

William Carlos Williams:

An Inventory of His Collection at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Williams, William Carlos, 1883-1963
Title:	William Carlos Williams Collection
Dates:	1928-1971
Extent:	4 document boxes (1.68 linear feet)
Abstract:	The William Carlos Williams Collection consists of manuscripts and correspondence by Williams; manuscripts, correspondence, and research notes about Williams by scholar John C. Thirlwall; and correspondence about Williams by other authors. Major works represented in draft form include Williams' <i>Life Along the Passaic River</i> (1938) and Thirlwall's edition of the <i>Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams</i> (1957). Correspondents represented include David McDowell, Marcia Nardi, Bonnie Golightly, and Srinivas Rayaprol. The collection is arranged in four series: I. Works, 1936-1960, undated; II. Correspondence, 1928-1961, undated; III. John C. Thirlwall Materials, 1951-1971, undated; and IV. Correspondence by Other Authors, 1946-1968, undated.
Call Number:	Manuscript Collection MS-04536
Language:	English
Access:	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Purchases and gifts, 1961-1995 (R 942, R1027, R2897, R3377, R4103, R4591, R5374, R7152, R11685, G9033, G10239, R13411, R13444)
Processed by:	Elspeth Healey, 2010
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

William Carlos Williams was born on September 17, 1883, in Rutherford, New Jersey, the same town where he would die nearly eighty years later. His father, William George Williams, was a British-born merchant who, since childhood, had lived in the Caribbean. His mother, Rachel Elena Hoheb, was from Puerto Rico and had studied painting in Paris. The couple moved to Rutherford shortly after their marriage in Brooklyn, New York. Williams, and his younger brother Edgar, attended elementary school in Rutherford, and in 1898 studied at Château de Lancy, a boarding school near Geneva, while their father was in Buenos Aires on a year-long business trip. In the fall of 1899, Williams started high school at Horace Mann in Manhattan, commuting roughly an hour and a half each way from Rutherford to Morningside Heights.

Williams entered the University of Pennsylvania in 1902, as a student in its medical program. At Penn, Williams formed friendships with fellow student Ezra Pound, as well as painter Charles Demuth, who was studying art at Drexel, and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), a student at Bryn Mawr. These friendships encouraged Williams to explore his aesthetic ambitions and would remain important throughout his life. Pound, in particular, was a chief foil in Williams' development of his vision of American literature. The two writers shared a life-long, if at times contentious, friendship. In his prologue to *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920), Williams would call Pound "the best enemy United States verse has" because, from Williams' perspective, Pound favored that which mimicked the European over that which was American. It became one of Williams' aesthetic missions to create a distinctively American literature—one which drew on American diction, rhythms, forms, and themes, and which was rooted in the particularities of the local.

Following medical school, Williams interned first at the French Hospital and then at Nursery and Child's Hospital in New York, resigning from the latter on principle rather than sign his name to a hospital report containing figures he could not verify. Williams next studied pediatrics in Leipzig. While in Europe, he visited Pound in London and had a brief taste of the literary scene there. Upon returning to Rutherford, Williams established a medical practice in his hometown and, in December of 1912, married Florence Herman. The couple would have two sons, William and Paul.

In 1909, Williams privately printed a volume of his poems in Rutherford; and then in 1913 he succeeded in publishing *The Tempers* with Pound's publisher, London-based Elkin Matthews. While many of his literary peers led bohemian lives in Greenwich Village and Paris, Williams juggled his writing with his life in suburban Rutherford and his busy medical career. In his 1951 *Autobiography*, Williams wrote that early on he had made the decision that he would "not 'die for art,' but live for it, grimly! And work, work, work (like Pop), beat the game and be free (like Mom, poor soul!) to write, write as I alone should write."

During the late 1910s, Williams would sometimes meet with a group of writers associated with the little magazine *Others* at the house of Alfred Kreyborg in Grantwood, New Jersey. He also made commutes into Greenwich Village to visit with writers like Marianne Moore, Marsden Hartley, Kay Boyle, Wallace Stevens, Mina Loy, and Lola Ridge. In 1920, Williams founded the little magazine *Contact* with writer Robert McAlmon. He also continued to contribute his own writing to various little magazines and during the early 1920s published *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920), *Sour Grapes* (1921), *Great American Novel* (1923), *Spring and All* (1923), and *In the American Grain* (1925). Much of this last book was written during a sabbatical year, half of which he spent in Europe. Though Williams did make several extended trips to Europe during the 1920s, he chose not to become an expatriate like so many of his peers. In 1926, he won the *Dial* award for his poem "Paterson," a precursor to the long-poem of the same name he would publish in five books beginning in 1946.

