The Letters of a Life

Museums tend to have better collections of wedding dresses than work clothes. Archives are likewise often filled with papers that are unrepresentative of peoples's lives, but are the kinds of papers people keep. MB Williams's papers suffer somewhat from that affliction: she was more likely to hold onto letters from famous folk such as Parks Branch Commissioner J. B. Harkin, or anthropologist and folklorist Marius Barbeau, or Minister of Natural Resources and future Prime Minister Jean Chrétien than from her own family. But to her family, she was the famous (or at least exotic) one, so they retained a lovely collection of her letters, dating from 1899 to 1972. Whether written in Ottawa or London, England, on cruise ship or hotel stationery, these letters offer a blend of everyday life—toothaches and nylons, friendships and feuds—with social commentary, and the occasional insights into historical figures.

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An undated photograph of MB Williams

M.B. Williams fonds, Library and Archives Canada, R12219-0-3-E

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MB's proximity to Canadian Prime Minister R. B. Bennett and his family in the 1930s dramatically shaped her life, in ways both personal and professional. She was a longtime friend and companion of Mary Bird ("Zoe") Herridge, the stepmother of William Duncan Herridge, Bennett's policy advisor and husband to his beloved sister Mildred. This drew her into the Bennett orbit, which must have made the draconian staff cuts he imposed early in the Depression all the more upsetting. In a 1930 letter, she tells family of attending the opening of Parliament with Bennett's sister, watching as the Prime Minister "perspired in gold lace & white satin trousers, cocked hat with the same grim determination with which he raises the tariff & cuts down the Civil Service." Her own job was likely safe, given her seniority—by this time she oversaw a large staff, including all the women in the Parks Branch headquarters—and her proximity to the Bennetts. But when told to lay off most of her staff, she

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resigned in solidarity. Ironically, whereas Bennett's cuts ended her career, it was likely his personal fortune that then subsidized her travel to Europe as companion to Mary Bird Herridge, and their setting up camp in London, England.

The sixteen letters from MB to family between 1931 and 1935 (five of which are below; the rest can be found in the collection) paint a picture of a woman experiencing life on her own terms. Her very first London letter tells of seeing "the Lord Mayor's Show" from their window at the Palace Strand Hotel, then going to the opening of the British Parliament, and then off to the Armistice Celebration. She soon tells of her role in writing, with Herridge, the King's first Empire radio broadcast for Christmas morning, 1932. There are recommendations of authors, descriptions of fashions, updates about health, and lots about her dog and about the car she drives on occasional returns to Ottawa. And there are also the first rumbles of unease in Europe. In 1933, "Hitler ... talks like a madman – the same kind of madness that led to war before," and by 1935, "been listening to Rudyard Kipling who evidently thinks we should stop talking of peace and get ready for war."

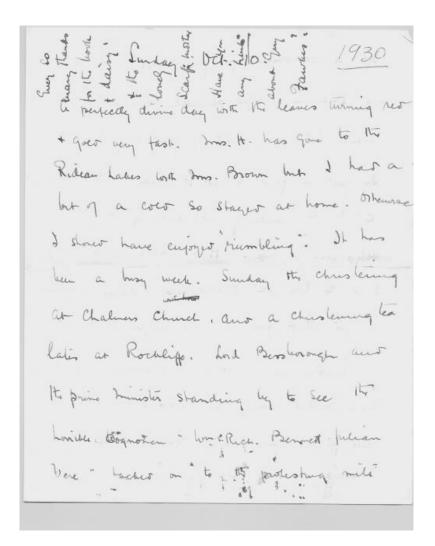
The original exhibition contains a dynamic gallery for viewing this multi-page document. It features five handwritten letters from MB Williams to her family between 1930 and 1935.

Letters from MB Williams to her family

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MB Williams to her family, 10 October 1930

1930

Sunday Oct. 10.

[Written vertically across the top of the letter:]

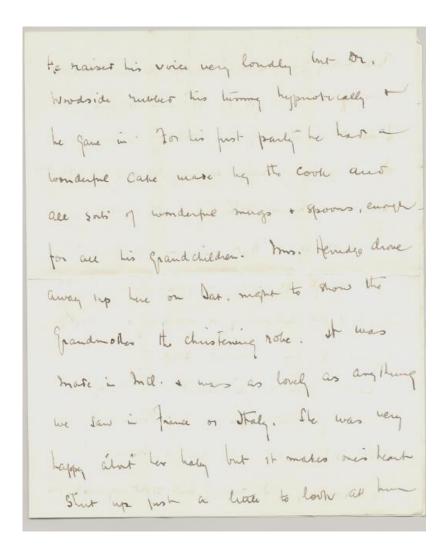
Ever so many thanks for the book & daisy & the lovely scarf Mother. Have you any hints about Guy Fawkes?

A perfectly divine day with the leaves turning red & gold very fast. Mrs. H. has gone to the Rideau Lakes with Mrs. Brown but I had a bit of a cold so stayed at home. Otherwise I should have enjoyed "rambling." It has been a busy week. Sunday the christening at Chalmers Church, and a christening tea later at Rockcliffe. Lord Bessborough and the prime minister standing by to see the horrible cognomen "Wm Rich Bennet Julian Vere" tacked on to the protesting mite

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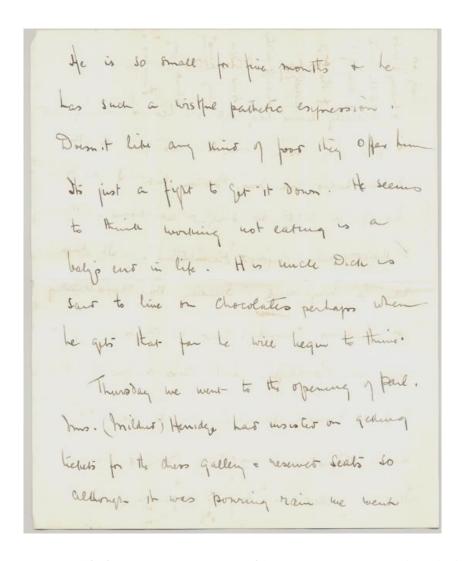


He raised his voice very loudly but Dr. Woodside rubbed his tummy hypnotically & he gave in. For his first party he had a wonderful cake made by the cook and all sorts of wonderful mugs & spoons, enough for all his grandchildren. Mrs. Herridge drove away up here on Sat. night to show the Grandmother the christening robe. It was made in Mil. & was a lovely as anything we saw in France or Italy. She was very happy about her baby but it makes one's heart start up just a little to look at him.

