

Ben Hecht:

An Inventory of His Collection in the Manuscript Collection at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Hecht, Ben, 1894-1964
Title:	Ben Hecht Collection
Dates:	1924-1958, undated
Extent:	2 boxes (0.84 linear feet)
Abstract:	The Ben Hecht Collection consists of five handwritten and typed manuscript drafts, galley proofs, and two letters dating from 1924-1958.
Call Number:	Manuscript Collection MS-01897
Language:	English
Access:	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Purchases and gift, 1965 (R2483), 1967 (R3347), 1968 (R4187), 1980 (G718)
Processed by:	Amy E. Armstrong, 2009
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

Ben Hecht was born on February 28, 1894, in New York, New York. While he was a child, his family moved to Racine, Wisconsin, where he met his “first mentor,” the trapeze artist Harry Costello. At age 14 Hecht joined Costello as a trapeze performer in his traveling show. Hecht had little formal education, but was a voracious reader. In 1910, he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin; however, having already read the required books, he left within the first few days, feeling that the University “had nothing to teach him.” He moved to Chicago where a distant uncle assisted Hecht in obtaining a job at the *Chicago Journal*.

Hecht’s career as a journalist, first with the *Chicago Journal* (1910-1914) and later the *Chicago Daily News* (1914-1923), influenced much of his later writing. Chicago’s streets, jails, courtrooms, and citizenry provided ample inspiration for Hecht, who wrote vivid, authentic, though not always pleasant stories about the city, always seeking “to remove the mask from the world.” Following World War I, the *Chicago Daily News* sent Hecht to Berlin as foreign correspondent. After returning from Europe in 1920, he wrote a daily column for the *Chicago Daily News* entitled “1001 Afternoons in Chicago.” The column was highly regarded and established a reporting model for the human interest story that was widely adopted by later journalists. Covici-McGee compiled a selection of these reports and published a book under the same name in 1922. Indeed, the success of *1001 Afternoons in Chicago* overshadowed the release of his first novel in 1921, *Erik Dorn*. Hecht’s straightforward language and style of prose led to federal charges against him for using the mail to send obscene material, with officials branding his book *Fantazius Mallare: A Mysterious Oath* (1922) as “lewd, obscene, and lascivious.”

During Chicago’s eruption of literary and artistic expression between 1912 and 1922, Hecht was well positioned as a writer and contributor to the Chicago Literary Renaissance. Among his friends were authors and artists, including Stanislaus Szukalski, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson, Maxwell Bodenheim, and Pascal Covici. Hecht was a frequent contributor to and literary critic for the influential art and literature magazine *The Little Review*, founded by Margaret Anderson. Between 1923 and 1924, Hecht published his own literature magazine, *The Chicago Literary Times*. “Attack everything” was the guiding philosophy for the publication and as its chief—and at times sole—contributor, Hecht did just that, commenting on a range of topics from literature to politics. During this time, Hecht published three more books: *The Florentine Dagger: A Novel for Amateur Detectives* (1923), *Humpty Dumpty* (1924), and *The Kingdom of Evil: A Continuation of the Journal of Fantazius Mallare* (1924).

Hecht enjoyed his greater success as a playwright. *The Egotist* was first produced on Broadway on December 25, 1922. At that time, Hecht reconnected with Charles MacArthur, a writer and journalist he knew in Chicago. The two men formed a life-long friendship and a successful creative partnership. Their collaborations include the plays *The Front Page* (1928), *Twentieth Century* (1932), and *Jumbo* (1935). In addition to their theater pieces, MacArthur and Hecht collaborated on screenplays and film projects. Their play *The Front Page* was adapted into a movie of the same title on three occasions (1931, 1945, and 1974) and helped establish the newspaper film genre.

In 1924, Hecht left his wife, Marie Armstrong, and their daughter, Edwina (Teddy), in Chicago and moved to New York City with writer Rose Caylor. Hecht and Marie divorced in 1925 and Caylor and Hecht married later that year. They had one daughter, Jenny. While living in New York, Hecht published eight books, including *Count Bruga* (1926), *A Jew in Love* (1931), *A Book of Miracles* (1939), *Collected Short Stories* (1943), and *A Guide for the Bedeviled* (1944). *A Book of Miracles* was Hecht's most highly praised novel; however, most of his books were met with little critical or commercial success. In 1940 he joined the staff of the publication *PM*, where he wrote a column entitled "1001 Afternoons in New York."

