

PENNSSTATE



Guide to the Kenneth Burke Letters to William H. Rueckert, 1959-1987

Accession number: 2006-0121R
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Contact Information:
Pennsylvania State University
University Libraries
Special Collections Library
104 Paterno Library
University Park, PA 16802
814/865-1793
FAX 814/863-5318
E-mail: sks5@psulias.psu.edu

Processed by: Jeannette Mercer Sabre
Date Completed: 2006
Encoded by: Susan Hamburger

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Descriptive Summary

Creator: Burke, Kenneth, 1897-1993
Title: Kenneth Burke Letters to William H. Rueckert, 1959-1987
Accession: 2006-0121R
Extent: 0.72 cubic feet
Repository: Pennsylvania State University, University Libraries, Special Collections Library

Administrative Information

Access

Unrestricted access.

Acquisition Information

Gift of William H. Rueckert, 2006

Preferred Citation

Kenneth Burke Letters to William H. Rueckert, 1959-1987, Accession 2006-0121R, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Special Collections Library, University Libraries, Pennsylvania State University.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged chronologically.

Biographical Note

Kenneth Duva Burke was born May 5, 1897, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and attended Ohio State University from 1916-1917 and Columbia University from 1917-1918. He lived most of his life, from about 1921 until his death in 1993, at his home in Andover,

New Jersey.

Kenneth Burke was a poet, essayist, reviewer, novelist, translator, social commentator, and writer of short stories. But Burke was more widely known in scholarly circles as a philosopher of language, and his ever-fertile writings have continued to influence contemporary thought, particularly in areas of rhetoric, philosophy, literary theory, cultural studies, and communication studies.

In 1918-1919 Burke was a member of an avant-garde group of writers in Greenwich Village. In the 1920s he worked intermittently as an editor at *The Dial Magazine* and became its music critic from 1927 to 1929. He taught literary criticism at the New School for Social Research (1937) and the University of Chicago (1938, 1949-1950). Burke also was associated closely with Bennington College, Vermont, where he began teaching literary theory and criticism in 1943. After resigning from Bennington in 1961, Burke accepted shorter teaching and lecturing opportunities at universities across the United States (including Penn State). During this time, Burke received many honorary doctorates and other awards, among them the Gold Medal from the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1975) and the National Medal for Literature (1981).

Burke's noted works include *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (1935; 3rd rev. ed. 1984), *Attitudes Toward History* (2 volumes, 1937; 3rd. rev. ed. 1984), *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (1941; 3rd. ed. 1973), *A Grammar of Motives* (1945; 2nd ed. 1955; 1969), *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950; 2nd ed. 1955; 1969), *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (1961; 1970), *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (1966), and *Dramatism and Development* (1972). Many of Burke's essays have been selected and published in different collections.

Throughout his life, Kenneth Burke wrote to many people, among them William H. Rueckert, a promising Burke scholar who would go on to become Burke's foremost academic interpreter. Their correspondence began in 1959 with Rueckert's letter, to "Dear Mr. Burke," describing his study of Burke and inquiring about Burke's long-promised "Symbolic of Motives." Burke's role as mentor, colleague, and friend is reflected in their long interchange that ends with a letter from Burke dated 1987. Rueckert published these letters in *Letters from Kenneth Burke to William H. Rueckert, 1959-1987* (2003).

William Howe Rueckert was born November 4, 1926, in Cleveland, Ohio. He served in the United States Navy, from 1945-1946. In 1950 he earned a B.A. from Williams College and in 1951 and 1956 an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Michigan.

William Howe Rueckert taught at Russell Sage College, Troy, New York, from 1954 to 1956; Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, from 1956 to 1957; the University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois, from 1957 to 1965; the University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, from 1966 to 1975; and the State University of New York at Geneseo, beginning in 1975. In May 1990, Rueckert was elected the first president of the Kenneth Burke Society. He was a member of the Modern Language Association.

Through his writings and editions William H. Rueckert introduced Burke's writings to a wide scholarly audience. He is author of the influential study *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* (1963, 1982). He is also editor of *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke: 1924-1966* (1969); *Encounters with Kenneth Burke* (1994); with Angelo Bonadonna, *On Human Nature, A Gathering While Everything Flows: Essays, 1967-1984* (2003); and *Burke's Essays Toward a Symbolic of Motives, 1950-1955* (2004).