In 1931, Williams contributed to the "Objectivist" issue of *Poetry* magazine, with fellow poets Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen and others. In the 1930s, Williams continued to publish extensively, including two volumes of collected poems and the short story collections *The Knife of the Times* (1932) and *Life Along the Passaic River* (1938). Williams' fiction often depicted the local middle- and working-class figures that he encountered in his medical practice.

During the late 1930s, Williams, who always had a difficult time finding a stable publisher, began publishing with the fledgling press New Directions. Its founder, James Laughlin, brought out Williams' 1937 novel, *White Mule*, and served as his principal publisher throughout the late 1930s and 1940s. In 1950, though, Williams was wooed by a former New Directions editor, David McDowell, into a lucrative contract to publish several volumes of prose with the more commercial Random House.

Living at a remove from modernism's literary colonies, Williams was a diligent correspondent throughout his life. In addition to carrying on extensive correspondences with his literary peers, he responded to almost anyone who wrote to him, including many young writers. During the 1940s, he met and began a correspondence with aspiring writer Marcia Nardi, whose desperate and sometimes accusatory letters he incorporated into his epic poem *Paterson*.

For much of his life, Williams felt neglected in comparison to some of his better-known contemporaries; however, in the 1950s he began to achieve some the renown he desired. Members of a younger generation of writers, like Allen Ginsberg and Denise Levertov, sought him out as a literary mentor. Such recognition, however, was offset by several medical and personal setbacks. In 1948, Williams suffered a heart attack, and throughout the 1950s he suffered a series of strokes and wrestled with bouts of depression. In the midst of this, Williams also commenced his periodic interviews with scholar John C. Thirlwall, who hoped to write a biography of the poet. Williams' own *Autobiography* had caused tensions with some of his old literary compatriots, including a major rift with his one-time friend Robert McAlmon.

Williams also experienced disappointment when his nomination to the post of Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress was sidetracked by McCarthy-era questions about his politics and personal associations, including his friendship with Pound. Ill-health and frustration led him to surrender the appointment. He did, however, that same year receive the validation of sharing the 1953 Bollingen Prize with Archibald MacLeish. Williams was increasingly asked to give readings around the country, and would do so as his health allowed. Julian Beck produced a successful off-Broadway run of Williams' play *Many Loves* in 1959, which the poet was able to attend.

In 1961, Williams experienced another round of debilitating strokes, leading him to give up on his writing. He died on March 4, 1963. Williams' funeral in Rutherford was attended by his family and townspeople, as well as several younger writers from New York--including Gilbert Sorrentino, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Joel Oppenheimer--who had come to pay homage to the poet. Later that year, Williams was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *Pictures from Breughel, and Other Poems* (1962) as well as the National Institute of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for poetry.

Sources:

Cooper, John Xiros. "William Carlos Williams." *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 54: American Poets, 1880-1945, Third Series*. <http://www.galegroup.com> (accessed 20 August 2010).

Mariani, Paul. *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981.

Williams, William Carlos. *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*. New York: New Directions, 1967.

Williams, William Carlos. *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, John C. Thirlwall, Ed. New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957.

Scope and Contents

The William Carlos Williams Collection consists of manuscripts and correspondence by Williams; manuscripts, correspondence, and research notes about Williams by scholar John C. Thirlwall; and correspondence about Williams by other authors. Major works represented in draft form include Williams' *Life Along the Passaic River* (1938) and Thirlwall's edition of the *Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams* (1957).

Correspondents represented include David McDowell, Marcia Nardi, Bonnie Golightly, and Srinivas Rayaprol. The collection is arranged in four series: I. Works, 1936-1960, undated; II. Correspondence, 1928-1961, undated; III. John C. Thirlwall Materials, 1951-1971, undated; and IV. Correspondence by Other Authors, 1946-1968, undated.

The Works series includes a typescript of Williams' 1938 short story collection, *Life Along the Passaic River*, as well as a printed copy of his play *A Dream of Love* (1948) with handwritten corrections. Additional manuscripts in this series include a draft version of Williams' foreword to his *Autobiography* (1951), a typescript of an essay on the artist Emanuel Romano, and a typescript of *The Train Ride*, an unpublished story tied to a passage in Williams' *Autobiography*. Also present is Williams' typescript introduction for a collection of his short stories with publisher David McDowell—the collection was published by New Directions instead and this original introduction was abandoned. Typescript and galley proof drafts of John C. Thirlwall's edition of *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams* are located in Series III.

