

MORE LETTERS FOR THE ROBERTS COLLECTION

John Coldwell Adams

At twenty-four, Kathleen Strathearn, a West Coast school teacher, possessed the physical attributes that Charles G.D. Roberts, the "dean of Canadian Literature," found irresistible: large and expressive eyes, "Clara Bow" lips, luxuriant black hair, and a slender figure. Moreover, she had an artistic temperament, and she was gaining a reputation as an accomplished pianist in her adopted city of Vancouver when Roberts first met her there in the winter of 1926-27. He had always been susceptible to a pretty face, but a disastrous youthful marriage to an attractive but otherwise inferior young woman had taught him that beauty alone was not enough in a long-term relationship.

Now past his mid-sixties, Roberts had recently returned from a prolonged sojourn in Europe without going back to his wife, whom he had not seen for eighteen years. He still contributed to her support as best he could, but his poetry had never paid very much and his once-popular animal stories were no longer in great demand. For more than a year, he had been criss-crossing the country, figuratively singing for his supper, on an exhausting grind of lectures and recitals. Although he had chosen Toronto as his permanent home, he had been lured back to Vancouver in the latter part of 1926 by an invitation to deliver several lectures at the University of British Columbia. Writing to Lorne Pierce, his editor at the Ryerson Press in Toronto on the fourth of December, he boasted: "My lectures at the University here were a great success. Have many recitals to give after the holidays."¹

The first of his communications with Kathleen Strathearn that has come to light is an inscription, dated 19 February 1927, on a "Season's Greetings" card for Christmas 1926 and New Year's 1927: "For Kathleen Strathearn from Charles G.D. Roberts." The card bears a picture of himself, seated upon a fallen tree, petting a dog (designated as "Laddie") beside a body of water that may

be the Ottawa river which ran past the house of his son Lloyd. Even though he has doffed his suit jacket in favour of a sweater, he still looks conspicuously formal with his be-ribboned *pince-nez*, dark tie, and city shoes.

Although Roberts left Vancouver for the east in the first week of March, 1927, he was back again early in December to give more lectures at the university. Afterwards, he stayed on for the rest of the winter, giving recitals wherever he could wangle an invitation. Autographing his greeting card to Kathleen for Christmas 1927 and New Year's 1928 (a picture of himself seated outside the railway station in Guelph, Ontario), he added: "Best wishes for the New Year & for all years! C.G.D.R." He also took care to include his local address: "1407 Robson St (Apt. 6)."

Thereafter, his relationship with the gifted Kathleen took a more passionate turn. She had come into his life at an opportune time: he was on the rebound from an infatuation with Constance Davies Woodrow, a young married poet in Toronto, who rhapsodized about her "Celtic Heart" and who appears to have been an outrageous flirt. Outwardly, she possessed all those characteristics that Roberts admired most, but in temperament she was quixotic and unpredictable. Although she shamelessly led him on from the moment she met him, the inconstant Constance inevitably turned her attentions elsewhere after a few months.

The date of the following letter from Roberts to Kathleen is not given, but the internal evidence shows that he wrote it on 18 March 1928:

New Washington Hotel
Seattle

Sunday

My Loveliest & Most Ever Beloved—

Only a line, to tell you that I am thinking of you & longing for you, *always*. Am in a wild rush here,—visitors, & receptions, & endless attentions, bless them. Have talks definitely arranged for Tuesday, Thursday and Friday *evenings*, with several others under negotiation. Shall probably get back to thee on Sunday next,—but will, of course, send thee *definite* word as soon as I know exactly.

I had a packed house, an enthusiastic audience, at Victoria,—& [indecipherable] reception afterwards, & a lunch at Government House Friday, before leaving for Seattle.

I kiss both your darling hands, My Lady Désirée.
Ever your devoted

C.

