

Earth Moon

A Ted Hughes Website

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»FURTHER TED«

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An American university has bought the entire collection of Ted Hughes's personal papers for a rumoured six figure sum. Terry Gifford looked at the poet's most intimate writings.

THE journey from North Carolina to Georgia was full of anticipation. I had been teaching at Lenoir-Rhyne College when the news broke that Emory University in Atlanta had acquired more than two-and-a-half tons of Ted Hughes's private correspondence and drafts of poems. What would the collection contain?

After four-and-a-half hours on the road, I was handling a scrap-book in which Sylvia Plath pasted documents of her husband's first successes – telegrams from Faber and Faber accepting *The Hawk in the Rain* for publication 40 years ago, a note of congratulations from TS Eliot, a receipt for the \$63 payment for the first publication of the famous poem »The Thought Fox«, the cover of *The New Yorker* in which it appeared.

There is also sad evidence of Plath's manic behaviour towards the end of the relationship. Some of the handwritten drafts of poems are burnt around the edges, relics presumably of the fire in which she tried to destroy Hughes's work. A typewritten manuscript page from her novel of mental breakdown, *The Bell Jar*, has been used on the reverse side for a handwritten poem by Hughes called »Digging«. This is one of hundreds of unpublished poems here. It has been torn in two places and taped back together. In his inventory for the papers, Hughes has written »torn by S.P. and repaired«.

To accompany the acquisition of a copy of each of his books, Hughes wrote some notes in which he revealed that two stories in *Wodwo* are set on Manor Farm, Old Denaby, a »territory« he knew better than anywhere, before he shifted his attentions to the Crookhill Estate, Conisborough whenever he escaped from Mexborough Grammar School.

The range of unseen material in this collection of 86 boxes will keep Hughes scholars busy for years to come. There's an unpublished comic poem for the Queen Mother »about her dream.« There are four pages of notes to the Arts Council about how to improve sales of poetry.

There's a box full of material relating to Hughes' complaint to the Press Council about Ronald Hayman's biography of Plath and letters correcting other biographers.

A six-year-old boy from St Bees Village School who sent his poem in to a competition judged by Hughes in 1969 might be amused to know that the reverse side of his pink paper was used to plan one of the major poetic works of the 20th century, *Crow*.

Some of the personal correspondence is closed for 25 years, but the letters between Hughes and Heaney »might be viewed 100 years from now« says Steve Enniss, curator of special collections, »like the correspondence between Wordsworth and Coleridge.«

Professor of modern English and Irish literature at Emory, Ronald Schuchard, says »it will help us hire new lecturers in the field who will have at their fingertips material that will launch their scholarly careers.«

The Hughes papers join those of the Irish poets Yeats, Longley, and Muldoon. Emory also has a small collection from Seamus Heaney, although he has not yet made his complete collection of papers available.

So why did the Hughes collection go to America and not to Leeds or Sheffield universities?

The answer is quite simply that in 1979 Emory was given \$105m in Coca-Cola stock which has been used to build a collection of manuscripts from contemporary poets. When I entered Schuchard's office, he was going through the catalogue of a London book dealer ticking his next purchases.

Hughes is quoted in an Atlanta newspaper as saying that his papers »could not be at a better place nor in more congenial company«. But there may be two further reasons why he is happy to have his papers in America. In the USA Hughes has, as one American scholar put it, »been skewered by the American feminists as being the person who killed Sylvia Plath, and that is in no way accurate.« Consequently, there has been little interest in his work there. Now it is clear that the future compilation of the Complete Poems and the Collected Letters could well fall to American scholars. Everything is in place for a Hughes revival in American academia.

Secondly, his reputation in the USA has deprived him of the pot of gold that American universities have delivered to his friend Seamus Heaney. This sale might seem to go some way towards compensation for that.

But the loss to Britain is sad. The fact is that British universities have been too aloof to seek the kind of private and commercial endowments that gave Emory its purchasing power. Witness the fact that a cheque for a mere £50,000 from Catherine Cookson can save a major art collection owned by Newcastle University.

Last year, Hughes' contemporary at Cambridge, the poet Peter Redgrove, deposited his papers at Sheffield University where Dr Neil Roberts just happens to lecture – the first person to write a critical study of his work. This option was always open to Hughes, although he'd have taken a lot less money.

The irony is that Britain's Poet Laureate could not finally make his papers available to British enthusiasts for his work.

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