: A Mexican Journey* (1953), recounting a trip made to Mexico in the mid 1940s.

Three years after the release of her critically acclaimed *Sudden View*, Bedford published the first of four semi-biographical novels, *A Legacy* (1956). Based on the social and family life of her youth, it was praised for its sophistication, wit, dialogue, and attention to detail. It also provided a seldom seen social historical view of early twentieth century Europe. Bedford continued to examine the themes of her youth in her later works *A Favourite of the Gods* (1963), *A Compass Error* (1968), and *Jigsaw: An Unsentimental Education* (1989), which was nominated for the Booker Prize.

In 1958, Bedford published *The Best We Can Do: An Account of the Trial of John Bodkin Adams*. Although she had no formal training in law, she had attended trials as leisure entertainment as a child and developed a keen interest in law. Her book on Dr. Adams established Bedford as an outstanding legal reporter and was followed by other books and articles on the English and European judiciary. Her talent for legal journalism also brought work covering famous trials for major magazines, such as the 1964 Jack

Ruby trial for *Life* magazine, and the 1966 trial of Auschwitz guards in Germany for *Esquire*.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Bedford also wrote reviews and articles on her three passions: food, wine, and travel. Once again, relying on her experience and knowledge of European high society, Bedford provided insight and critique for major magazines and newspapers. Several of these pieces were later brought together, along with some of her accounts of legal trials, in *As it Was: Pleasures, Landscapes, and Justice* (1990) and in *Pleasures and Landscapes: A Traveller's Tales from Europe* (2003).

In the late 1960s Bedford began work on what became her most renowned work, the two volume *Aldous Huxley: A Biography* (1973 & 1974). Bedford drew on her close friendship with Huxley and his first wife, Maria Nys, to create an exhaustive account of Huxley's life. Although receiving some criticism that she was too close a friend to be objective, the work was generally hailed as a thorough and detailed biography and the first real look at Huxley beyond the context of his writing.

Over the years, Bedford established many close relationships with her contemporaries in literature. Besides Huxley, she could count Martha Gellhorn, Rebecca West, Evelyn Gendel, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and Allanah Harper among her close friends. She served as Vice President of English PEN, was appointed a Companion of Literature of the Royal Society of Literature in 1994, and in 1981 was invested as an officer of the Order of the British Empire. Her last work, *Quicksands: A Memoir* (2005), was published shortly before her death in London on February 17, 2006.

Sources:

Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series, Volume 47. Pamela S. Dear, Ed. (Detroit, Gale Research Company, 1995).

Current Biography. Charles Moritz, Ed. (New York, H.W. Wilson Company, 1990).

Guppy, Shusha. "Sybille Bedford: An Interview," *The Paris Review*, Volume 126 (Flushing, NY, The Paris Review, 1993).

Kimball, Roger. "Without Rancor: Sybille Bedford's achievement," *The New Criterion*, Volume 12, Number 8 (New York, The Foundation for Cultural Review, 1994).

Scope and Contents

Correspondence, typescript drafts, handwritten notes, photographs, clippings, drawings, address books, date books, calendars, and diaries document the life and work of Sybille Bedford from the early 1940s through the beginning of the twenty-first century. The papers are organized in three series: I. Works, 1941-2001, nd (18 boxes); II. Correspondence, 1914-2001, undated (26 boxes); and III. Subject Files, 1919-1999, undated (8 boxes).

Series Descriptions

Series I. Works, 1941-2001, undated

The Works series primarily contains typescripts and carbon drafts of Bedford's books and articles, including several unpublished works. The largest group of materials documents the creation and publication of the two volume *Aldous Huxley: A Biography*. Included is correspondence between Bedford and numerous Huxley family members and friends, and background material on Huxley and his work. Typed drafts and publisher's correspondence track the development of the work over time, and fan mail and review clippings provide critique and overview of the finished books.

Bedford's 1989 novel *Jigsaw* is also well documented with various drafts and proofs of the text. These files also include publisher's correspondence and corrections, and congratulatory correspondence regarding the book's nomination for the Booker Prize. Publicity material for a 2001 reprint of *Jigsaw* with *A Legacy* is located in the file for Counterpoint Press.

