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Saxe Commins Papers, 1930-1973 (bulk 1945-1960): Finding Aid

Summary Information

Call number:	C0718
Location:	Princeton University Library. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. Manuscripts Division. One Washington Road Princeton, New Jersey 08544 USA
Size:	6.05 cubic feet (17 boxes)
Language(s) of material:	English.
Abstract:	This collection consists of the papers of Saxe Commins, concentrating primarily while he was chief editor at Random House (1933-1958). Commins worked with many major writers of the literary world, such as Eugene O'Neill and William Faulkner, as well as Irwin Shaw and Budd Schulberg. Commins also compiled several collections of others' works, such as "The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt" and "Major Speeches of Adlai E. Stevenson."

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Biography of Saxe Commins

Saxe Commins was born in Rochester, New York, around 1892. He attended the University of Pennsylvania and received his bachelor's degree in 1913, after which he married Dorothy Berliner, a concert pianist. He began his editing career at Horace Liveright, but soon joined Random House in 1933. He quickly ascended the ranks to become editor-in-chief and, then, senior editor. Commins also acted as the director of the Modern Library series, a division of Random House.

Many of the twentieth-century's greatest authors received help from Saxe Commins on their works. The editor accepted novels and plays by William Faulkner, W. H. Auden, Eugene O'Neill, Sinclair Lewis, Gertrude Stein, and James A. Michener, to name a few. He helped some on their way to the Pulitzer Prize, including O'Neill, Faulkner, and Lewis.

Commins also compiled several collections of others' works. He presented *The Major Campaign Speeches of Adlai E. Stevenson* in 1933, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* in 1938, *The Selected Writings of Washington Irving* in 1945, *The Selected Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson* in 1947, a four-volume series entitled *The World's Greatest Thinkers* with Robert N. Linscott in 1947, and *The Basic Writings of George Washington* in 1948.

Commins believed that “the role of the editor is to be invisible,” but his editing was an indisputable element of many authors' reputations. He died in his Princeton home in 1958 after a long struggle with heart ailments.

Description

Consists of papers of Commins, compiled primarily while he was chief editor, 1933-1958, at Random House. The author files contain a large section of Eugene O'Neill material, including 60 letters (1920-1948) to Commins; galleys for *Morning Becomes Electra*, *Ah, Wilderness*, *The Iceman Cometh*, *Days Without End*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*; miscellaneous correspondence; about 160 letters by Carlotta O'Neill; and photographs of the O'Neills. In addition, there are letters to Commins and his wife, Dorothy Commins, by Gertrude Stein, W. H. Auden, Sherwood Anderson, Budd Schulberg, Albert Einstein, S. N. Behrman, Isak Dinesen, Edgar Snow, Bennett Cerf, Robinson Jeffers, Peter van de Kamp, Margaret Mead, and many others. Typescripts and photographs of various authors are also interspersed among the files.

Also present are Commins's typescripts for his lectures, articles, reviews, and short stories, as well as correspondence and papers relating to the publication of *The Basic Writings of George Washington*, *Selected Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson*, and *The Major Campaign Speeches of Adlai E. Stevenson*, all edited by Commins.

Series 1: Author Files (A-Z)

Contains, alphabetically by author, correspondence and manuscripts of a variety of writers, including W. H. Auden, Isak Dinesen, Edgar Snow, and Gertrude Stein, that Commins collected during his work as chief editor at Random House. There is also a large section of Eugene O'Neill material, consisting of correspondence between the Comminses and the O'Neills, galleys of O'Neill's major plays, and photographs of the two couples.

Series 2: Writings of Saxe Commins

Contains typescripts of Commins's own works, which include the subseries A. Editorial Works, B. Articles, C. Short Stories, and D. Miscellaneous. His editorial works include correspondence and papers relating to his publications of *The Basic Writings of George Washington*, *Selected Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson*, and *The Major Campaign Speeches of Adlai E. Stevenson*. The miscellaneous section includes his lectures, reviews, and notes.

Subseries 2A: Editorial Works

Subseries 2B: Articles

Subseries 2C: Short Stories

Subseries 2D: Miscellaneous

Arrangement

Organized into the following series:

Series 1: Author Files (A-Z)

Series 2: Writings of Saxe Commins

Subseries 2A: Editorial Works

Subseries 2B: Articles

Subseries 2C: Short Stories

Subseries 2D: Miscellaneous

Access and Use

Access

Collection is open for research use.

Restrictions on Use and Copyright Information

Single photocopies may be made for research purposes. No further photoduplication of copies of material in the collection can be made when Princeton University Library does not own the original. Permission to publish material from the collection must be requested from the Associate University Librarian for Rare Books and Special Collections. The library has no information on the status of literary rights in the collection and researchers are responsible for determining any questions of copyright.

Processing and Other Information

Preferred Citation

Identification of specific item; Date (if known); Saxe Commins Papers, Box and Folder Number; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

Processing Information

This collection was processed by Maritza Maxwell in 1992. Finding aid written by Maritza Maxwell in 1992.

Encoding

Machine-readable finding aid encoded in EAD 2002 by TechBooks and Cristela García-Spitz on March 23, 2007.

Descriptive Rules Used

Finding aid content adheres to that prescribed by *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*.

Subject Headings

These materials have been indexed in the [Princeton University Library online catalog](#) using the following terms. Those seeking related materials should search under these terms.

- Random House (Firm)
- Authors, American -- 20th century.
- Authors and publishers -- United States -- 20th century.
- Dramatists, American -- 20th century.
- Editors -- New York (N.Y.) -- 20th century.
- Novelists, American -- 20th century.
- Correspondence.
- Galley Proofs (Printing) -- 20th century.
- Photoprints.
- Commins, Dorothy, 1889-1991.
- O'Neill, Carlotta Monterey, 1888-1970.
- O'Neill, Eugene, 1888-1953.
- Publishing history

Contents List

Series 1: Author Files

Series Description

Contains, alphabetically by author, correspondence and manuscripts of a variety of writers, including W. H. Auden, Isak Dinesen, Edgar Snow, and Gertrude Stein, that Commins collected during his work as chief editor at Random House. There is also a large section of Eugene O'Neill material, consisting of correspondence between the Commins and the O'Neills, galleys of O'Neill's major plays, and photographs of the two couples.

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Series 2: Writings of Saxe Commins

Series Description

Contains typescripts of Commins's own works, which include the subseries A. Editorial Works, B.

Series 2: Writings of Saxe Commins ... (Continued)

Articles, C. Short Stories, and D. Miscellaneous. His editorial works include correspondence and papers relating to his publications of *The Basic Writings of George Washington*, *Selected Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson*, and *The Major Campaign Speeches of Adlai E. Stevenson*. The miscellaneous section includes his lectures, reviews, and notes.

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