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He is so small for five months & he has such a wistful pathetic expression. Doesn't like any kind of food they offer him. It's just a fight to get it down. He seems to think working not eating is a baby's end in life. His uncle Dick is said to live on chocolates perhaps when he gets that far he will begin to thrive.

Thursday we went to the opening of Parl. Mrs. (Mildred) Herridge had insisted on getting tickets for the chess [press] gallery & reserved seats so although it was pouring rain we went

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Those hardy perenneals - one black lace dresses - came of the hoose for its 99th his escept that I added a how of blue veloct to mine.

By was pouring rain so we decided to 90 m slyle + both a 35th taxis both ways.

The hoth agreet that once in 30 years was often enough for such a performance though her has no crowding a wanting. Sungoly was to an reserves seats.

Lady Bers har ongs brokes wonderfully lovel.

Deers y while chipm welver. Train lives with a broad hand

Those hardy perennials—our black lace dresses came off the hook for the 99th time except that I added a bow of blue velvet to mine. It was pouring rain so we decided to go in style & took a 25ct taxi both ways.

We both agreed that once in 20 years was often enough for such a performance though we had no crowding or waiting. Simply walked to our reserved seats.

Lady Bessborough looked wonderfully lovely. Dress of white chiffon velvet. Train lined with silver & edged with a broad band of Kolinsky. It looked just right against the

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red carpet, chairs which killer some of the

pines * purples. Im. Bennet perspect in gold

lace * while satin horses. cochet hat with the

Same grim determination with which be trained

It tainst * cuts down the Circle hunce. In port

darling brother, misses sair, on honday when

the was going away. How will be get with

that cost above.

The Jues one set friend Ims. Indemorely came

down to the hospital for some it may treatments

+ has been here all week. Cypic has been

going a coming * Thinday might sharest all

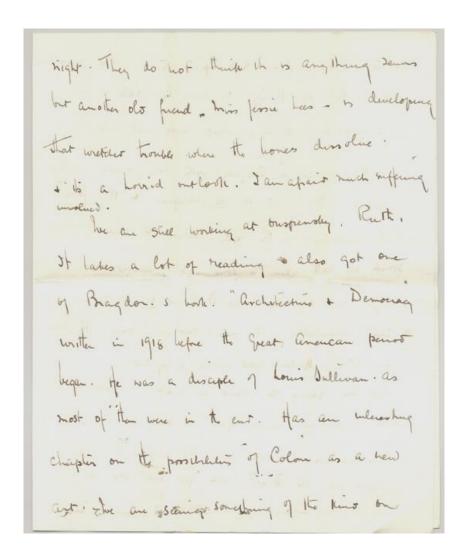
red carpet & chairs which killed some of the pinks & purples. Mr. Bennett perspired in gold lace & white satin trousers, cocked hat with the same grim determination with which he raises the tariff & cuts down the Civil Service. "My poor darling brother," Mildred said, on Monday when she was going away. "How will he get into that coat alone.

On Tues. our old friend Mrs. Inderwick came down to the hospital for some Xray treatments & has been here all week. Cyril has been going & coming & Friday night stayed all

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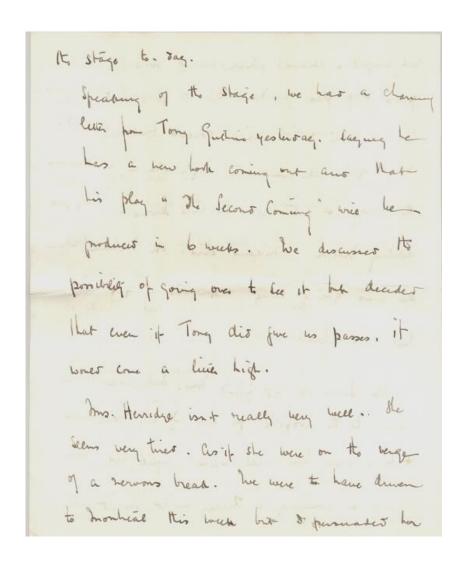
night. They do not think it is anything serious but another old friend — Miss Jessie Lees—is developing that wretched trouble where the bones dissolve & it's a horrid outlook. I am afraid much suffering involved.

We are still working at Ouspensky. Ruth, it takes a lot of reading also got one of Bragdon's book. "Architecture & Democracy" written in 1918 before the Great American period began. He was a disciple of Louis Sullivan as most of them were in the end. Has an interesting chapter on the possibilities of Colour as a new art. We are seeing something of the kind on

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the stage to-day.

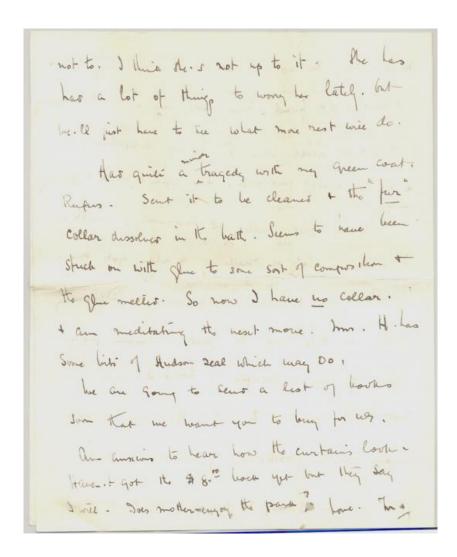
Speaking of the stage, we had a charming letter from Tony Guthrie yesterday. Saying he has a new book coming out and that his play "The Second Coming" will be produced in 6 weeks. We discussed the possibility of going over to see it but decided that even if Tony did give us passes it would come a little high.

Mrs. Herridge isn't really very well. She seems very tired. As if she were on the verge of a nervous break. We were to have driven to Montreal this week but I persuaded her

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not to. I think she's not up to it. She has had a lot of things to worry her lately but we'll just have to see what more rest will do. Had quite a minor tragedy with my green coat, Rufus. Sent it to be cleaned & the "fur" collar dissolved in the bath. Seems to have been stuck on with glue to some sort of composition & the glue melted. So now I have no collar & am meditating the next move. Mrs. H. has some bits of Hudson seal which may DO.

We are going to send a list of books soon that we want you to buy for us. Am anxious to hear how the curtains look. Haven't got the \$8.00 back yet but they say I will. Does mother enjoy the park?

Love. M

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1931

Novih/31 N. W. S.

