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Archibald MacLeish Papers

1938-1982

1 box (0.25 linear ft.)

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American poet, writer, and Librarian of Congress, MacLeish was associated with the modernist school of poetry and awarded the Pulitzer Prize three times. The collection features a manuscript of *An Evening's Journey To Conway, Massachusetts* written to commemorate the bicentennial anniversary of the town as well as correspondence with Kenneth Murdoch documenting their friendship over three decades.

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Background on Archibald MacLeish

A native of Illinois, Archibald MacLeish was the son of a merchant father and a mother who was a college professor. His mother's

conviction to civic duties was a driving force behind Archibald developing a commitment to and taking action in various social and artistic endeavors. It was instilled in him that as a citizen he had a responsibility to contribute to the prosperity and freedom of others. MacLeish's early years were spent primarily on a large estate which encompassed nearly seventeen acres. Due to his rambunctious and at times rebellious nature as a youth, Mrs. MacLeish felt the rigorous and structured environment of private schools would be well suited for her son.

MacLeish's high school years were spent at Hotchkiss, after which he attended Yale as an English major. His leisure time was spent divided amongst several activities, including poetry, literature clubs and sports. After receiving his degree, his next destination was Harvard Law School in 1916, but his stay at the institution was halted by the service. A year after joining the program MacLeish departed for France during World War I. *Tower of Ivory*, MacLeish's first collection of poems, was published not long after his deployment into the service. Initially he was enlisted as a member of the Yale Mobile Hospital Unit, eventually switching to the artillery school. He became highly aversive and resentful of the war following the death of his brother, a fighter pilot, who was killed in the line of duty.

Upon returning to the States, MacLeish graduated from law school in 1919. He taught in the Harvard School of Government for a semester before joining a Boston law firm. He was a skilled lawyer, but eventually left the profession due to dissatisfaction with the minute amount of time the job left him to write poetry. Seven months after leaving his position at the firm, MacLeish joined a handful of accomplished writers and relocated to France.

While in Europe, MacLeish progressed as a writer focusing primarily on the long poem. In 1932, four years after returning to the United States, he was awarded with his first Pulitzer Prize for a poem titled *Conquistador*. The poem dealt with the poor treatment of the Aztecs by the Spanish Conquistadors, and suggested that this relationship was representative of the American experience. During the late thirties MacLeish was the object of criticism for his political views, criticism that was compounded with accusations that his writing was too uncertain and inconsistent. From work to work, MacLeish's views and opinions changed, and no consistent message or theme emerged. This may have been more acceptable had he not been such a staunch advocate for using art as a platform for social commentary. For example, MacLeish was an opponent of fascism and communism, while at the same time critical of American capitalism.

MacLeish went on to win two more Pulitzer prizes. One for a compilation of poetry called *Collected Poems 1917-52* and the other, for a play based on the Biblical story of Job entitled *J.B.* He was elected by President Franklin Roosevelt to be the Librarian of the Congress. In 1949, MacLeish became a professor of rhetoric and oratory at Harvard, a position he held until his retirement in 1962. During this time MacLeish was still an active poet and writer. He passed away in 1982 at the age of 90.

Scope of collection

The collection features a manuscript of *An Evening's Journey To Conway, Massachusetts* written to commemorate the bicentennial anniversary of the small town. The story is focused on a young man who is from the town and has lived there all his life. Over the course of the story he talks to new people and he comes to realize he does not really know the town. He doesn't know its history, the people, or any of the intangible things that makes a place home. During a fair for the town's 200th birthday, the young man is introduced to historical figures who helped develop Conway, and he ultimately gains a deeper understanding of what his hometown represents.

The collection also features a series of letters. The majority of these letters are addressed to Kenneth Murdoch. Though brief, the writings offer an intimate perspective of MacLeish. The period of time over which this correspondence takes place is remarkable: the first letter to Murdoch is dated 1938 and the last letter is addressed during the late sixties. The fact that the two men continued their correspondence over such an expanse of time reveals something about the nature of their friendship. Indeed, in reading the letters one can see how their relationship grew and developed during the correspondence. Because some of the letters refer to MacLeish's work, it is also possible to determine his professional and artistic activities.

Inventory

Letters: Carrol, Jan and Carroll, David

1962-1964

Box 1: 1

Letters: MacLeish, Ada

1966-1971

Box 1: 2

Letters: McLaughlin, Donald

1939

Box 1: 3

Letters: Murdock, Kenneth and Murdock, Eleanor

1938-1968

Box 1: 4

University of Massachusetts

1969,1982

Box 1: 5

Concerning MacLeish's receipt of Doctor of Humane Letters by the University and details of an etching of MacLeish by Jack Coughlin.

Writings: L'an Trentiesme de Mon Eage

undated

Box 1: 6

Writings: *An Evening's Journey to Conway, Massachusetts*

1967

Box 1: 7

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Processing Information

Processed by Shawn K. Robinson, 2007.

Language:

English

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Search terms

Subjects

Conway (Mass.)--Fiction

MacLeish, Archibald, 1892-

Poets, American

Contributors

MacLeish, Archibald, 1892- [\[main entry\]](#)

Murdoch, Kenneth

Genres and formats

Letters (Correspondence)

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