Series II. consists of correspondence to and from Williams. The majority of letters in this series date from the 1940s and 1950s. The largest accumulation of letters consist of those to and from Williams' editor David McDowell. These letters document Williams' decision in 1950 to break with his principal publisher since 1937, James Laughlin of New Directions, and publish several volumes with McDowell at Random House and then McDowell, Obolensky. Also present are Williams' thirty-five letters to writer and New York bookstore owner Bonnie Golightly. Of note are over thirty of Williams' letters to Marcia Nardi, the poet whose own letters to Williams served as the basis for the "Cress" passages in his long poem *Paterson*. Williams' generosity toward younger writers and admirers is reflected in his correspondence with Srinivas Rayaprol and Daniel Langton. The poet's letter to Anna Wirtz, a curious reader, is particularly noteworthy for its explication of his most famous poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow." Additional recipients of multiple letters include Oscar Baradinsky, Kay Boyle, and H. R. Hays.

Series III. consists of works on and research materials about William Carlos Williams by scholar John C. Thirlwall. Thirlwall was an English Professor at the City College of New York who published, with Williams' cooperation, an edition of the poet's selected letters. This series includes two draft versions of that work: a typescript, with numerous editorial corrections and printer's notations, and an uncorrected galley proof. Thirlwall also interviewed Williams over several years for a never published biography. Carbon copy transcripts from some of these interviews are located in this series. Interview transcriptions pertaining to Williams' literary peers, life, and writing are found in folder 2.10; whereas Williams' comments on specific poems are recorded in transcript excerpts in 2.11 and a printed copy of *The Collected Earlier Poems* in folder 3.2. Additional materials in this series include correspondence pertaining to Thirlwall's work on Williams and typescripts of and research materials for his article, "William Carlos Williams' Heart Beat and his 'Measured Line' in Poetry." The series also includes two photographs of Williams in folder 2.8.

Series IV. Correspondence by Other Authors consists largely of letters between David McDowell and a variety of figures concerning William Carlos Williams and his works. McDowell served as one of Williams' publishers and editors during the 1950s, first at Random House and then briefly at his own firm of McDowell, Obolensky. Additional correspondence by others includes six letters from Williams' wife Florence (Flossie) to Bonnie Golightly and four letters from James Laughlin to Marcia Nardi.

This collection was previously accessible through the Ransom Center's card catalog and has been re-cataloged. The materials are generally in good condition.

Related Material

The Ransom Center's Book Collections contains extensive holdings for Williams, including first editions of most of Williams' published works and numerous association copies. The Center's Louis Zukofsky Collection contains over 350 letters from Williams, spanning over thirty years of the two writers' friendship. The Julian Beck Collection contains approximately 70 letters between the poet and Beck regarding the production of Williams' play *Many Loves*. Other collections at the Ransom Center that contain Williams materials are: *21 Etchings*, Merle Armitage, Artine Artinian Collection of Guy de Maupassant, Marcella Spann Booth Collection of Ezra Pound, Kay Boyle, *Contempo*, Cid Corman, *El Corno Emplumado*, Nancy Cunard, Edward Dahlberg, Ronald Frederick Henry Duncan, Charles Henri Ford, John Herrman, Margo Jones, John Lehman, Willard Mass, Charles Norman, Peter Owen, Ezra Loomis Pound, Evelyn Scott, Idella Purnell Stone, Parker Tyler, and Walt Whitman.

Yale University's Beinecke Library holds a major deposit of William Carlos Williams' papers. Among its ninety-four-box Williams collection are three boxes of John Thirlwall's research materials for *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*. A second major collection of Williams' manuscripts and correspondence is housed in the Poetry Collection at the University at Buffalo, The State University of New York. Drafts of Williams' *Paterson* are split between these two collections, with materials for Books I and II at Buffalo, and materials for Books III-V at Yale. Smaller Williams collections are held at the University of Delaware, the University of Virginia, and Indiana University's Lilly Library.

Separated Material

Three audio reels of Williams material recorded by John Thirlwall have been transferred to the Ransom Center's Sound Recordings Collection.

Index Terms

People

McDowell, David, 1918-1985

Pound, Ezra, 1885-1972

Thirlwall, John C.