It was perhaps with feelings of personal ambivalence that Hecht returned to Hollywood in 1941 to write screenplays. He was prolific and financially successful, usually working on more than one screenplay at a time and often completing a screenplay in less than two weeks. He wrote and contributed—often uncredited—to over 80 screen stories and screenplays. In addition to six Academy Award nominations, Hecht was awarded the first ever Academy Award for Best Story for the film *Underworld* (1927/1928). In 1935 he received the same award for the film *The Scoundrel*. Hecht worked frequently with producers David O. Selznick and Samuel Goldwyn and wrote or contributed to many classics of the Golden Age of Hollywood including *Scarface* (1932), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Angels Over Broadway* (1940), *His Girl Friday* (1940), *Spellbound* (1945), *Notorious* (1946), *A Farewell to Arms* (1957), and *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962).

After Hecht appeared on *The Mike Wallace Interview* television program on February 15, 1958, Wallace and his producer, Ted Yates, believed that Hecht's demeanor and outspoken opinions were well-suited for his own television show. *The Ben Hecht Show* debuted the same year, but due to its controversial subject matter, was cancelled after twenty-two weeks.

Ben Hecht died in New York City on April 18, 1964.

Sources:

"Ben Hecht." *Contemporary Authors Online*, <http://galenet.galegroup.com> (accessed 22 January 2009).

Hecht, Ben. *A Child of the Century*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954.

Kaul, A. J. "Ben Hecht." *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 25: American Newspaper Journalists, 1901-1925*, <http://galenet.galegroup.com> (accessed 9 February 2009).

Scope and Contents

The Ben Hecht Collection consists of five handwritten and typed manuscript drafts, galley proofs, and two letters dating from 1924-1958. The materials are alphabetically arranged in two series: I. Works, 1924-1947 and II. Letters, 1958, undated.

The largest segment of material consists of five typed, handwritten, and composite manuscript drafts for Hecht's novels *Count Bruga* (1926), *Humpty Dumpty* (1924), *A Jew in Love* (1931), and *The Kingdom of Evil: A Continuation of the Journal of Fantazius Mallare* (1924). Three of the manuscripts contain handwritten corrections. Hecht inscribed and autographed three of the manuscripts to his friend and publisher, Pascal Covici. Also present are galley proofs for *The Cat that Jumped out of the Story* (1947).

Two letters written by Ben Hecht are also contained in the collection. The first is undated and handwritten to Mr. Fawcett on *Chicago Literary Times* stationery and mentions Hecht's play, *The Egotist*, his indecency charge for his novel, *Mallare*, and some brief biographical details. The 1958 letter is typed and signed and addressed to Mrs. Benjamin B. Goodman on American Broadcasting Company stationery and regards *The Ben Hecht Show*.

The collection is in good condition; however, the paper for the handwritten manuscript *A Jew in Love* is slightly brittle.

Related Material

Related collections at the Ransom Center include the James Agee Collection, the William A. Bradley Literary Agency Records, the Pascal Covici Correspondence, the John Gassner Collection, the Edward Gordon Craig Collection, the Frederic Dannay Collection, the Theodore Dreiser Collection, the Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Records, the Robert Park Mills Papers, the Arnold T. Schwab Collection of James G. Haneker, the David O. Selznick Collection, the Jule Styne Collection, the Gloria Swanson Papers, and the Mike Wallace Interview Collection.

The Ben Hecht Papers are housed at The Newberry Library in Chicago, Illinois.

Index Terms

People

Hecht, Ben, 1893-1964.

Subjects

Dramatists.

Motion picture authorship.

Novelists, American--20th century.

Document Types

Galley proofs

Letters (correspondence)

Typescripts

Series I. Works, 1924-1947, undated

<i>The Cat that Jumped out of the Story</i> , galley proofs, 1947 (*proofs removed to galley file)	Container *
<i>Count Bruga</i> , bound composite manuscript draft with handwritten corrections, inscribed, 9 January 1925	Container 1.1
<i>Humpty Dumpty</i> , bound typescript, inscribed, undated	Container 1.2
<i>A Jew in Love</i>	
Handwritten manuscript draft, inscribed, 1930	Container 1.3-2.1
Typescript draft with handwritten corrections, [1930-1931]	Container 2.2-4
<i>The Kingdom of Evil</i> , bound composite manuscript draft with handwritten corrections, signed, 19 September 1924	Container 2.5

Series II. Letters, 1958, undated

Letters, 1958, undated

Container 2.6