Files for Bedford's 1990 compilation of previously published articles on food, travel, and the legal system, titled *As It Was*, contain original typescripts and tearsheets dating back to 1959. Materials for these articles, such as the 1966 *Saturday Evening Post* article "The Worst that Ever Happened", are also located under their own titles.

Works files are arranged alphabetically by title, except for several articles grouped together under the heading "Travel Pieces." Clippings and correspondence related to *A Visit to Don Otavio* are located under the work's original publication title: *The Sudden View: A Mexican Journey*.

As in the other series, the vast majority of the works are in English, Bedford's preferred language for writing, and overall in very good condition.

Series II. Correspondence, 1914-2001, undated

Correspondence is the largest series and is divided into three subseries: Outgoing, Incoming, and Family, with Incoming correspondence further divided into Personal, Private, and Literary, preserving Bedford's own filing order.

Outgoing correspondence is arranged alphabetically by recipient name with the bulk consisting of letters to Evelyn Gendel, Eda Lord, and Allanah Harper. Bedford and Lord were partners from 1955 until Lord's death in 1976 and Bedford acted as executor for her estate. She was also executor for Gendel and Harper, and likely retrieved these letters after their deaths.

Bedford's letters relate her daily activities, contacts with other friends, and progress on her work. Generally several pages or more in length, they are often quite personal, expressing strong feelings of love and friendship.

Incoming correspondence includes fan mail, invitations, birthday and holiday greetings, business and publisher's correspondence, and personal letters reflective of those found in Bedford's outgoing correspondence. The bulk consists of letters from Bedford's friends and colleagues, with letters labeled "Personal" in alphabetical order and letters labeled "Private" in chronological order. There is great overlap between these headings, both in the nature of the correspondence and in the individual writers.

Included in the incoming correspondence are letters from Ivy Compton-Burnett, Elizabeth David, M. F. K. Fisher, Martha Gellhorn, Graham Greene, Lord Snowdon, and Stephen Spender. Also included are a small number of letters addressed to both Sybille Bedford and Eda Lord, or to Eda Lord alone. Letters from Aldous Huxley and other Huxley family members are found with the incoming correspondence and in the Works series with the *Aldous Huxley: A Biography* materials.

Literary correspondence in the Incoming subseries is largely from Evelyn Gendel with some third party correspondence between Gendel and others. It also contains revisions and draft fragments of works discussed in accompanying correspondence. Small amounts of unidentified correspondence can be found throughout the incoming letters, but the bulk is grouped together at the end of the subseries.

The Family correspondence subseries consists of one folder of third party correspondence to and from Bedford's mother. This includes the earliest dated material in the papers, an unfinished letter from Bedford's mother written in 1914. However, the majority of the correspondence and other material in Bedford's papers date from the 1940s onward.

The Index of Correspondents included with this finding aid indicates the box and folder location of correspondence from each individual.

Series III. Subject Files, 1919-1999, undated

Subject files constitute the smallest series and include financial and personal records for Bedford as well as legal records and literary works for several of Bedford's friends, such as Evelyn Gendel and Eda Lord. Of particular note are the extensive date books, calendars and typed diaries documenting Bedford's daily activities from the 1950 through the 1990s. Also present are date books from Bedford's long time partner Eda Lord, as well as probate records for Lord's estate and drafts of several of her works.

In addition to Lord, the subject files contain materials related to several other individuals. The Toni Muir file contains probate records and photographs of Bedford's long time friend. Probate records are also present for Eva Hermann and Evelyn Gendel. The Gendel file includes draft fragments for Gendel's *Tortoise and Turtle Abroad*, and notes and letters similar to those located in the incoming literary correspondence of Series II. A scrapbook on Allanah Harper contains clippings, letters, and a 1944 contract for her autobiography.

Snapshots and publicity photos are found throughout the Bedford papers, but a large group of photographs are located in the subject files. The bulk are carte-de-visite images of unidentified family members or family friends dating from around the 1900s. Also included are more recent photos of Bedford's friends from the 1950s through the 1990s.

Several folders of notebooks contain detailed records of expenses Bedford incurred while writing articles for various magazines. Other materials found in the subject files include invitations, menus, and notes related to wine tastings and dinners, interviews and biographical information, and a handwritten travel journal written in German and dating from 1919, likely created by Bedford's mother.

Index Terms

People

- Beauchamp, Barbara.
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Organizations

English Centre of International PEN.

Subjects

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