This is just a lim to less you have

we have now a permanent address, as above. by house harden a frace principle

that - " centrally heated" - as they say in This

Country, which means hot water coils. a rare thing. brost of them have only fas or technic fries. In the oldest houses there

is a fall with a mesiable morning his

of hoef a doza brace pieces of load. This is

MB Williams to her family, 16 November 1931

1931

14 St. John's Wood Court.

St. John's Wood. London.

N.W.8.

Nov 16/1931

Dear People.

This is just a line to tell you that we have now a permanent address, as above. We have taken a small furnished flat—"centrally heated" as they say in this country, which means hot water coils, a rare thing. Most of them have only gas or electric fires. In the oldest houses there is a grate with a miserable moping fire of half a dozen small pieces of coal. This is quite comfy and we have also electric heaters

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in case really severe weapon occurs so hat we have the we can control be situation. We are fairly central, just a permy box ride from Seepings. You turn at short cornor from Oxford It. I fo northered to It. Johns board. It is much higher a dryer than stemsing to a Chelsen wh. We have been only a livid ones a week in London a very rushed, looking to a house a seeing sights. Three freat spectacles last week. Look lungers than where we saw in comput from the

in case really severe weather occurs so that we feel we can control the situation. We are fairly central, just a penny bus ride from Selfridges. You turn at that corner from Oxford St. & go northwest to St. John's Wood. It is much higher and dryer than Kensington or Chelsea wh. We had first thought of.

Have been only a little over a week in London & very rushed, looking for a house & seeing sights. Three great spectacles last week. Lord Mayor's show which we saw in comfort from the

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bomano of the palace than Hotel where he was shown of the back of the sound the way of the sound of the standard of the stand

windows of the Palace Strand Hotel where we were staying—a wonderful place where you get room & breakfast, bath, books & general service for \$2.25 per day. No tips. The Lord Mayor looked very important in his ancient gold coach but the show was somewhat spoiled by a downpour of rain. However London crowds don't mind that & the streets were lined with a six-deep thicket of umbrellas for hours before. The procession was about a mile long & was something after the order of our Labour Day affairs. Floats showing the progress of industry etc. first bicycle, & motor car old

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have omnibes etc. Then the beef - caters from the Taco we went to to Opening of Paul Bries Seriety has written to lot. Varmice, who is the real hear of to High Commorner fice. + he is samply living to opin on us to get as into Thing. Due to of course a pear deman for tackets. but he manager at to last moment to get as two for the Troyal Colley. That is a long fulley opening out from behind the Throne shough which the King + Quen pars. He saw the peus + penores cone in is job lace + drawners . + all the processional country. Beefection, Heralds Imagini a log potric hall with her of least rising at each side (where we were) Rogal blue Carpet rolled don to 14 occasion. The Crown rock in posti . Beat - calis, heralds + hings chandeling all chain up at each side of the open way. ah 10 mi to 12 The Com was Solemal, bone who the

horse omnibus etc. Then the beef-eaters from the Tower.

Tues we went to the opening of Parl. Bill Herridge had written to Col Vannier, who is the real head of the High Commissioners office & he is simply turning the office on end to get us into things. There is of course a great demand for tickets but he managed at the last moment to get us two for the Royal Gallery. That is a long gallery opening out from behind the Throne through which the King & Queen pass. We saw the peers & peeresses come in in gold lace & diamonds & all the processional ceremony. Imagine a long Gothic hall with tiers of seats rising at each side (where we were) Royal blue carpet rolled down for the occasion. The crown & orb in position, Beaf-eaters, heralds & kings chamberlains all drawn up at each side of the open way. At 10 min to 12 the Crown was solemnly borne into the

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auli - chamber. Then It proce I wale when I apperhant Prime Gerge. Pha we hear to howds Cherry onto so * Its bands staying amounting to anwar of the Many + Quee + at 12 exactly on the first thorse of Biglise. It hurlds blow a blast on their brights, the part dons opened at the loves end of the hack + the Royal process in extents. The King was leading the Queen by the hand + they were both themen exactly as In see then in state probab. Gear clouds of red belock with ormine capes of trains carried by his pego The Onen had a wonderful their g tream date culoided in peals + the most wonder for cottan and heastplat of themones. Deaurns crown + carrays. In fact when the waster the sparker lase a cut crystal chandelies. The King were his brown, with to peet my or Robertson diamond. It was rather becoming ing it looked live too lage. " as if it shower have been taken in a lets

anti-chamber. Then the Prince of Wales entered & afterwards Prince George. Then we heard the crowds cheering outside & the bands playing announcing the arrival of the King & Queen & at 12 exactly, on the first stroke of Big Ben the heralds blew a blast on their bugles. The great doors opened at the lower end of the hall & the Royal procession entered. The King was leading the Queen by the hand & they were both dressed exactly as you see them in the state portraits. Great cloaks of red velvet with ermine capes & trains carried by two pages. The Queen had a wonderful dress of cream satin embroidered in pearls & the most wonderful collar and breast plate of diamonds. Diamond crown & earrings. In fact—when she walked she sparkled like a cut crystal chandelier. The King wore his crown, with the great ruby & Koh-i-noor diamond. It was rather becoming only it looked a little too large as if it should have been taken in a bit.

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a whole lot of defentación including has Baldin followed. We waited until they came my + the went into the Horse of ands where we rubber Storlders was a lot of duckenses the. waiting to go home. Near Day we were even more fortunate for The armistice celebration. Col. Vannier 1st as ticket for Im. Thomas office universally opposite to Constaint & down windows from where It's Queen was. he comes see every thing marvellowing + it was one ? Di host thrilling Expensions I believe he whall live have. In have no conception of what Eng. + 16 Empir hear till y see to British people in a day like this. He went at a line after 9 + It sheets were black with people the - shanding Is deep on the sidewards. The Centraph is in the middle of William + from eng morning to their is closed for hopie from hestmaski to Trafaga Square. So that the whole day is carried out without any compasion. how a wonderful norming, war + stong sunny sondon is beautiful Wear The dan shines .

A whole lot of dignitaries including M. Baldwin followed. We waited until they came out & then went into the House of Lords where we rubbed shoulders with a lot of duchesses etc. waiting to go home.

Next day we were even more fortunate for the Armistice Celebration. Col. Vannier got us tickets for M. Thomas' office immediately opposite the Cenotaph & two windows from where the Queen was. We could see everything marvellously & it was one of most thrilling experiences I believe we shall ever have. You have no conception of what Eng. & the Empire mean till you see the British people on a day like this. We went at a little after 9 & the streets were black with people then—standing 15 deep on the sidewalks. The Cenotaph is in the middle of Whitehall & from early morning the street is closed for traffic from Westminster to Trafalgar Square so that the whole thing is carried out without any confusion. It was a wonderful morning, warm & sunny & London is beautiful when the sun shines.

