

DONALD DAVIDSON
EARLY POEMS COLLECTION
MSS 698

Arranged and described by Molly Dohrmann

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Special Collections and University Archives
Jean and Alexander Heard Library
Vanderbilt University
419 21st Avenue South
Nashville, TN 37203-2427

Donald Davidson Early Poems Collection

Biographical Notes

Donald Davidson (1893 – 1968) received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from Vanderbilt University in 1917 and in 1922. He taught English at Vanderbilt from 1920 - 1964 his entire professional career. In addition to being a teacher Davidson was also a poet, novelist, and critic, and he published many books of poetry and criticism and one folk opera *Singin' Billy*. For the years 1924 – 1930 he wrote a book column for *The Tennessean*. He was a member of the Fugitive poets group that published their magazine *The Fugitive* from 1922 – 1925, and he was also one of the Agrarians who published *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930 and *Who Owns America?* in 1936. From 1931 until 1967 he spent his summers teaching at Breadloaf School of English in Ripton, Vermont. He served as an army officer during World War I from May 1917 until June 1919. He maintained lifelong friendships and correspondence with Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and other literary colleagues. In June of 1918 he married Theresa Sherrer, a legal scholar and artist, and they had one daughter, Mary, who married Dr. Eric Bell, Jr.

Will Ella Tatom Johnson Smith is the donor for this collection. She was born December 11, 1890 in Union City, Tennessee, the daughter of Kate Kirkmon Tatom and Colonel William Clinton Tatom, co-owner and publisher of the *Ohioan Democrat*. She was a contemporary of Donald Davidson, and was married to Stanley Johnson, one of the Fugitive poets, and these may be the reasons these poems came to be in her possession.

She was a librarian at Vanderbilt University from 1922 to 1931. In 1923 she married James Mapheus Smith, and they lived in Kansas and Washington, D.C. over the course of the next four decades. They retired to Nashville in 1966. J. Mapheus Smith died on January 5, 1968, and as a memorial to him Will Ella made a gift to Vanderbilt University to have the identification plaques made for the trees on campus. After her husband's death Will Ella devoted herself to gardening, genealogy, and writing articles for the local papers. She died on April 15, 1986.

Also attached to this collection is a letter from Mrs. Smith about a holograph poem by Ridley Wills (1897 - 1957) another of the Fugitive poets and older cousin of Fugitive poet Jesse Wills, who endowed the Fugitive and Agrarian Collection in Vanderbilt University Special Collections. A photocopy of this Ridley Wills' poem "To Rupert Brook" is included along with photocopies of the 11 Davidson poems. The original of Wills' poem is in the last folder of Box 3 of the Fugitive/Agrarian Collection.

Scope and Content Note

This small collection of 11 typescript poems with some holograph notes by Donald Davidson dating from 1916 was given to Vanderbilt University Special Collections by James Summerville, who was given the poems by Will Ella Tatom Johnson Smith (Mrs. James Mapheus Smith), who was given the poems by Donald Davidson.

Mrs. Smith was first married to Stanley Johnson, one of the Fugitive poets, and she herself wrote poetry.

These poems were never published in the *Fugitive* or in any other collection. They were written just as Davidson was joining members of what was to be the Nashville Fugitive poet group in discussions of poetry, philosophy, literature, and political ideas, and so are an important addition to an understanding of his early work. File 13 of this collection contains the photocopies of these poems.

Also included with these papers is a photocopy of the holograph poem "To Rupert Brook" by Ridley Wills, another of the Fugitive poets, with 2 accompanying letters with background information dated October 19, 1971 and September 9, 1978.

Box 1

The Poems:

1. "At the Shrine of the Ghosts"
2. "The Book of My Soul"
3. "The Blue Rose"
4. "In a Persian Garden"
5. "Sowing and Reaping"
6. "Summer House in Autumn"
7. "Tears in the Darkness"
8. "The Thought of the Singer"
9. "The Trysting Place"
10. "When I Go Home"
11. Untitled "This bitter rose of love that I have worn"
12. "To Rupert Brooke" by Ridley Wills (photocopy) with accompanying correspondence
13. Photocopies of the 11 early poems