Other of William H. Rueckert's publications include, *Glenway Wescott* (1965), *Faulkner From Within--Destructive and Generative Being in the Novels of William Faulkner* (2004), and the essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (*The Iowa Review* 9:1 (1978)).

Scope and Content

The collection predominantly includes letters written by Kenneth Burke to William H. Rueckert from 1959 to 1987. Friend, mentor, and colleague, Burke wrote to Rueckert, a knowledgeable Burke scholar, in Burke's late productive period when Burke was developing and extending his earlier thought.

Included in the collection are approximately 238 letters, notes, or postcards written by Burke to Rueckert and his first wife Betty Ehlers. In his letters Burke wrote about his personal and intellectual life and often included a poem. The collection also contains about twenty-two letters, notes, or postcards from Elizabeth Batterham Burke to Rueckert and his wife. Among them is Elizabeth Burke's appreciative postcard to Rueckert shortly before she died, on the occasion his dedication to her of *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke: 1924-1966* (1969).

Seven letters from Rueckert appear in the collection. In addition, a vignette written by Rueckert in 1968 offers an impressionistic glimpse of Burke lecturing at the Brockport, New York, International Philosophy Year conference and visiting his friend James Sibley Watson at Watson's home in Rochester, New York.

Additional miscellaneous items appear in the collection: a few reprints, statements, newspaper accounts, and speeches, as well as a publicity card, certificate photocopy, search printout, and correspondence table. A few copies or original correspondence also are included: letters, notes, or card, from translator Erica Freiberg, critic and editor of *The Nation* Robert Hatch, Northwestern University professor Leland Griffin, editor of *The Nation* Carey McWilliams, poet Howard Nemerov, New York University English professor Gordon Norton Ray, University of Connecticut English professor Milton R. ("Mickey") Stern, and French literary critic Christian Susini.

Differences from the published book. The collection includes all the correspondence William H. Rueckert published in *Letters from Kenneth Burke to William H. Rueckert, 1959-1987* (2003). Angelo Bonadonna's "Foreword" and William H. Rueckert's "Introduction" to their book provide informative introductions to these letters.

Though essentially the same, the collection contains a few additional letters and postcards written by Burke and in place of selected excerpts from Elizabeth Burke's letters includes her complete letters. In addition, the collection contains miscellaneous items and a few letters from other correspondents.

The dating or placement of letters in the collection differs from the book in four instances.

1) *Collection*: TLS, 25 July 1963, to Dear B & B, with envelope.

Book: The letter is dated 26 July 1963. [Type is difficult to discern.]

2) *Collection*: TLS, Charlie Marcus' and K. Burke's Birthday 78, [5 May 1978], to Dear Billions, with envelope.

Book: The date is given as May 6, 1978.

3) *Collection*: TLS/AN, 17 Aug. 1978, to Dear Billions, with envelope.

Book: The date is given as Aug. 7, 1978.

4) *Collection*: TPS, circa 2 Feb. 1982, to Dear Billions.

Book: This letter is dated similarly, but placed in 1983.

Related Material

Researchers interested in the Burke--Rueckert correspondence should also consult the Kenneth Burke Papers, Burke-2 (circa 1960-1987), in Rare Books and Manuscripts, which contains many of William H. Rueckert's original letters to Burke.

Index Terms

These materials are indexed under the following headings in the catalog of the Pennsylvania State University. Researchers wishing to find related materials should search the catalog under these index terms.

Personal Name Subjects

Burke, Kenneth, 1897-1993

Rueckert, William H. (William Howe), 1926-

Topical Subjects

Philosophers -- United States

Rhetoricians -- United States

Correspondents

Burke, Elizabeth Batterham

Burke, Kenneth, 1897-1993

Freiburg, Erica

Griffin, Leland M., 1920-

Hatch, Robert (Robert L.), 1910-1994

McWilliams, Carey, 1905-

Nemerov, Howard

Ray, Gordon Norton, 1915-

Rueckert, William H. (William Howe), 1926-

Stern, Milton R.

Susini, Christian

Form/Genre Terms

Letters (correspondence)

Container List

Correspondence Series

Correspondence, 1959-1987.

[Link to an alphabetical list of correspondents with the dates of letters.](#)

Box 1

Correspondence, 1959-1975

Box 2

Correspondence, 1976-1987