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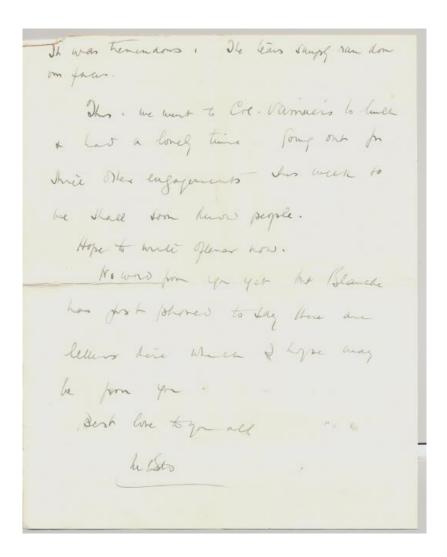
about 10 we went ou on to the halcomes + hady brethans Dayla of morrored lappored to stand head to his the as the has sea it many times before it was able to let us just What was jone on. You can bee from the prechase just how 4 botherd. at 10.50 to prince came out of the Home Office + look his place. + to Cabiner muster ele It brotop. Ohois & about 10 bands was always in place at 10.55 to shepper forward, hover & law his week at to foot of the Centaph. Then In , macsoned, In Baldwin , on In . Longues + the representation of No Oher Dominios land Thoms. + to Bishop of horsen Sand a grayer. at 11 It bells range out all over the Cif. To flegs dipper + the true was abolite School for 2 min. It motor bosses & Typed + 16 people for not. look of Their Lats + waiter. You can't unaque low Hulling a was. The to boship prayed you the Genatics praids Band played almost in a Whopser To find bons of for dave the King . You realized . Hat that was what to whole thing meants.

About 10 we went out on to the balconies & Lady Williams Taylor of Montreal happened to stand next to us & as she had seen it many times before she was able to tell us just what was going on. You can see from the pictures just how it looked. At 10.50 the Prince came out of the Home offices & took his place & the Cabinet Ministers etc. The bishop, choir & about 10 bands were already in place. At 10.55 he stepped forward, bowed & laid his wreath at the foot of the Cenotaph. Then Mr. MacDonald, Mr. Baldwin, and Mr. Ferguson & the representatives of the Dominions laid theirs & the Bishop of London said a prayer. At 11 the bells rang out all over the city. The flags dipped & then there was absolute silence for 2 min. The motor buses stopped & the people got out took off their hats & waited. You can't imagine how thrilling it was. Then the bishop prayed again & the Grenadier [freands] Band played almost in a whisper the first bars of God Save the King. You realized that that was what the whole thing meant.

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It was tremendous. The tears simply ran down our faces.

Thurs. we went to Col Vanniers to lunch & had a lovely time. Going out for three other engagements this week so we shall soon know people.

Hope to write oftener now.

No word from you yet but Blanche has just phoned to say there are letters here which I hope may be from you.

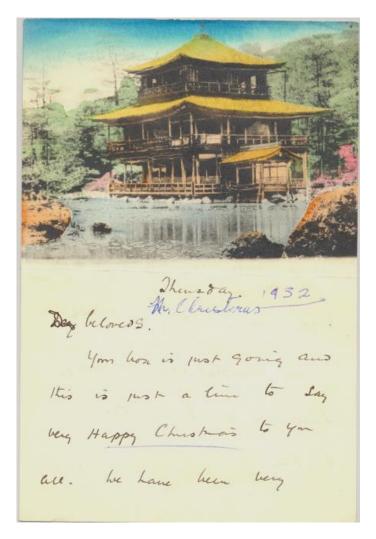
Best love to you all

M. B.

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MB Williams to her family, December 1932

[Japanese scene in colour on top]

Thursday 1932

M. Christmas

Dear beloveds.

Your box is just going and this is just a time to say very Happy Christmas to you all. We have been very

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broad cast for Christman 200 ming
Which Iron. A. & I wook but
be day we kee a good dear time
the playinght on to night of a

first food weter " for one original

product has been brumed or cut

so often to suit so many people
things that we hardly know it.

be are quite threeted to be on

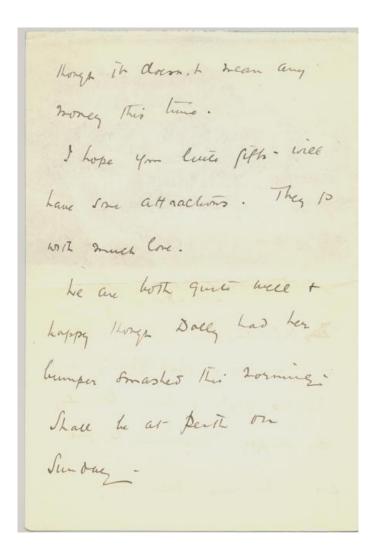
the first historic programme however

busy working on this Empire broadcast for Christmas morning which Mrs. H. & I wrote but to-day we feel a good deal like the playwright on the night of a first production. For our original has been trimmed & cut so often to suit so many people & times that we hardly know it. We are quite thrilled to be on the first historic programme however

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though it doesn't mean any money this time.

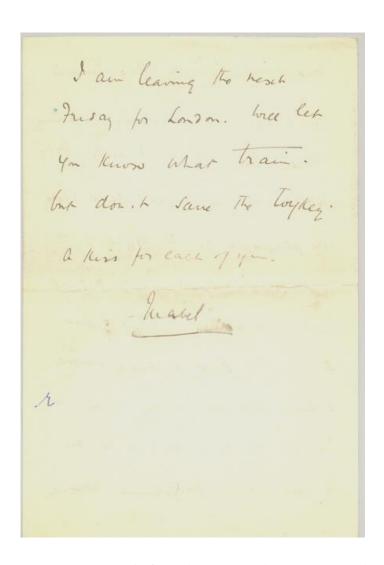
I hope your little gifts will have some attractions. They go with much love.

We are both quite well & happy though Dolly had her bumper smashed this morning. Shall be at Perth on Sunday.

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I am leaving the next Friday for London. Will let you know what train but don't save the turkey. A kiss for each of you.

