

## A NOVELIST AND HIS BIOGRAPHER

by

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Future biographers of John Dos Passos will be indebted to his correspondence with Charles W. Bernardin, which recently became available at the University of Virginia's Alderman Library. A scholar of French Canadian background, Bernardin (1917-1996) was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, got his college education and his first year of graduate work at Roman Catholic institutions and his doctorate at the University of Wisconsin, and then went on to teach at two Catholic universities, Fordham (1948-1953) and Villanova. He served as Chairman of Villanova's English department between 1954 and 1976, becoming a full professor in 1960. His ambitious Dos Passos scholarship did not preclude a broader life; he was the father of nine children, and in his later years wrote a detailed multivolume work on his family's genealogy.

Bernardin's doctoral studies at Wisconsin began in 1942, but were interrupted by service in the U.S. Army (Guam, 1943-1946). Prior to Wisconsin he had gotten a B.A. degree (1939) from Assumption College, in Worcester, Massachusetts, and an M.A. degree (1942) from Boston College Graduate School. He received his Ph.D. degree in 1949 after writing a dissertation "The Development of John Dos Passos," but his interest in the novelist antedated attendance at Wisconsin: Bernardin's M.A. thesis bore the title "A Perilous Passage: John Dos Passos."

His correspondence with Dos Passos, which seems to have started in late 1941, continued at least to 1966. Of the approximately 157 letters, questionnaires, and miscellaneous items in the Alderman Library collection, one was placed on deposit by Elizabeth Dos Passos, the novelist's widow, after his death in 1970, and some 156 more were donated by the Bernardin family in 1999.

The collection begins with a letter Dos Passos wrote on January 3, 1942, seeking to correct the "misconception" in Bernardin's thesis (presumably his M.A. thesis) that social and political protest in America between 1919 and 1933 could be equated with communism. (For the text of the letter, please see p. 15 below.)

By mid-1943 Bernardin must have wanted to write Dos Passos' biography, as on June 15 of that year Dos Passos wrote him a letter beginning with the advice: "The biography of a novelist is to be found in his books, it seems to me, rather more than that of any other kind of a writer." Still, Dos Passos did not squelch the project. "I wish you'd wait fifty years—but anyway, good luck," he told Bernardin, saying too that he would be glad to aid him with dates, etc., and give him some names of people who could help.

After receiving a manuscript from Bernardin, Dos Passos wrote him on May 26, 1950, "Don't you think your chapters are pretty detailed? Anyway that's your business.

They seem tolerably accurate." But he could not keep himself from remonstrating: "Lord if you put in so much biography when are you going to get room for the critical study?"

Bernardin must have been encouraged by Dos Passos' letter of May 22, 1951, which said: "I . . . have to repeat how much I admire your industry" (though Dos Passos added in the margin: "I only wish it were being applied to some other victim.") "The only way to do is to dig out every damn deceitful speck of information if you want to find out something."

A college friend of Dos Passos, Arthur McComb, wrote him from Boston on October 1, 1951:

. . . I've been in touch with Bernardin in connection with the book he is writing about you—A year or so ago I gave him some anecdotes, opinions etc. for his Spanish chapter,<sup>1</sup> and answered various questions. He has now shewn me his chapter (or rather sent it, I've never seen him actually) He seems polite & appreciative. But I did not know he was going to quote me in those few pages—and a good deal, too. He will send you the chapter of course.

Dos Passos replied on Thanksgiving Day, 1951:

I hope Bernardin hasn't made himself a nuisance. He's a distressingly thorough young man. I did my best to explain to him that his function was to follow and not precede the undertaker—but since he insists on continuing with his rash enterprise I've sent him what data I could remember. . . . Write your memoir of that period in Spain. It will be worth a great more than poor B's strainings to comprehend—though as you say he's polite, appreciative and (I add) industrious. Its his industry I find disarming.

From Edmund Wilson's house in Wellfleet, Massachusetts (which the critic had lent Dos Passos for a month) Dos Passos, on August 1, 1952, wrote Bernardin about material the latter had sent:

I wasnt able to read through this very carefully but did catch a couple of things

which I have noted on separate sheets. You've certainly gone to great pains; that's the first requisite, and the rarest, in the production of a good book—

Bernardin was reaching the end of his career at Fordham, as Dos Passos' letter to him in early 1953 shows:

I certainly hope you find yourself a teaching job in a more congenial atmosphere. Maybe you'd better do some work on Jacques Maritain or Bernardos [Bernanos] or somebody like that for a change, or a study of somebody a hundred years back. I'm afraid your present task hasn't been very rewarding. Anyway it's finished and you can always use it as an obituary. . . . Better luck next time

When Bernardin asked him about literary agents, Dos Passos referred him to Bernice Baumgarter, at his agency Brandt and Brandt (letter of August 20, 1953), adding: "I doubt very much whether she would want to take it on right now. My stock is rather low on the literary exchanges at present." He suggested that Bernardin might turn to Joel Barlow or John Wilkes as a subject for a study.

