



Martha Gellhorn, November 1, 1940 (Associated Press)

## Timely and Timeless Words

*Yours, for Probably Always . . . Martha Gellhorn's Letters of Love and War 1930–1949* by Janet Somerville. Richmond Hill, Canada: Firefly Books, 2019. Photographs. Timeline. Selected Further Reading. Letter Citations. Notes. Index. Hardcover, 528 pp., USD\$40.

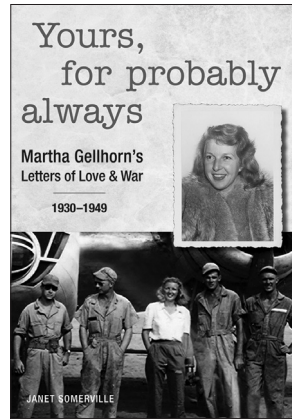
Reviewed by Isabelle Meuret, Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

“I do not believe that Fascism can destroy democracy, I think democracy can only destroy itself.”

— Martha Gellhorn, in a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt (1939)

Long gone are the days when Martha Gellhorn was showcased as the wife of some famous great American novelist. Thanks to the copious scholarship attached to her name these last decades and the careful attention paid to her literary and journalistic production, the intrepid war correspondent is now acknowledged as a full-fledged and distinguished writer. While several biographies have documented her personal and professional trajectories, in particular Caroline Moorehead's *Gellhorn: A Twentieth-Century Life* (2003), the entertainment business has also contributed to glorifying this U.S. heroine, albeit through the slightly extravagant feature film *Hemingway and Gellhorn* (2012) by Philip Kaufman. In times when women's accomplishments are increasingly and justly receiving long-awaited and eagerly expected consideration, *Yours, for Probably Always: Martha Gellhorn's Letters of Love & War 1930–1949* is understandably a welcome and appreciable addition to existing knowledge. While this volume is not the first to present Gellhorn's correspondence—Moorehead's *Selected Letters of Martha Gellhorn* (2006) already disclosed before-unseen material—Janet Somerville's tour de force rests on her being granted access to Gellhorn's restricted papers, photos, journals, and correspondence, unpublished to this day.

Somerville, a Canadian literature specialist, set about the daunting task of sifting through Gellhorn's archives, a treasure chest held at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University. The book itself, an impressively hefty and elegant volume of letters, also contains two beautifully arranged inserts featuring vintage photographs of Gellhorn, her relatives, and friends, as well as reproductions of authentic missives, telegrams, and official documents, among which is a note signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself, and an emotion-laden visitor's pass to the Dachau concentration camp, wherefrom Gellhorn bore witness to the ultimate



horror. Unquestionably, the added value of Somerville's impressive curation of documents resides in its meticulous selection and arrangement, augmented with her own occasional comments and additions to the letters, journal entries, and diary notes of Gellhorn. Pondering over *Yours, for Probably Always*, more specifically with a view to its contribution to literary journalism studies, two elements stand out. First, Gellhorn showed unabated enthusiasm for and absolute dedication to her journalistic occupation and literary craft. Second, the timelessness and timeliness of her words, as they appear in letters spanning two decades, is astounding, given the particularly volatile moments in which we are living.

Gellhorn was undeniably proud of being a war correspondent; her determination to get the job done was her top priority and "obligation as a citizen" (413). This preoccupation is constantly present in her letters, which imply critical acumen and professional flair. Such commitment required a strong work ethic and constant introspection. She shared equal concern for the editors at *Collier's*, for her sources on the field, and for readers at home. That she went to great lengths to obtain firsthand information is clear from her letters and notes. If her reportages from the War in Spain published in *Collier's* bespeak her unwavering engagement in the coverage of the conflict, they also reflect the specific angle she was encouraged to develop, that is, stories of human interest. Her letters confirm this passion for people but, most importantly, they reveal the huge amount of reporting she did, behind the scenes, collecting information on the field and interacting with notable sources. Her scrupulous and methodical approach to her assignments shatters the simplistic image of Gellhorn as a reckless journalist willing to go to the war with the boys but telling stories that were peripheral to the actual military stakes. They confirm that her courage was immense; the risks she took are inferred from the moving letters she prepared for loved ones, never expedited, in case she died.

