

Biographical Background:

Stevie (Florence Margaret) Smith was born in Hull on 20th September 1902. She was the daughter of Charles Ward Smith and Ethel Rachel Spear. When Stevie Smith was three years old her father joined the Merchant Navy as a ship's purser and left home for a life at sea. Following her father's departure Stevie moved with her mother and sisters to Palmers Green in North London, to a house in Avondale Road, which was to be Stevie's home for most of her life. Later when her mother became ill her Aunt, Madge Spear, came to live with them. Aunt Maggie played an important role in raising Stevie and her older sister Molly following the death of their mother in 1918, and was called the 'darling Lion of Hull' by Stevie. She continued to live with her aunt until 1968 when her Aunt Maggie died at the age of ninety six.

She acquired her nickname as a young woman at the age of 19 or 20, whilst riding on one of the London commons with a companion who compared her to Steve Donoghue, a popular jockey of the time. 'Steve' became 'Stevie' and the name caught on among her friends.

Education & Work

Stevie was educated at Palmers Green High School, North London Collegiate for Girls and Mrs Hoster's Secretarial Training College. From 1923 to 1953 she worked as private secretary to Sir Neville Pearson, chairman of Newnes Publishing Company, and later Sir Frank Newnes. She retired from Newnes Publishing Company in 1953 following an attempted suicide.

Publications

The first work by Stevie Smith to be published was a collection of six poems, which appeared in the New Statesman in 1935. Later that year, she submitted further poems to the publisher Chatto and Windus but was advised to 'go away and write a novel'. This she did, writing at home and in her office, using the yellow paper used at Newnes Publishing Company for carbon copies. 'Novel on Yellow Paper or Work It Out For Yourself' was published in 1936 (by Jonathan Cape rather than Chatto and Windus) and was an instant success. Her first volume of poetry, 'A Good Time Was Had By All', was published in 1937.

Stevie's poetry was at first less successful than her novels had been and during the late 1940s and early 1950s she was comparatively neglected as a poet. However, following the publication of her best known collection 'Not Waving But Drowning' in 1957 she became more widely known and throughout the 1960s was increasingly popular in Britain and America, as she gave poetry readings and broadcasts that gained her new friends and readers among a younger generation.

Stevie Smith was awarded the Cholmondeley Award for Poets in 1966 and the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry in 1969. She died of a brain tumour on 7th March 1971. Her work was often tinged with sadness and accompanied by whimsical line drawings. Her 'Selected Poems' came out in 1962 and won considerable attention from Philip Larkin who was responsible for assembling the archive at the Brynmor Jones Library. She went on living with her aunt, who died at the age of ninety six in 1968. She herself died in 1971 from a brain tumour.

Custodial history:

Purchased from Michael Silverman, bookseller, July 1996

Description:

Comprises letters discussing personal and financial affairs

Extent: 7 items

Related material:

Other papers of Stevie Smith are at U DP156 and U DP209
Stevie Smith Book Collection

Access conditions:

Access will be granted to any accredited reader

U DP197/1	Letters from Stevie Smith (Palmer's Green, London) to Ladislav Horvat (friend and financial adviser) Her holiday plans; visits to Folkestone and Dover; her financial affairs; the BBC; girls' schools (with 4 envelopes) 7 items	23 Mar-17 Oct 1957
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