

Letters



Passionate dispatches from the frontline

War reporter Martha Gellhorn's candid letters to her husband, family and friends underline her courage and fight for recognition, writes Lyse Doucet

Yours, for Probably Always: Martha Gellhorn's Letters of Love and War 1930-1949
Edited by Janet Somerville
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Women are not welcome on the frontline, wrote famed war correspondent Martha Gellhorn in 1940 as she battled against military rules and male rivals for space alongside the troops.

Actually, to be exact, she was only referring to the frontline before a morning attack, "because the men are going to the bathroom (in agony of spirit) in all the trenches up and down the countryside and supposedly it would embarrass the woman".

Other than that, "if there is a war anywhere I want to be at it", the pioneering Gellhorn wrote in a letter to friends, fizzing with her signature

passion, to be "places where trouble is". This is just one of hundreds of missives she wrote or received included in a new collection, *Yours, for Probably Always*. These "Letters of Love and War" were written, typed or telegraphed across a turbulent period from 1930 to 1949, including the Great Depression, the Spanish civil war and the second world war.

This is history as it was lived, and shared in intimate and emotional detail, among Gellhorn's lovers, husband, family and friends who were among the most important doers and thinkers of the time.

Curated with valuable context by Janet Somerville, a literature teacher

The 'gutsy, glamorous' Martha Gellhorn in May 1946.
FPG/Getty

in Toronto, it's her own love letter of sorts to a woman she calls "a wonder".

Do we need another book on the celebrated Gellhorn who took her own life in 1998 at the age of 89 after a remarkable career spanning 60 years? There's no shortage of material about or by this gutsy, glamorous writer who chronicled almost every conflict of the 20th century in her novels and reporting. In 2006, a trove of letters was selected and published by Gellhorn's official biographer, Caroline Moorehead, who knew her as a close friend of her mother's.

But this new offering reminds us how we read history through two prisms: a recollection of the past and a reflection on our own time. So much has changed, and so much is much the same, since our last Martha moment, reason enough to savour a new account.

Carrying this big brick of a book, more than 500 pages long, on my travels while on assignment, I kept dipping into it against the backdrop of another conflagration in Syria with yet more death and displacement, the kind of story that would have pulled Gellhorn to the front to be "with the boys". But now our eyes and ears include impressive women correspondents on the ground in equal, if not greater, numbers than the men. And it's women from the region as much as from the west.

Nowadays, females at the front are, dare I say it, a normal part of war reporting, even if the old fascination with women and war still hasn't completely faded and students still write theses on whether gender matters in journalism.

Gellhorn's candid correspondence reminds us of her own ambivalence on these matters. She writes often, and scornfully, about the lot of women in her time, but she somehow escaped society's strictures. "I've never lived in a proper woman's world, nor had a proper woman's life... feeling myself to be floating uncertainly somewhere between the sexes."

At other times, she's made painfully aware of her position. In a letter written in June 1944, from the Dorchester hotel in London, to a Colonel Lawrence, she railed against the exclusion of women reporters in the second world war, writing: "I do not feel there is any need to beg, as a favour, 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."

Her mantra of "being there" is still written in stone for those who follow the path she did so much to clear. "The only way I can write with any authority with the hope of influencing even a very few people is to write from firsthand knowledge."

Gellhorn rose above the restrictions with some equally

extraordinary advantages. Her correspondence includes frequent exchanges with Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of the US president, hailed in her own right as a pioneering woman of her time. It meant Gellhorn was able to obtain her own letter from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt addressed to "All American Foreign Service Officers" to provide "every assistance" to "an old friend".

But not all of Gellhorn's friends were helpful all the time. Gellhorn aficionados don't forget – or forgive – how in 1944 her then husband, Ernest Hemingway, asked *Collier's* magazine to accredit him to cover the war even though Gellhorn's byline had long been theirs. Revenge was sweet when she snuck on board a hospital barge and reached the Normandy shore on D-day. Hemingway and many others never made it.

Those eagerly anticipating that sequence of salvos will be left disappointed. Somerville tells us how Gellhorn, just months before her death, went through her correspondence and threw much of it into a fire, including almost all of her letters from Hemingway. Only two survive, which her adopted son, Sandy, saved from the flames.

Being known as Hemingway's wife troubled her in her own time

Gellhorn's own mail to Hemingway, until they divorced, is steeped in love and features a charming collection of pet names for him and his most precious part (nicknamed "Scroobie"). But her outpourings also underline how her first and last love would always be her work. Somerville tells us how Hemingway told Gellhorn's mother, Edna, whose friendship he cherished, that he should have added to his book dedication to his wife: "If I can find her".

Despite all this and much more, she still often gets first mention as Hemingway's third wife, rather than as a writer and journalist in her own right. Being known as "Mrs Hemingway" troubled her in her own time. A letter to her editor is categorical: "My articles are always to be signed Martha Gellhorn, always", underlining her preoccupation with her working life in his long shadow.

"I swallowed the world and it came out as words," Gellhorn often remarked. Now we have more of her own words, and those who admired and embraced her, to reflect again on her world and ours.

Lyse Doucet is chief international correspondent for the BBC. To order *Yours, for Probably Always* for £26.40 go to guardianbookshop.com or call 020-3176 3837