



THE WRITTEN WORD

BY JOHN D. WRIGHT, JR

I grew up in a world of which the written word was the major form of non-verbal communication. Radio was in its adolescent stage. There was no television. There were no cell phones or computers with the internet. There were typewriters, of course, but they were used for more formal documents. The telephone was available but used mostly for local calls. Long distance calls were saved for more important reasons.

And then there were diaries. Though the habit of keeping a diary was beginning to die out in the post-World War I days, many still wrote in them faithfully. My sister kept one. My mother and father kept theirs. I started my first diary when I was in Junior High School (no middle school label then) and kept one through my senior year in college. Then marriage and World War II and graduate school and new jobs created a hiatus of about three decades. Since I retired in 1986 I have resumed the habit.

One of the most time-consuming tasks I confronted in examining the memorabilia of my predecessors was wading through the daunting pile of diaries of my great-grandmother, grandmother, father,

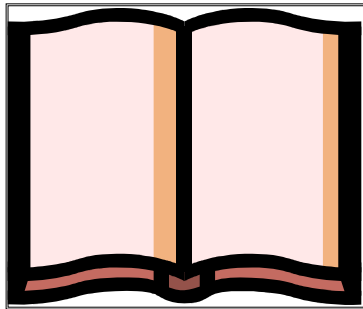
and mother. My father had over sixty diaries, and the others were not far behind. Only my father's diaries proved to be of real interest and significance, and of sufficient value that they are now in the archives of Dartmouth College. For me, born and raised in a city, the diaries of my grandparents were an introduction to the rural life in which my parents had grown up before they moved to the city. These diaries were certainly rich in the details of weather, farming, and local activities. For the most part those diaries made no record of the world beyond their farms, nor were thoughts and emotions recorded.

My mother kept every letter I ever wrote home from summer camp, college, and the U.S. Navy. Going through these letters now I experience a kind of retrospective reincarnation. The flippant tone, the insertion of humorous quips along with the usual narrative, elicit a sense of immaturity. Yet these letters evoke an immediacy of those days, and my long-gone youthful flamboyance in a way nothing else could do. The written word.

Yet in no human relationship in my life were letters more important

than those between Fran and me, from the time we first met as college students through the exploratory period of finding out who we were, our ideas, opinions, feelings, and emotions, to the moment we were married. We truly moved from being strangers to two persons intimately bound together by this sharing of our intimate selves. It was through Fran's letters that I came to know she was the most unusual girl I had ever met.

When I was in the South Pacific as a naval officer in World War II, Fran wrote me every single day we were separated during those long months, and I wrote her almost as frequently. That stash of letters, now tied up in ribbon and stored away, not only record for ourselves the intensity of our feelings, our reading and comments on current events, but will, I hope, be read by our children and grandchildren.



How sad to think that the day of writing letters and diaries has passed. Communication by cell phone and e-mail will leave little or no trace of what transpired between individuals, related or not related. It may be of some solace to the historian that e-mail in official channels may be preserved but only to a limited degree of accessibility. The historians in the future who wish to access a written

record of events and personalities of the recent past face a bleak prospect.

Beyond the importance of the written word as used in correspondence and diaries is the impact words have on our thinking and reading. When we read good books written by authors who are sensitive to the sounds and rhythms of words as well as their meaning, we broaden the scope of our capacities to see multiple realities, both interior and exterior. Reading poetry does this in a most compressed way.

I have in the past few years concentrated on reading Shakespeare. No author I know uses language with such breadth and richness. His vocabulary exceeds that of any other English author. While many of the words he used are now obsolete and archaic, there remains a colorful tapestry of words that enhances the beauty of the most commonplace. Of course, in the case of Shakespeare, one realizes the remarkable intellect that lay beyond the literary fabric of his work. But to read him, and other great writers, is to renew our sensitivity to the written word.

Finally, there is the tactile experience of holding letters and diaries and feeling the very paper used at the very moment the words were written. Nothing can replace the sense of bonding with the writers, whether others or ourselves. The special character of the handwriting reveals something about the personality of the writer. The gap of time is closed between the writer and the reader, and for a few moments, we are reunited by the written word.

John D. Wright

JOHN D. WRIGHT is my most respected friend and colleague. He was a long-time Professor of History at Transylvania University, whom I considered to be the finest scholar in the entire school. He was an extraordinary teacher who had the best command of his subject I have ever encountered. Every semester I sat in on one or two courses taught by colleagues when schedule permitted. I was fortunate to be able to experience him in his *History of Kentucky* course in which, in a most friendly fashion and leisurely pace, he demonstrated a most profound breadth and impressive depth of his subject.

I spent many happy hours in his office talking about a wide range of subjects during which he shared his most balanced, and thorough understanding. Everyone considered him a rare treasure of the University. He was an outstanding author and speaker who was in much demand for speeches in central Kentucky. Sharing of his knowledge was a major theme in his life. His wife, Fran, a very active, beautiful lady shares many of his interests, and then some.

After retirement, they moved back to his family home place near Perkinsville, VT, where they are a vital part of the community. My correspondence with John has always been fascinating. One year's project was reading all of the plays of Shakespeare, a task I wouldn't think of undertaking. He confessed to me that some of them were not as great as the few on which Shakespeare's revered reputation is based. He is my only colleague who continues to challenge himself and grow intellectually into his upper eighties, a time when most men seem to have given up on life.



History colleagues, John D. Wright, seated, and Paul Fuller, standing

Whippoorwill E-Comment is the electronic journal of J. Hill Hamon, who lives out in the back woods in the rolling Bluegrass Region of Kentucky, near Frankfort, the capital city. John Wright, naturally, maintains a diary. I do too, though not in a formal fashion. My correspondence with friends chronicles many of the events of my life.

J. Hill Hamon
1515 Evergreen Road
Frankfort, Kentucky 40601
kyhamon@aol.com

John Wright's e-mail address is
silpoplr@sover.net