Organizations

Random House

Subjects

American poetry -- 20th century

Poets, American--20th century

Document Types

Galley proofs

Scripts

Sound recordings

Series I. Works, 1936-1960, undated

A Dream of Love, printed book (issue six of magazine *Direction*) with handwritten corrections, 107 pp., 1948, undated **Container**
1.1

Life Along the Passaic River, typed manuscript with handwritten notes to the printer, 176 pp., circa 2 November 1937 **Container**
1.2-3

A-R, 1936-1951, undated

Adam & Eve & the City, unbound printed copy with uncut pages, signed by Williams, inscribed by J. Ronald Lane Latimer to Willard Maas, 69 pp., 1936 **Container**
1.4

The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams, foreword

Typescript with handwritten corrections, 5 pp., undated **Container** 1.4

Mimeograph, 5 pp., with attached letter [1951]

The Build-Up, synopsis, signed typescript with minor handwritten corrections, 3 pp., undated

Emanuel Romano, article typescript with handwritten corrections, 9 pp., with attached rejection letter and two photographs, [1951]

The Passaic City Hall, signed poem typescript, 1 p., undated

Reply to Miss Moore: Am. Institute of Arts and Letters, signed typescript, 1 p., 21 May 1948

S-Z, 1955-1960, undated

Short Stories of William Carlos Williams, introduction, carbon copy typescript, 22 pp., with attached letter, [1960] **Container**
1.5

The Train Ride, short story carbon copy typescript, signed with handwritten corrections, 7 pp., undated

A Tribute to Ezra Pound, mimeograph radio script featuring Williams and others, 17 pp., circa December 1955

The White Butterfly, signed typescript with handwritten corrections, 2 pp., undated

William Carlos Williams on Rutherford, New Jersey, mimeograph radio script, 4 pp., July 1955

Memorabilia and Fragments

Autograph specimen, 1p., undated

Container 1.5

Make Light of It, table of contents, carbon copy typescript, 1 p., undated

Notes, handwritten, two on prescription pad, 3pp., undated

Series II. Correspondence, 1928-1961, undated

A-G, 1928-1961	Container 1.6
Baradinsky, Oscar, 1950, undated	Container 1.7
Golightly, Bonnie, 1946-[1950]	Container 1.8
H-Z, 1931-1961, undated	Container 1.9
Hays, H. R. (Hoffman Reynolds), 1932-1958	Container 1.10
Langton, Daniel J., 1955-1959	Container 1.11
McDowell, David	
January 1950-December 1950	Container 2.1
January 1951-July 1951	Container 2.2
July 1951-August 1954	Container 2.3
Nardi, Marcia, 1942-1956, undated	Container 2.4
Rayaprol, Srinivas, 1949-1958	Container 2.5

Series III. John C. Thirlwall Materials, 1951-1971, undated

Research Materials on William Carlos Williams

Three Audio Reels, 'WCW-JT,' 'WCW talking,' 'Heart beat Machine vs. WCW,' 1953-1962, undated (*transferred to Ransom Center Sound Recordings Collection) **Container ***

Correspondence

'WCW Correspondence On,' 1954-1970, undated **Container 2.6**

'WCW-JCT,' 1953-1971 **Container 2.7**

'W. C. W. Letters Unpublisht,' includes photographs, 1951-1969, undated **Container 2.8**

'Heart Beat,' notes, correspondence, and three typescript drafts with handwritten corrections of Thirlwall's 'William Carlos Williams' Heart Beat and his "Measured Line" in Poetry,' 1960-1963, undated **Container 2.9**

'Tape Talks – Carbons,' carbon copy typescript transcriptions with handwritten corrections of Thirlwall's conversations with William Carlos Williams, with related correspondence, undated [conversations 1953-1961], 1971 **Container 2.10**

'W. C. W. CEP – Notes'

William Carlos Williams and John C. Thirlwall: Record of a Happy Ten Year Relationship, typescript with Thirlwall's handwritten corrections, undated **Container 3.1**

William Carlos Williams: The Poet as Expositor and Critic, typescript of Williams' comments to Thirlwall on various of his poems, undated

Withdrawals from Thirlwall's copy of *The Collected Earlier Poems* (see folder 3.2)

The Collected Earlier Poems of William Carlos Williams, printed copy with Thirlwall's transcriptions of Williams' interview comments on individual poems, undated (withdrawals in folder 3.1) **Container 3.2**

The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams (1957), edited with an introduction by John C. Thirlwall

Typescript and carbon copy draft, with editor's handwritten corrections and attached slips, and printer's notes and marks, 460 pp., circa May 1957 **Container 3.3-4.2**