<u>Mabel</u>

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2 Golders Comt. Bolders Green Losson. Dear Every hody. The Eugress is due to night aux I expect their will be letters from you to monor but I peus that him have to be poles to right or early to monor to be some of catching her on her return trip. The mail Closes at the City p.o. to morn at I but so we are a food way not we have to allow an intra half - day. I am apaid the won. I be making many more hips Then we shall have to watch for the fast N. y. brats. The Caurdian lines am So Slow. Been Laving a very quiet week succe on return from Norwice. Chiefly Concerned with Closhes I hought one my old green coat (3 yrs) + am having It taken in a little + lauches up. It will do very Well to fill is . Blanche Knows a woman who is a Wholesale meliner. I Think They rented rooms from her when they first lame over - and she took ho to several wholes ales. I want to get a waren there shar wie do to go but to hunch in .the went to one very Swandy place where they

MB Williams to her family, 18 October 1933

2 Golder's Court.

Woodstock Rd

Golder's Green. N.W.II. London.

Oct. 18.

Dear Everybody,

The "Empress" is due to-night and I expect there will be letters from you to-morrow but I find that mine have to be posted to night or early to morrow to be sure of catching her or her return trip. The mail closes at the City P.O. to-morrow at 5 but as we are a good way out we have to allow an extra half-day. I am afraid she won't be making many more trips. Then we shall have to watch for the fast N.Y. boats, the Canadian lines are so slow.

Been having a very quiet week since our return from Norwich. Chiefly concerned with clothes. I brought over my old green coat (3 yrs) & am having it taken in a little & touched up. It will do very well to fill in. Blanche knows a woman who is a wholesale milliner. I think they rented rooms from her when they first came over and she took us to several wholesales. I want to get a <u>warm</u> dress that will do to go out to lunch in. We went to one very swanky place where they

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Chapter: The Letters of a Life

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seel sports models from mance and Switzerland. Naw one I liked in raisin colons but as it was \$3000 + dion. 4 quite fit. I resistes. Blanche is still looking but I gave up. They have promised to report any finds. I lave me the fag. Everyone here lacking about the Disarenament Schoolin aus very interesting laiks ones the Radio. There is a Growing feeling that Germany is not to he huster. That she is really preparing for war and glorifying was by propaganta all the line. France is undoubtedly uneasy and it may be with food cause. I expect the has led the Bulish ministers to Thurk it woned he folly to fine in to Germany's demands - because every one Says that will lately British Sympasty with Gerency had been growing airs they was a Strong feeling that she shoned he given more equality. Hulter. however, tacks like a headwan - the same Rais of madness that led to war before, It's like fiving a lumatic a fun to play with.

sell sports models from France and Switzerland. Saw one I liked in raisin colour but as it was \$30.00 & didn't quite fit, I resisted. Blanche is still looking but I gave up. They have promised to report any "finds" & save me the fag.

Everyone here talking about the Disarmament situation and very interesting talks over the Radio. There is a growing feeling that Germany is not to be trusted. That she is really preparing for war and glorifying war by propaganda all the time. France is undoubtedly uneasy and it may be with good cause. I expect she has led the British ministers to think it would be folly to give in to Germany's demands—because everyone says that until lately British sympathy with Germany had been growing and there was a strong feeling that she should be given more equality. Hitler, however, talks like a madman - the same kind of madness that led to war before. It's like giving a lunatic a gun to play with.

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Yesterday we got ready to receive to branchioners of aberdase who wrote that she woned he in lowin for the day + womes like to see him. H. if she comes find time. we didn't know whether that meant here or not but polished up a list just in case. as it lumed out She hadnet line and asked hus. H. to go to fee her at her hotel in the evening. Iron. H. vais there was list a procession of people all day + that The oes dear was nearly are in Though bright o kurs as ever. The was taking to midnight train for Scotland. Lady pentland, her daugh tir- Who was trille Lady hiarpoise in Canada asked us to tea for Saturday but him H. had another engagement so the sair the Women's Set another Day. I think the is a being fine woman aus she beens to know a lotof intellectual people + rice people regardless of rank. Don't Shink the has a great deal of money. The lives in Hampsteas - quet was

Yesterday we got ready to receive the Marchioness of Aberdeen who wrote that she would be in town for the day & would like to see Mrs. H. if she could find time. We didn't know whether that meant here or not but polished up a bit just in case. As it turned out she hadn't time and asked Mrs. H. to go to see her at her hotel in the evening. Mrs. H. said there was just a procession of people all day & that the old dear was nearly all in though bright & kind as ever. She was taking the midnight train for Scotland. Lady Pentland, her daughter—who was little Lady Marjorie in Canada—asked us to tea for Saturday but Mrs. H. had another engagement so she said she would set another day. I think she is a very fine woman and she seems to know a lot of intellectual people & nice people regardless of rank. Don't think she has a great deal of money. She lives in Hampstead quite near.

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longie and I are keeping honce & to lies at my feet While I write. Has been hunting "walks" for sme him but I how him we showed soon he soung to the AD. Rung at the door bell - promes to be the south man Who was selling sausages. Seemes a Shange Combinalit. I inquired 1/2 it was a new one + he raw ho Every week they has what they called a species pushings of wore article of this week It were Sausiges. Seems they always have 'en . However . I didn't respond to the push - not knowing what the costis places migst be. The two brepressions of again to the Lovely weather, Sun Stiming & Guile Warm Roses + michaelmas daises + mums + datlias in It gardens. Jaw a house yesterd ag with the don almost comes with white roses. Leaves beginning to lim from & face of hongs. Which stows winter is hear. No Crumpets yet. They are the Sure Sign. Hope Ruth is suit turned out a vaccios. Tweeds Everywhere here. Fr. 'S Coat wored be quite in as for Collars are not so much The voque. How does The Cooking per on?

Wuffie and I are keeping house & he lies at my feet while I write. Has been hinting "walks" for some time but I told him we should soon be going to the P.O. Ring at the door bell! Proved to be the milkman who was selling sausages. Seemed a strange combination. I inquired if it was a new one & he said no. Every week they had what they called a special "push-up" of some article & this week it were sausages. Seems they always have'em. However, I didn't respond to the push—not knowing what the cook's plans might be. The two irrepressibles off again to the Shops.

Lovely weather, sun shining & quite warm. Roses & Michaelmas daisies & mums & dahlias in the gardens. Saw a house yesterday with the door almost covered with white roses. Leaves beginning to turn brown & fall off though, which shows winter is near. No crumpets—yet. They are the sure sign.

Hope Ruth's suit turned out a success. Tweeds everywhere here. Fr.'s coat would be quite in as fur collars are not so much the vogue. How does the cooking get on?

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hay 6/35 England

Die hother.

How just heen lestering to

the Things speech + unagines I

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brules . Lowon her heer tending

brules for days. We know of it

Chiefly through the winders thems

papers though ever out here the

Sheits are very fay to there is

MB Williams to her mother, 6 May 1935

London NW2

England

May 6/35

Dear Mother,

Have just been listening to the Kings speech & imagined I could see you listening to your own wireless. London has been terribly excited for days. We know of it chiefly through the wireless & news papers. Though even out here the streets are very gay & there is

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an arch at the lop of m Sheet.

It here Its that perfect day like an early lune day at home-really lengs weather. Just here listening to Rudy and Kipling who condends thinks we shoned stops tacking the war.

Emope that seems to have hyphophia. Int it would be too dreadful to that it would be too dreadful to them of another war.

an arch at the top of our street. It's been the most perfect day like an early June day at home-really King's weather. Just been listening to Rudyard Kipling who evidently thinks we should stop talking of peace & get ready for war. Europe still seems to have hydrophobia, but it would be dreadful to think of another war.

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I am getting shorger every day.

Go up on the roof of set in the

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Concept, house. her can be for hiles—

tren city roof.

Suppose you are watching for

P. s return now what a lot he wall

have to lite you. It write take

all summer. I heper you have been

Just like you but I hope you wan

Just like you but I hope you wan

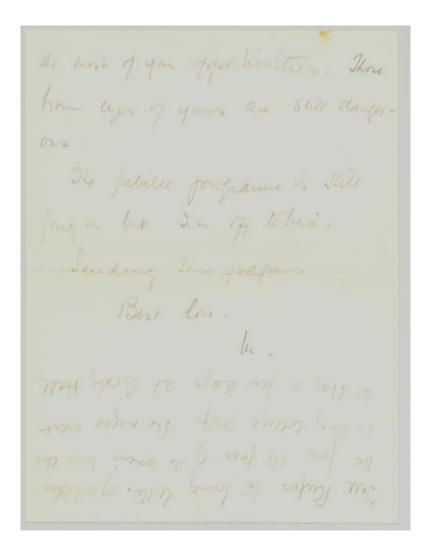
I am getting stronger every day. Go up on the roof & sit in the sun now. Almost as good as a country house. We can see for miles—over city roofs.

Suppose you are watching for E's return now. What a lot he will have to tell you. It will take all summer. I hear you have been "going out" with another young man just like you but I hope you make

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the most of your opportunities. Those brown eyes of yours are still dangerous. The Jubilee programme is still going on but I'm off to bed. Sending some papers. Best love,

M.

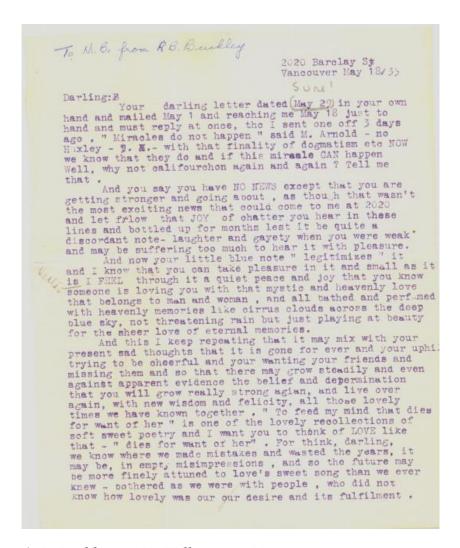
In one letter, we hear that Williams and Herridge's good friend Charlotte Whitton, the mayor of Ottawa (the first female mayor in Canada), had visited them "fresh from an exciting tête-a-tête with H.R.H. the Pr. of Wales. I don't know whether this will start a new news story — 'P of W. to marry a Canadian' — or not." Considering that Whitton had a longtime female companion, and there has been longtime debate whether they were lesbians, it is hard to know whether MB wrote this tongue in cheek. Of course, MB had a longtime female companion of her own. In part for that reason, two of the most compelling items here are love letters to and from Canadian journalist and one-time Parks Branch staffer Alfred B. Buckley, in which the two speak passionately of wasted years and might-have-beens. We learn much about Williams's life from her correspondence, but we do not learn everything.

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The original exhibition contains a dynamic gallery for viewing this multi-page document. It features handwritten letters from Alfred B. Buckley to MB Williams and from MB Williams to Mr. Buckley to her family between 1935 and 1936.



A. B. Buckley to MB Williams, 18 May 1935

[Handwritten] To M.B. from A. B. Buckley [Remainder typed] 2020 Barclay St. Vancouver May 18/35 Darling: B

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Your darling letter dated (May 29/June 1) in your own hand and mailed May 1 and reaching me May 18 just to hand and must reply at once, tho I sent one off 3 days ago, "Miracles do not happen" said M. Arnold—no Huxley—

with that finality of dogmatism etc NOW we know that they do and if this miracle CAN happen. Well, why not califourchon again and again? Tell me that.

And you say you have NO NEWS except that you are getting stronger and going about, as though that wasn't the most exciting news that could come to me at 2020 and let flow that JOY of chatter you hear in these lines bottled up for months lest it be quite a discordant note laughter and gayety when you were weak and may be suffering too much to hear it with pleasure.

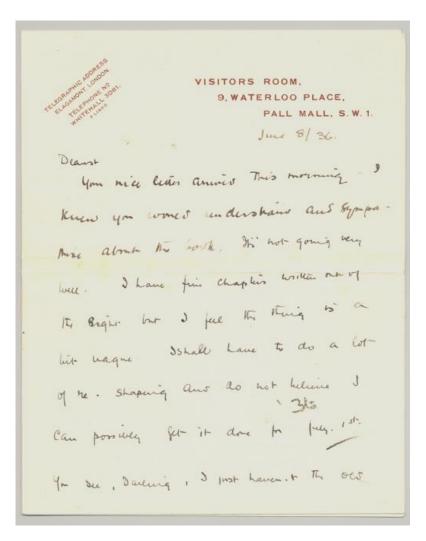
And now your little blue note "legitimizes" it and I know that you can take pleasure in it and small as it is I FEEL through it a quiet peace and joy that you know someone is loving you with that mystic and heavenly love that belongs to man and woman, and all bathed and perfumed with heavenly memories like cirrus clouds across the deep blue sky, not threatening rain but just playing at beauty for the sheer love of eternal memories.