Bernardin's article "John Dos Passos' Harvard Years" appeared in the *New England Quarterly* in March 1954. A well-written, almost entirely biographical, and occasionally anecdotal piece, it cited a letter from Dos Passos to the author as a source, but said nothing about the novelist's extensive help with a biography. Besides crediting the novelist's letter, the article cited letters from three of Dos Passos' fellow students at Harvard: S. Foster Damon, Kenneth Murdock, and Stewart Mitchell. (The latter two were among the current editors of the *New England Quarterly*.) For biographical materials, Bernardin drew upon some of Dos Passos' fictional writings at Harvard and on his Richard Ellsworth Savage story in *Nineteen-Nineteen*; and for some of the background he used Malcolm Cowley's discussion of Harvard aesthetes in his *After the Genteel Tradition*.

Over six years later, probably in fall 1961, Bernardin wrote Dos Passos about the possibility of the University of Oklahoma Press' publishing his biography. He also asked Dos Passos to support him for a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Dos Passos answered on October 14:

It was nice to hear from you and to hear that things are going well with you. The U. of Oklahoma has seemed to me to be one of the best of the college presses. I should think they would be good people to work with. Go ahead with Guggenheim etc: it's a little em-

barrassing to appear as a sponsor of someone who is writing about my own work, but I guess I can stand it.

There followed more queries from Bernardin—for help with bibliography, for specific information, and for comment on his text.

In March 1962 Bernardin wrote that he planned to submit his entire manuscript to Dos Passos before it was printed, in about September. He asked for comments on his chapter "Juvenilia," and for pictures to illustrate the biography. The novelist, in a letter of October 12, 1962—written after his return from a journey to South America—told him: "Congratulations on finally pinning down the U. of Okla."

Alas, there were further delays, attributable to Bernardin's scholarly conscience. Arthur McComb wrote Dos Passos on October 20, 1962:

I have had a few lines from Bernardin whom I last heard from 10 or more years ago. The Oklahoma Univ. Press is going to do his book in 2 vols. He asks to examine yr letters to me (having seen Aron's book)<sup>2</sup> I have replied that I have all yr letters of the last 20 years and all post-cards since 1916—but have not encouraged him. He can consult the letters which Aron saw.— This is to keep you *au courant*.

Dos Passos' reply on November 2 imposed a barrier:

2 vols is really appalling—yet he who says "a" must say "b". I foolishly encouraged Bernardin years ago. I don't know that I want him reading all my letters. Suppose I wanted to print them myself? If you can satisfy him with the ones Aron saw it might be sufficient—one or two others maybe—but not too many.

Bernardin sent Dos Passos further queries and lengthy questionnaires in 1962 and 1963, and Dos Passos continued responding. On January 22, 1964, Bernardin wrote that yesterday he had mailed him the third revision of the first volume; he had not intended to revise the volume after the press accepted the second revision, he said, but had found it necessary. Once again he invited comments.

On February 11, 1964, Dos Passos wrote him: "I think on the whole you have produced an accurate picture." But he had an objection regarding a major character in *Manhattan Transfer*:

Incidentally, I don't think you are right to connect Elaine Ogleshorpe with

Elaine Orr. She's much more like another girl I knew at the same time. Maybe you push these analogies between fiction characters and living people too hard.

He sent Bernardin letters containing additional corrections or information on February 14, 1964, and November 18, 1965. On January 25, 1966 he returned a questionnaire to Bernardin, and on June 24, 1966, sent him another letter with information.

According to Ann Southwell, Manuscript Cataloger at Alderman Library's Special Collections Department, the Bernardin papers there include an unpublished two-volume biography of Dos Passos: the first, covering the novelist's life through *Three Soldiers*' publication, was completed; the second, taking it through *Manhattan Transfer*, is unfinished. Besides these, she says, Alderman has an earlier version of the second volume, called *The Prime Years: John Dos Passos*.<sup>3</sup>

Why was the work never finished? Yvonne Evans, secretary to the director of Oklahoma University Press, very kindly researched some of the matter. The 1962 contract (which she had retrieved from storage) was for a work titled *John Dos Passos, a Work in Two Volumes*. It stated merely that the author would furnish, within a reasonable time, a manuscript to the publisher's satisfaction.<sup>4</sup>

Bernardin's sister Jacqueline says that Bernardin's wife told her that he was always revising, and his editor at Oklahoma University Press gave him extensions of dates to deliver the final manuscript. When this editor died, the people who succeeded him did not have the same interest.<sup>5</sup> Bernardin's son Paul says that his father must have had the impression that Oklahoma University Press would publish one volume at a time. But at some point it told him that it would not publish the first volume unless it had the second. It wanted to do the two together.<sup>6</sup>

Bernardin seems to have become discouraged, and as a result to have changed his priorities. With Dos Passos' death in September 1970, and the consequent release of new source materials, Bernardin's task became more difficult. But he did not give up entirely, not even after younger biographers preempted him. Probably in 1981 he submitted a manuscript to Gambit, Inc., which had published Dos Passos' posthumous novel *Century's Ebb* and a posthumous volume of his letters. The publisher, