



It's the wealth of engaging and revealing personal correspondence that breathes life into the story of a prodigious artist and writer

CREATIVE

Edith Simon

FORCE

CURATOR'S CHOICE – BY SALLY HARROWER, MANUSCRIPTS CURATOR

The greatest fascination of working with archives is the people you meet. More often than not, the person you're getting to know through their papers is dead, but I would argue that an archive resurrects its creator more than anything else we can leave behind.

Anyone who has lived in Edinburgh during the last 50 years might recognise the name – Edith Simon had a solo art exhibition at just about every festival for a period of 30 years. This tells you something about her phenomenal

creative energy – the fact that she was producing enough new work to carry this off year after year. And art for Edith Simon was a second career, or one to which she returned after a long and successful literary career which saw the publication of some 20 books between 1937 and 1972.

Both these lives are well-represented in the archive – notebooks containing drafts and research relating to the novels and non-fiction books as well as photographic records of artworks in various stages of creation. Edith was acclaimed in

both fields of creative endeavour, and the surrounding illustrations give only a hint of her output. I recommend Antonia Reeve's handsomely illustrated book about her mother, *Edith Simon: Moderation Be Damned* (2005), for a much fuller account.

In the archive, it's the correspondence which really tells the stories. Edith Simon was born in Berlin 100 years ago, into a middle-class Jewish family. Her father, Walter Simon (described by Edith's

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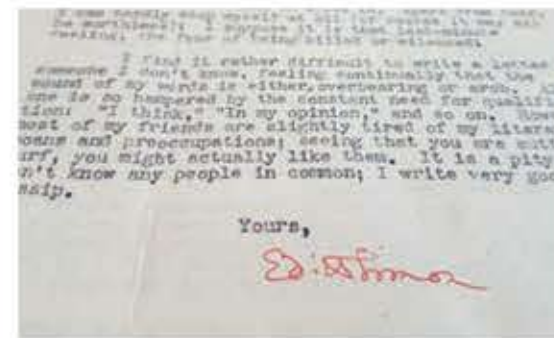
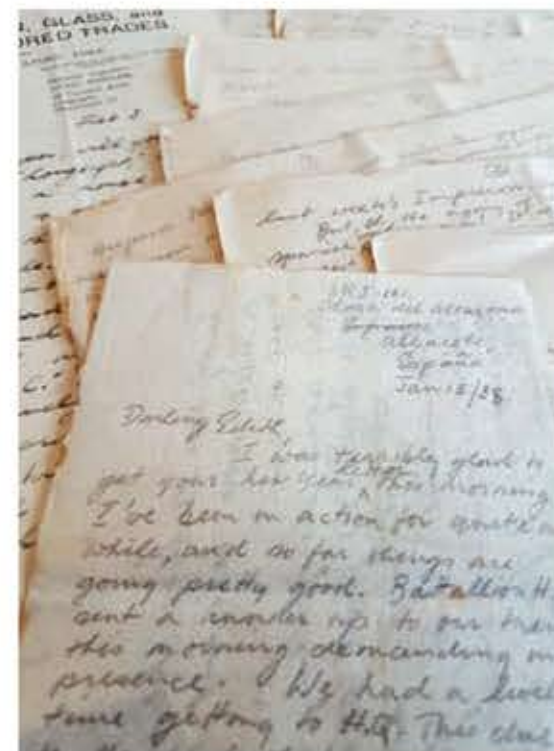


Photograph by Antonia Reeve

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CARING AND CREATIVE

From far left, clockwise: a self portrait of Edith, the Woman in the Rain sculpture, a selection of letters from the archive. Above, clockwise: Karate 'scalpel painting', a letter from David Mindline to Edith and a letter from Edith showing her signature. The large image on page 11 shows Edith in her studio creating one of many works of art.

Eric to Edith. Her letters don't survive, but they must have made him love her all the more. One of Eric's begins: "My beautiful writer of most Charming and Inspiring Letters".

He then goes into great detail on how Edith should seek medical help for a persistent bout of diarrhoea! Yet this is a love letter. He ends: "I think about you much more than is good for the war effort [...] Surely only a fundamentally good God could create anyone so charming, delightful, entertaining – in fact perfect – in all aspects."

Another – sadly much briefer – wartime correspondence was that between Edith and John Mair, a writer and trainee pilot with the RAF. Edith must have written to him because she had enjoyed his novel, *Never Come Back* (1940). It was to be his only book as he died in action in 1942. This file includes a few of Edith's letters, and the quality of the letter writing – of both – is so engaging, ranging from thoughtful comment on writing (specific and general) to wry humour, often directed

at the vagaries of war and the RAF. Edith ends one early letter with the winning line: "It is a pity we don't know any people in common; I write very good gossip." The story continues after John Mair's death. Edith had no contact with Mair's wife when he was alive, but she wrote to Jean Mair after his death. The two women became lifelong friends. Jean was later instrumental in introducing Edith to the literary agent David Higham, who in turn found Edith a US publisher, and it was perhaps in the States that her literary career really took off.

We've run out of space and the Reeves haven't even reached Scotland. That happened in 1947 which – appropriately enough – is the year in which the Edinburgh Festival started. It might have taken such a sea change to turn Edinburgh into the city in which such a vibrant creative force as Edith Simon would feel at home.

She lived here, with her much-loved family and at the centre of a vast social and creative network, until her death in 2003.

● **As war often separated the couple, there are many loving letters from Eric to Edith. Her letters don't survive, but they must have made him love her all the more** ●

two clearly enjoyed writing to each other: "When we finally got [to H.Q.] the Battalion Commander ordered me to take up a position at an observation post some two kilometres away. He presented me with a jar of potted tongue and sent me out alone in the cold, cruel world..."

On the evidence of the archive, Edith and Dave continued writing to each other until the late 1940s. Despite the

occasional mock-flirtatious tone, there's no hint of a romantic connection – both were aspiring writers and their shared cultural and political interests, and humour, created a strong bond.

A good reason for assuming there was no romance between Edith and Dave is that, in 1942, she met and married Eric Reeve, a scientist. As war often separated the couple, there are many loving letters from

THE NUMBERS

20

BOOKS PUBLISHED

between 1937 and 1972

From previous page

sister Inge as "a cheerful pessimist") foresightedly moved with his family to London in the early 1930s. The earliest letters in the archive date from this period. These are to "Liebes Edchen" from friends she left in Germany. Friendship was something else at which Edith evidently excelled.

For example, there is a great series of letters from a friend called David Mindline. The first two surviving letters are written from Spain in the winter of 1937-38, where Dave had gone to volunteer with Socorro Rojo Internacional (International Red Aid). The letters are long, vivid and often funny – the