Gellhorn threw herself wholeheartedly in her journalistic ventures, but she was also a creative writer at heart. In a letter from Cuba, dated July 10, 1942, she confessed to Eleanor Roosevelt:

I would rather be a journalist than anything except a first-rate writer. The writing of books is hard and lonely work and you are never sure for a minute that you have done the thing you planned and hoped to do. Journalism is hard and exhausting and marvelously exciting and always rewarding and you know exactly what kind of job you are doing, every minute. (352)

Gellhorn drew a line between her two activities, hence her concern about a realistic story of lynching she had written, of which she was no actual witness (135–36); and her reviewers were sometimes confused as to her reporting of true events (274). Is this dabbling with both reportage and fiction the reason why her then-French lover, Bertrand de Jouvenel, declared her journalism "unprintable," but trusted she would eventually "achieve the reputation of a Rimbaud" (98)? Allen Grover, from *Time* magazine, penned prescient lines: "I should one day publish your collected letters. They're magnificent prose" (110). Eleanor Roosevelt deemed that *A Stricken Field* (1940), a novel based on Czechoslovakia on the brink of war, enabled Gellhorn "to say certain things that [she] could not have said if [she] were simply

reporting what [she] had seen and heard” (272). Gellhorn, who felt “on occasion very mildly pleased with [her] articles” (401), cut her teeth on writing, flexing her muscles, “doing five finger exercises. . . . If you see something, you write it, to give the exact emotion to someone who did not see it” (285). She was also an avid reader of Koestler and Waugh, among others.

Besides these considerations relative to Gellhorn’s journalistic and literary aspirations, her words, as noted above, are timely and timeless, to such an extent that reading her today proves a disturbing experience. Her commitment to social justice while documenting poverty during the Great Depression, her concern for the vulnerability of war victims, as well as her outright partisan advocacy journalism, strike a particular chord today, when nationalism and racism are alarmingly on the rise worldwide. Gellhorn’s reflections do not necessarily offer a visionary take on the future, as her letters discuss events that spanned the 1930s and ’40s, two decades tainted by the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, but they ominously resonate with the current global political climate and should therefore be read as a healthy, albeit baneful, remembrance of things past. By way of illustration, Gellhorn wrote in a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, dated October 19, 1938, “I hate cowardice and I hate brutality and I hate lies. And of these three, maybe the lies are worst. Now Hitler has set the standard for the world, and truth is rarer than radium” (219). These comments were enlightened by her presence in Europe, where she observed first-hand the plight of Czechoslovakia and Spain, and then a whole continent adrift, blighted by Nazism.

While Gellhorn’s correspondence is strident with social and political criticism, it is also instructive regarding gender-related matters. The #MeToo groundswell was undoubtedly a long-awaited and game-changing upheaval. However, as a watershed movement, it has also occasionally swept under the carpet instances where women actually stood their ground, outwitted, and surpassed their male rivals, or situations where male colleagues and partners were their best allies and brothers-in-arms. Gellhorn’s letters acknowledge her irreconcilable enmities as much as her steadfast loyalties. They complexify gender relations in the interwar period and resist victimhood by repeatedly indicating that, for all the disappointments and deceptions she endured, Gellhorn was also often encouraged, praised, and trusted by male counterparts, mentors, and advisors. From the most abject and unfair ordeals she emerged with increased stature and command, not seeking revenge. She gained resilience and resourcefulness in the face of adversity. Arguably, her tongue-in-cheek admissions (after two abortions) that “[b]eing fertile is a great handicap” (54), or that she embraced her “future career as a *femme de ménage littéraire* [literary maid] with positive gratitude” (55), or that her father once claimed “blondes only work under compulsion” (66), should remain anecdotal.

More important is her recognition that she did not fit in a world that had limited expectations for women. That she “committed mortal sin” by opting for a life on her own terms was par-for-the-course “gossip” (60) in her native St. Louis. However, such parochialism did not spoil the genuine affection she felt for and received from her parents. Again, her admission that “I am somewhat the enemy of feminine . . . except

in a strictly limited field of personal relations” (299) shows that Gellhorn was capable of nuance and aware of the many human intricacies. Appreciably, Gellhorn’s letters instantiate her attachment and admiration to her mother and to Eleanor Roosevelt, both dedicated and trailblazing activists. The numerous exchanges with the latter are telling of the support the president’s spouse offered to Gellhorn and, conversely, the high esteem in which the writer held the indefatigable Mrs. Roosevelt. From these two women Gellhorn learned to be confrontational when the circumstances dictated. In a letter sent to Colonel Lawrence, on June 24, 1944, Gellhorn recalled that “General Eisenhower stated that men and women correspondents would be treated alike and would be afforded equal opportunities to fulfill their assignments.” Yet eighteen days after the landing, “women correspondents are still unable to cover the war” (412). Her tone then became peremptory:

There are nineteen women correspondents accredited; of these I know that at least six have had active war reporting experience, and at least two (of whom I happen to be one) have been war correspondents for seven years . . .

Speaking for myself, I have tried to be allowed to do the work I was sent to England to do and I have been unable to do it. I have reported war in Spain, Finland, China and Italy, and now I find myself plainly unable to continue my work in this theatre, for no reason that I can discover than that I am a woman. Being a professional journalist, I do not find this an adequate reason for being barred. The position in which I now am is that I cannot provide my magazine, and three million American readers, with the sort of information and explanation which I am sent here to obtain . . .

I must explain to my editor why I am not permitted to complete my mission here, and I trust that you will provide me with an official explanation which I can in turn send on to him. Naturally, since he has a very great obligation to the American public, he will protest this discrimination through channels in Washington. (412–13)

Gellhorn thus pushed her case with a view to doing her duty, not as a “need to beg, as a favor,” but “for the right to serve as eyes for millions of people in America who are desperately in need of seeing, but cannot see for themselves” (413). This episode follows her fatal dispute with Hemingway, which resulted in their definitive separation. It is a known fact that he cut her short by stealing her job from *Collier’s*, sabotaging her plans to cover the war, pure and simple, out of vainglory. Somerville provides evidence of the nightmarish situation in which Gellhorn ended up having to soldier on and embark on an endless voyage onboard a vessel loaded with explosives (397). However, this no-return tipping point in Gellhorn and Hemingway’s relationship, no matter how repulsive and revolting, cannot efface the ties that bound them for seven years. Their correspondence is understandably quite central in Somerville’s book, due to the many letters included, but it is unfortunately one-sided, as Gellhorn burned almost all of Hemingway’s letters (only two survive). Although the rejection and deception are clear, mutual respect and appreciation, as well as tender complicity and passionate promises, exude from most letters. As Somerville notes, the palette of their own “idiosyncratic diction” is incredibly touching, a testament to their “cherished intimacy” (344).