Uncorrected galleys, 224 pp., 1957 **Container 4.3**

Series IV. Correspondence by Other Authors, 1946-1968, undated

Unidentified-M, 1950-1966	Container 4.4
McDowell, David, 1950-1955	Container 4.5
N-Z, 1949-1968	Container 4.6
Williams, Florence H. (Florence Herman), 1946-1952	Container 4.7

Index of Correspondents

- Baradinsky, Oscar (Oscar Baron) --1.7 (15 from Williams)
- Baraka, Imamu Amiri, 1934--1.9 (1 from Williams)
- The Beistle Company (H. E. Luhrs)--1.6 (1 to Williams)
- Boyle, Kay, 1902-1992--1.6 (13 from Williams)
- Burke, Kenneth, 1897-1993--2.8 (1 copy from Williams)
- Carroll, Donald, 1940- --1.6 (1 from Williams)
- Crehan, Hubert--1.6 (2 from Williams)
- Cummings, E. E. (Edward Estlin), 1894-1962--1.6 (1 from Williams)
- Fjelde, Rolf--1.6 (1 from Williams)
- George Washington Memorial Library (P. Gehring)--1.6 (1 to Williams)
- Golightly, Bonnie--1.8 (35 from Williams)
- Golightly, Leeann--1.6 (1 from Williams)
- Hays, H. R. (Hoffman Reynolds), 1904-1980--1.10 (8 from Williams)
- Jennings, _____ --1.9 (1 from Williams)
- Jones, LeRoi see Baraka, Imamu Amiri, 1934-
- Koch, Vivienne (V) --1.9 (1 to Williams)
- Langton, Daniel J. --1.11 (12 from Williams)
- Laughlin, James (Jim), 1914-1997--1.9 (1 from Williams, 1 to Williams), 2.1 (1 from Williams, 1 to Williams in enclosures)
- Lougée, David--1.9 (4 from Williams)
- Maas, Willard, 1906-1971--1.9 (2 from Williams)
- Macdonald, Dwight--1.9 (1 from Williams)
- McCullers, Carson, 1917-1967--1.9 (1 from Williams)
- McDowell, David, 1918-1985--1.5 (1 from Williams), 2.1-2.3 (76 from Williams, 47 to Williams)
- Nardi, Marcia--2.4 (32 from Williams, 2 drafts to Williams)
- Pound, Ezra, 1885-1972--1.9 (1 to Williams)
- Rakosi, Carl, 1903-2004--1.9 (2 from Williams)
- Random House--1.9 (1 to Williams)
- Rappaport, H. A. --1.9 (2 from Williams)
- Rayaprol, Srinivas (Seena) --2.5 (35 from Williams)
- Rogers, Charles M. (WEW, Saint Louis, MO)--2.3 (1 to Williams enclosed with Williams to MacDowell, David)
- Rosenthal, M. L. (Macha Louis), 1917-1996--1.11 (1 to Williams enclosed with Williams to Langton, Daniel J.)
- Russell, Jim--1.9 (1 to Williams)
- Reznikoff, Charles, 1894-1976--1.8 (1 to Williams enclosed with Williams to Golightly, Bonnie)
- Steloff, Frances, b. 1887 (Gotham Book Mart)--1.9 (4 from Williams)
- Thirlwall, John C. --2.7 (2 to Williams)
- Thoma, Richard--1.9 (2 from Williams)
- United States Library of Congress Copyright Office (MacCarteney, Richard S.)--1.9 (1 to Williams)
- Wilson, Hilda (and Anna)--1.9 (1 from Williams)
- Wirtz, Anna--1.9 (1 from Williams, 1 to Williams)

Index of Works

- *Adam & Eve & the City*--1.4
- *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (enclosed with letter from Random House, Inc. to Bookseller)--1.4, 4.6
- *The Build-Up*--1.4
- *A Dream of Love*--1.1
- Emanuel Romano--1.4
- Life Along the Passaic River--1.2-3
- *Make Light of It*--1.5
- The Passaic City Hall--1.4
- Reply to Miss Moore: Am. Institute of Arts and Letters--1.4
- *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*--3.3-4.3
- The Short Stories of William Carlos Williams--1.5
- Sonnet in Search of an Author--1.11, 2.5
- The Train Ride (enclosed with letter from McDowell, David, to Morton, Charles W.)--1.5, 4.5
- A Tribute to Ezra Pound--1.5
- The White Butterfly--1.5
- William Carlos Williams on Rutherford, New Jersey--1.5