Roberts had lived on the European continent long enough to acquire the Old World custom of kissing ladies' hands in greeting. Now that he was back in Canada, most of his female acquaintances seemed to be charmed by the gesture, although one high school student was dismayed when he took her hand before she had time to remove her grimy woolen mitten.² He acted without any self-consciousness, and it seemed natural to him that his correspondence should end with "I kiss both your hands." He even used the phrase when he wrote to congratulate Mazo de la Roche for winning the *Atlantic Monthly* prize for her novel *Jalna*.³ For special people like Kathleen Strathearn, it often became "dear hands" or "darling hands" and even (in greater obeisance) "feet."

Apparently Kathleen replied promptly to the letter from Seattle, and Roberts' response was immediate, exceedingly solicitous, and utterly abject in its professed devotion:

New Washington Hotel
Seattle

Thursday, Mch 22/28

My Adorable Loveliest—

I have your dear letter this morning, bless you. I am so sorry to learn that you are feeling so wretched & lifeless. You poor Darling! And you are depriving your audiences of so much, when you do not shed your wonderful personality & imagination forth upon them. But perhaps you are recovering by this time, Beloved. And in any case they have the thrill of seeing you as well as hearing you.

I am terribly anxious to learn the Doctor's report. But I will be back to you on Monday morning, & will try to cheer & stimulate you. Please drop me a wee line at once to tell me what time to listen for you on the radio, C.K.W.X., Sunday night. I plan to take the night boat from here, at midnight Sunday,—though I *may* not get away till the *train, Monday morning*. In either case, I will phone my Lady at once on arrival.

Everyone is being most attentive to me here, & overwhelming me with *entertainments*—but only two recitals! I must run.

I love you, Deliciousness. And I kiss your hands & your feet.

Your devoted
C.

From Roberts' next three existing letters to Kathleen, it becomes clear that she did not answer him with reciprocal ardour and effusiveness. She might find his attentions flattering, but her passion for music was undoubtedly greater than her affection for a charming but impoverished writer who was almost old enough to be her grandfather. Under the exacting tutelage of J.D.A. Tripp, a noted musician and teacher, she had perfected her skills to the point where she could dream of becoming a celebrated concert pianist. The stress of her regimen, in addition to her work load as a teacher, may have been in some part responsible for the health problems to which Roberts refers.

The Marlborough
Winnipeg, Canada
April 30, 1928

Loveliest—

I was so glad to get your dear note, which awaited me here. But you may imagine my amusement at your calling me *Dr Roberts!* Have you already forgotten that my name is "Bobs"?

I was also amused at your reference to my being kissed for good bye at the station! I suppose our dear "J.D.B." gave you a picturesque account of it! Well, it was *most* platonic! The ladies's husbands were present! It was dear of Tripp to come down to see me off. But I expect he came *partly* to see if you were there!

My love to thee always, & dearest dreams,—My Flower of Girls.

Your
Bobs⁴

The Earnescliffe (25)
Wellesley St
Toronto, May 10, 1928

Dear Miss Strathearn—

(How do you like *that*, My Lady? But if you *will* "Doctor" me, instead of calling me Charles or Bobs, what can I do??)

I am so glad to get your letter at last, Dearest Heart; but I am deeply anxious about your health. Do go to my dearest & understanding friend, *Dr Ernest P. Fewster*, (you'll find him in the telephone book)—& tell him I *insisted* on your going to him. He is a marvellous diagnostician,—has perhaps a *clairvoyant* insight, and his big, sympathetic personality will be a strength & an inspiration to you. *Possibly* the main trouble is that you need to get up into the higher altitudes.

I am in a breathless rush since my return last Friday, so this is only a *note*, not a letter; but it takes you my love, & tenderness, & deep devotion, My Loveliest. Please let me have a *wee note*, speedily!

I kiss both your dear, dear hands, My Darling.

Your

Charles

I caught Carman here, & had a day & a half with him.