Gellhorn was certainly an impetuous, engaging, and qualified journalist, but her personality was ambiguous. While self-assured and ambitious, she also lacked confidence and shared her fear of being a “profiteer” (385), conscious of her privilege to be married to Hemingway, and infinitely indebted to the Roosevelts for their backing and connections. While serious and caustic in her reports, she was also affectionate and hilarious. “Gellhorn, the first of her class to sin, the last to legalize,” she wrote self-mockingly, or later, “What a shitty business: Who invented marriage since it fails?” (302, 418). And while she proved genial and gregarious, her musings on loneliness and abandonment tell a distinctly different story (410, 419). Yet Gellhorn was unapologetic: “feeling myself to be floating uncertainly somewhere between the sexes—I opt for what seems to me the more interesting of the two” (444). This honest take on gender fluidity is another lesson we take from this groundbreaking journalist. It is striking that, whether writing from the frontline, in the fire of action, or from her provincial hometown, Gellhorn’s words indicate a similar engagement, critical eye, and evenness of temper. Her stepson’s foreword to the volume echoes this equanimity, and points to the quality attention granted to all those who were blessed and privileged to receive her letters.

*Yours, for Probably Always* is certainly not restricted to a literary journalism audience and is accessible to a wider readership. Somerville embarked on a titanic project and fulfilled her grand enterprise with gusto. Nevertheless, despite the impressive collection of material and the laudable care brought to its organization, there remain a few gray areas in terms of methodology. While the bulk of the correspondence is between Gellhorn and her mother Edna, Eleanor Roosevelt, her partners and friends (Cam Becket, de Jouvenel, H. G. Wells, Hemingway, etc.), it is unclear how the actual curating was made. Somerville frames and complements each chapter with useful indications to help readers navigate the volume, but the criteria to select the letters, or passages thereof, or the reasons why so few diary notes are published in full, are not addressed. Scholars might miss such vital information to make sense of the blind spots in Gellhorn’s papers. Also, while the architecture of the volume corresponds to the years 1930–49, substantial information that exceeds these two decades is crammed into the last part of the book. This paradoxically gives new momentum, but it also comes either too late or too soon, and slightly unbalances the whole edifice. It feels as if the author was itching to say so much more but had not anticipated the whole picture, or a possible sequel.

I first read *Yours, for Probably Always* with a view to identify how the volume would illuminate our knowledge of Gellhorn’s life and times, already well furnished with biographies, critical chapters, and articles. Undeniably, Somerville’s impressive work on the writer’s archives contributes to the scholarship on Gellhorn. Having said that, I confess that I was tempted more than once to put down my academic glasses to take in Gellhorn’s words as they were, imagining the pleasure and emotion she and her addressees must have felt when they received those missives that had traveled for so long, and from so far away. The volume makes us wistful of such correspondence, obviously handwritten in beautiful cursive script or typed on solemn headed notepaper, literally an extension of Gellhorn’s persona, and of her kith and kin. Each piece

tells something about her mood, the place and time at which she penned those messages. We cannot help but regret and wax nostalgic about the corporeality, temporality, and spatiality of yesteryear correspondence, to which we held on physically in the absence of those we loved, admired, cherished. The remains of days when taking long looks at the world was a possibility, despite the atrocities of the times. A sharp contrast to today's vitriolic text and Twitter invectives that cause so much blast but blessedly never last.

To finish on a positive and galvanizing note, which is also to bring to Somerville's credit—her sagacity to find gems in Gellhorn's massive correspondence—I suggest getting back to the latter's wise words, albeit she insisted "one should be a writer, and not a lecturer" (188). Indeed, in times of clicktivism and armchair engagement, Gellhorn's journalistic ethics transpires from her personal and professional contract, that is to be "where the trouble is" (352). In a letter dated fall 1939, sent from New York City, Gellhorn wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt a caveat that resonates like a mantra not just for journalists, but for all of us who, on a daily basis, struggle with ideas and juggle with words: "But the thing that distresses me the most is this: do you think any people have a right to a moral attitude which they will not back with action, or have they a right to convictions without courage, or have they a right to speeches and writing and radio the while they complacently eat their national dinners and absolve their consciences with words" (235). Gellhorn shied away from sermonizing or pontificating, but her letters, while never sententious, make clear how strongly she felt about her journalism and hoped it would inspire radical imagination and direct action. Surely, we have to thank Somerville for getting us reacquainted with Martha Gellhorn.