And this I keep repeating that it may mix with your present sad thoughts that it is gone for ever and your uphill trying to be cheerful and your wanting your friends and missing them and so that there may grow steadily and even against apparent evidence the belief and determination that you will grow really strong again, and live over again, with new wisdom and felicity, all those lovely times we have known together. "To feed my mind that dies for want of her" is one of the lovely recollections of soft sweet poetry and I want you to think of LOVE like that—"dies for want of her." For think, darling, we know where we made mistakes and wasted the years, it may be, in empty misimpressions, and so the future may be more finely attuned to love's sweet song than we ever knew—bothered as we were with people, who did not know how lovely was our our desire and its fulfilment.

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MB Williams to A. B. Buckley, 8 June 1936

[Letterhead]

Telegraphic Address

Elagamont, London

3 lines

Telephone No.

Whitehall 3081

Visitors Room,

9, Waterloo Place,

Pall Mall, S.W.1.

June 8/36.

Dearest

Your nice letter arrived this morning. I knew you would understand and sympathise about the book. It's not going very well. I have five chapters written out of the eight but I feel the thing is a bit vague. I shall have to do a lot of re-shaping and as not believe I can possibly get it done for <u>July 1st</u>. You see, darling, I just haven't the old

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Capacity to work long homes at a shetch.

Really I showed only work in the homeways and play in the attendoors.

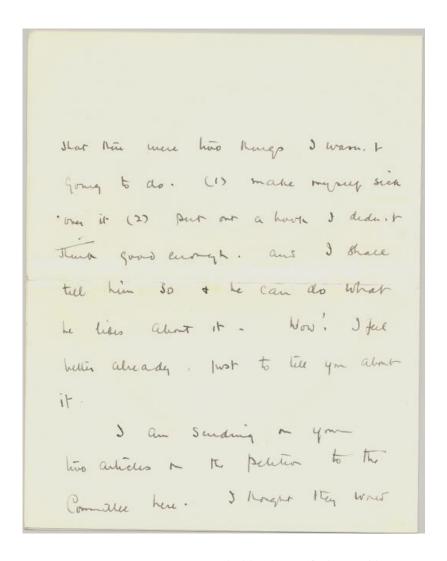
Go off in Blaketh and hie or a hielside and lishin to the waterfalls falling and the humblehees brigging + perhaps their a list work a nice man. — I have been brying to work all day + the first work do. So I have deaded to ask the publisher for another month. If he won't allow it were I made I, in soney but I made up my mis to-day

capacity to work long hours at a stretch. Really I should only work in the mornings and play in the afternoons. Go off in Baberts and lie on a hillside and listen to the waterfalls falling and the bumblebees buzzing & perhaps flirt a bit with a nice man—I have been trying to work all day & it just won't do. So I have decided to ask the publisher for another month. If he won't allow it, well I'm sorry but I made up my mind to-day

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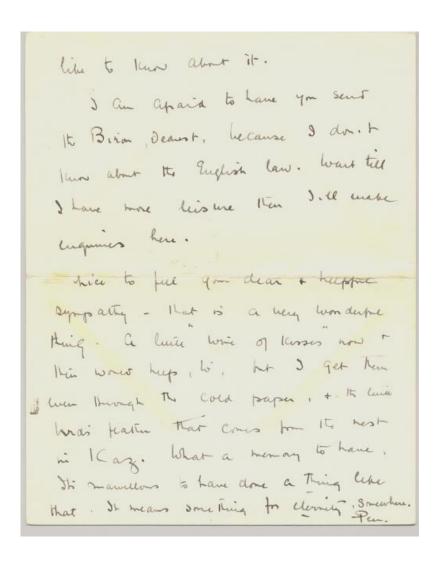


that there were two things I wasn't going to do. (1) make myself sick over it (2) put out a book I didn't think good enough and I shall tell him so & he can do what he likes about it. Wow! I feel better already. Just to tell you about it. I am sending on your two articles & the petition to the Committee here. I thought they would

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like to know about it.

I am afraid to have you send the Biron, Dearest, because I don't know about the English law. Wait till I have more leisure then I'll make enquiries here.

Nice to feel your dear & helpful sympathy – that is a very wonderful thing. A little 'wind of kisses' now & then would help, too, but I get them even through the cold paper, & the little bird's feather that comes from the nest in Kaz. What a memory to have. It's marvelous to have done a thing like that. It means something for <u>eternity</u>, somewhere. [Pen]

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I have just got to know I'me members of a group who are working to betterment here. Such a piece man, who is the editor of an "animals belfar paper. but a compette crippele. We has a good fach + he wants me to do I'me writing to him + to speak at a conference on Next? parks - hilo hipe conservation in Canada. But he is interested in the social movement, too. If you will bent me The date of that bothact from The Bankers Imag. I will get him to preversh it widely may here. J. ll by m The ang. Cath. pamphlets-+ oren things you rention. an sending yn bemon Bartlett. s new magazine The world Review of Reviews. It gives a good resume' of The International Situation from the eyer of other waterns Who don't regard England with quite to logi approval she accords herself. Ym last bridget of Columns was very hot Shift. Smetures I am almost apaid forbody will knock you on the head or

I have just got to know some members of a group who are working for betterment here. Such a nice man, who is the editor of an "Animals Welfare" paper, but a complete cripple. We had a good talk & he wants me to do some writing for him & to speak at a conference on Nat'l Parks—wild life conservation in Canada. But he is interested in the social movement too. If you will send me the date of that extract from the Bankers Mag. I will get him to publish it widely over here. I'll write for the Ang. Cath. Pamphlets & other things you mention. Am sending you Vernon Bartlett's new magazine The World Review of Reviews. It gives a good resumé of the international situation from the eyes of the other nations who don't regard England with quite the lofty approval she accords herself.

Your last budget of "columns" was very hot stuff. Sometimes I am almost afraid somebody will knock you on the head or

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run you into jail. You are absolutely fearless but I suppose you know how to cucumvent the hild haw. R.B.B. Hones enjoy studing a luis kinge into you. I am some. But it's Swifty splendir, darling, to see how burg + hospil you are. It is a big responsibilityto. pot now. Staping probeic opinion. as you say, a great deal of the lest Thought are here is moving to socialism. I am tols oriend is strongly socialistie + so becattly is the thing. Someone who is very well informed lies he he dide t want Its come at all but was only persuaded to take it because he was made to see he comes Meally do have as king Than any other way. But he complained it was not a han. S job. (This isn. t for publication) but it may be time, or if so, its good. Yes. I saw after I wrote you that ym hav changed the Burglang blag

run you into jail. You are absolutely fearless but I suppose you know how to circumvent the Libel Law. R.B.B. would enjoy sticking a little knife into you. I am sure. But it's simply splendid, darling, to see how busy & useful you are. It's a big responsibility too, just now, shaping public opinion.

As you say, a great deal of the best thought over here is moving to socialism. I am told Oxford is strongly socialistic & so secretly is the King. Someone who is very well informed told me he didn't want the crown at all but was only persuaded to take it because he was made to see he could really do more as king than any other way. But he complained it wasn't a man's job. (This isn't for publication) but it may be true, & if so, it's good.

Yes, I saw after I wrote you, that you had changed the Burglary play

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But to whole thing is coming hore + have hustrick wery Jay. Here is a nice line his about to king In Nat line play you spote of. anh.P. bus Its story in Its last trashis may. As saw he took him through the unemployed wear, penal + to Clyde, before the last election + what the King saw about to howaring conditions was about the Shong to print. One Conservature organizer remarked. " Every time that fellow opens his month he loses us 100,000 votes. In a few weeks the King (then p. of tr.) wanted to make author hips to the host. Influence was brought to bear to dessure him but he HONES GO. So the powers Decides the most lost Thing word he to keep the visit as quet as possible. Not let to press Know. However the P. o. H. Leans of this + be deliberately game to

but the whole thing is coming more & more unstuck every day.

Here is a nice little bit about the king for that little play you spoke of. An M.P. tells the story in the last Nash's Mag. He said he took him through the unemployed areas [lanon] & the Clyde, before the last election & what the king said about the housing conditions was almost too strong to print. One Conservative organizer remarked, "Every time that fellow opens his mouth he loses us 100,000 votes." In a few weeks the king (then P. of W.) wanted to make another trip to the north. Influence was brought to bear to dissuade him but he would go. So the powers decided the next best thing would be to keep the visit as quiet as possible. Not let the press know. However the P. of W. heard of this & he deliberately gave the

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besit as much purchast as possible + ser Smally anauged that all the prior men show he here to take down every thing he Sand about The conditions. It. 5 a new era when a recogni Sovereign represes not may a ponvate hair but wer a private Coach + havels dom to Landring Lam in a 18th class carriage (reserved) Canque his own despatch case. Looks a lit wearer to plato's philosopher King all This for the that by the fire deans. While we are warming up ". The how to slip into such + relase + he back + look at the fire logether. It would well - lost. Ah! those pine Knot piec . What a lovely thing they were in Russelves. One comed write a pole about Pine - Keroto .

visit as much publicity as possible & personally arranged that all the press men should be there to take down everything he said about the conditions.

It's a new era when a reigning sovereign refuses not only a private train but even a private coach & travels down to Sandringham in a 1st class carriage (reserved) carrying his own dispatch case. Looks a bit nearer to Plato's philosopher king.

All this for chit-chat by the fire, dearest. While we are "warming up." Time now to slip into silk & relax & lie back & look at the fire together. The world well-lost. Ah! Those pine knot fires! What a lovely thing they were in themselves. One could write a poem about pine-knots.

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The lovely line Gacelings + whop - Inappings + The worderful architecture of the planes. What a lot of Things we had. Do you have trood hies in 13. C. or beach - hies. I could unaquie A mell of red cedar logs bring ind a her of kongho in a line tent rear It sea. Son of Kaz. all riger long. Smell of pines, human of sea added. In desert do you know That it is 15 years This fumer Suce Kay. It was a sat of Great Divide moreur warm. I it, or tres it for you to. Like alice trespell. I coras on Jong Dom to Italy. For a time are to rwers are huma north. Hen one corres the Leight of land and all the waters begin to run south, lowards warmth + light + flowers. In comes make a polen but of that.

The lovely little cracklings & whip snappings & the wonderful architecture of the flames. What a lot of things we had. Do you have wood fires in B.C. or beach-fires. I could imagine the smell of red cedar logs burning and a bed of boughs in a little tent near the sea. Sort of Kaz. all night long. Smell of pines, murmur of sea added. My dearest do you know that it is 15 years this summer since Kaz. It was a sort of Great Divide moreover wasn't it, or was it for you too. Like Alice Meynell's essay on going down to Italy. For a time all the rivers are running north. Then one crosses the height of land and all the waters began to run south, towards warmth & light and flowers. You could make a poem out of that.

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I can feel how your white sich shirt per yet. The July so look, with the transflow underweak + you heart beating harder + harder. I deda + Know what that heart then . It goes to Emember that we cometed most of the happy Aments. That we didn't let many blips. That must be the bitmest regret of age "the higher have beens the square on leave orange fauly dry of Juice each time but here was always por as much heart time Rash mancleons des wores, wonder of life Keeps anything like that hedden for to after we are done with it. I can always unaquie so much more than is prosition. but I can't gente fear round 5 R. B. s " all we have willed, or dreamed a hope of part shall issust. Can you . Oh love. Dear love. why aren. I you have him moment to love the up + have me laugh.

I can feel how your white silk shirt felt yet. The silk so cool, with the warm flow underneath & your heart beating harder & harder. I didn't know what that meant then. It's good to remember that we counted most of the happy moments. That we didn't let many slip. That must be the bitterest regret of all "the might have beens." We squeezed our little orange family dry of juice each time but there was always just as much next time.

Rather marvellous old world, wonder if life keeps anything like that hidden for us after we are done with it. I can always imagine so much more than is possible but I can't quite get around to R.B.'s [[Browning's]] "all we have willed, or dreamed or hoped of good shall exist." Can you?

Oh love, dear love, why aren't you here this moment to hold me up & make me laugh. [Pen]

Many of MB's letters from this period are to her niece, "Rufus" (Ruth). In a February 1934 letter, she responds to a question as to whether modern life is bad for women. Rather than answering directly, she tells of having recently read John Cowper Powys's *A Philosophy of Solitude* (she gets the name wrong). She writes of the differences between extroverts who experience things outside themselves and introverts who experience within—and that everyone who has experienced both knows the inner seems somehow more real. Williams in the early 1930s was still very active, but more so than in previous decades she was watching the world go by—and

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seemed at peace with that. Her answer to Rufus seems to be that modern life gives women some opportunities to cultivate the inner self. She then tells Rufus to get Powys's book and see what she thinks for herself.

A selection of letters are given in this chapter, but you can peruse the entire collection of MB Williams's correspondence in the collection .

Websites linked in this text:

- $\bullet \ \ https://www.environmentandsociety.org/exhibitions/mb-williams/collection$
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