The Earnescliffe (25)

Wellesley St

Toronto, June 20/28

Loveliest My Lady—

I am just back from up North—at *The Pas*. I am so glad to get your wee note, so much more cheerful than your last. You sound so much *better*, my Dearest. I am very happy to think you are having such a good time.

For myself, I have been, & still am, *distractingly* busy. On the 27th I leave for Calgary & the Convention, stopping off a couple of days at Winnipeg on the way. June 30th and July 1st I'll be at the Hotel Marlborough, Winnipeg. July 3rd-7th at Hotel Palliser, Calgary. Then from the 9th onward, at Vancouver, 1407 Robson St.

Please, dearest My Lady, let me know your definite plans. I am longing to see you.

My love to you as always.

Your devoted

Bobs

Having been elected president of the Canadian Authors' Association in 1927, Roberts was chairman of the annual convention held in Calgary on 4, 5 and 6 July 1928, and of the concluding banquet in Banff. As soon as his duties were over, he hurried to Vancouver where he remained until the third week of August. The two letters that follow were written to Kathleen sometime

during that period. They refer to her trip to Nelson in the interior of British Columbia, not far from her birthplace of Kaslo on Lake Kootenay. Undoubtedly, she intended to visit some of her relatives in the area, but Roberts' wording suggests that she had also planned some recitals.

Douglas 2527
1407 Robson St
Friday morning—

Loveliest—

This photogravure would like to go with you on your trip to Nelson. It says it will be *very* good, & give you no trouble, & take up very little room, & require no attention whatever. But Oh, what a lot of *thinking* it will be doing!

The real photograph I shall have for you on your return.

I kiss your darling feet.

C.

1407 Robson St
Vancouver
Monday night—

Loveliest & Most Desired,

You cannot know how hard it was for me to let you go without one brief word with you. But I knew how driven you must be, & I felt I could but show my love for you by not giving you one more thing, however small, to think about. I can efface myself, my Dearest, if I think that is easiest for you. If you had needed me, if you had felt that I could be of use to you, I felt that you would have told me.

I went out to Tripp's tea, & listened to some good music,—& dreamed all the time of you, you, you!

And Oh, how longingly I dream of your return!

May all the Gods conspire, My dearest Lady, to make this trip a vast success in every way! Your success,—& your happiness, are more to me than you can guess.

I kiss your hands & your feet, My Lady.

Yours—

C.

When Kathleen returned to Vancouver, she may have made it clear that she wished Roberts to "efface" himself permanently. The point at which he gave up his pursuit is uncertain; but, once

he was back in Toronto, the only known communication between them afterwards was a copy of Palgrave's *The Golden Treasury*, which he sent to her in December 1928 with the inscription: "To Kathleen Strathearn with best wishes for Christmas & for always, from her most sincere friend Charles G.D. Roberts." To date, there is no evidence to suggest that they ever saw each other again.

Depending on the differing moral perspectives of those who have reacted to the saga of Roberts' recurrent "love affairs," he has been variously described as a womanizer, an adulterer, a rake, or a lonely man with some very human weaknesses. What many people find most objectionable is his treatment of his first wife, to whom he was unfaithful even before he finally left her and chose never to see her again (although he went to her funeral in 1930). Early in the marriage, he seems to have been regularly tormented by guilt over his conduct and did not try to soothe his conscience by resorting to the easy excuse of incompatibility. He would repeatedly resolve not to become entangled in another serious romance "and then, alack, first thing I know, I will fall in love again, and again go over the same old sweet, ridiculous, delicious, bitter round."⁵ As the years passed, however, so did the attacks of self-blame and remorse, and the affairs followed one another with rapidity.

Kathleen Strathearn was replaced shortly by Eleanor Williams-Moore, an aspiring writer in Montreal to whom he was soon writing: "Darlingest, I love you, & kiss you quite to death."⁶ He importuned several of his friends in the publishing business to find employment for Eleanor in Toronto, but nothing came of his efforts, and the romance appears to have languished because of the distance between them. In 1933 he met Joan Montgomery and soon became her lover, although he did not marry her until 1943, just a few weeks before his death.

After Roberts disappeared from Kathleen Strathearn's life, she was destined to find a more satisfactory relationship, which lasted until the beginning of World War II. Early in 1929, Arthur J. Hughes, a wealthy executive of the China United Assurance Society, chanced to attend a concert in Vancouver while travelling back to Shanghai. Being a music lover who could follow a score as easily as he could read a book, he was able to appreciate the virtuosity of Miss Strathearn, the star of the evening. For him, a childless widower, it was a case of love at first sight in spite of a

difference of thirty years in their ages. With his be-ribboned monocle, which was even more impressive than Roberts's *pince-nez*, he exuded an air of material success that Kathleen had missed in her debonaire but destitute poet. A whirlwind courtship followed in the short interval before Hughes was obliged to sail home to Shanghai. The rest of the story is told in the words of Kathleen's son, Arthur Hughes:

There followed a period of virtually weekly correspondence from "A.J." (a worldly, well-informed, charming & persistent fellow), directed to Miss Strathearn in Vancouver, during which he apparently made her several offers which, finally, she was "unable to refuse." By the end of 1929, she had left for Shanghai, and they were married. (There were two children, Isobel in 1930, and myself in 1932).

Subsequently she spent ten glittering years as a socialite, and soloist with the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra under Maestro Mario Paci, acting as hostess in the Hughes mansion to virtually all conductors & soloists who visited Shanghai, such as Felix Weingartner and Jan Paderewski. In the "nick of time" she and the children fled China for Canada in 1940. "A.J." was less fortunate, and spent the war as a "guest of the Japanese government," as he always charitably put it, surviving the debacle destitute and in poor health.⁷

Kathleen's marriage to Hughes ended with her departure from Shanghai. After her divorce, she married William G.L. Dunbar, a shipping agent who had been stationed in virtually every major seaport in the Far East. In the summer of 1990, long after Kathleen's death, her son Arthur Hughes found Roberts's gift, *The Golden Treasury*, buried among the memorabilia stored in a carved chest that had survived the China days. Tucked inside were the two greeting cards that have been described in this paper and the seven letters that have been reproduced here.⁸ Unfortunately, the items were discovered a few months too late to be included in *The Collected Letters of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts*, edited by Laurel Boone.

Only once had Arthur Hughes ever heard his mother mention her involvement with Roberts. When he responded unwisely by calling it a "fling," she retorted sharply: "It was no *fling*, my boy! He pursued me for a considerable period of time, and wanted to marry me."

"Why didn't you accept his offer?" Arthur queried.

"I rather doubted his sincerity in the long run, you see, as well as his financial stability," Kathleen replied. "Besides, I was aware that he already had a wife in the east!"⁹

NOTES

¹ Laurel Boone, ed., *Collected Letters of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts* (Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1989) 348. Letter to Lorne Pierce, 4 December 1926.

² The student was Dorothy McKee, who lived down the street from Roberts in Toronto. Author's interview with Dorothy McKee Miner, 12 January 1978.

³ Boone 353. Letter to Mazo de la Roche, 11 April 1927.

⁴ It seems likely that the "J.D.B." in this letter is a slip that Roberts made instead of writing "J.D.A.," meaning J.D.A. Tripp.

⁵ Boone 138. Letter to Bliss Carman, 23 December 1891.

⁶ Boone 406. Letter to Eleanor Williams-Moore, 28 June 1931.

⁷ Letter to author from Arthur Wates Strathearn Hughes, 24 December 1990.

⁸ The cards and letters, as well as the inscribed copy of *The Golden Treasury*, are now in the possession of Arthur W.S. Hughes, Vancouver.

⁹ Letter to author from Arthur W.S. Hughes, 24 December 1990.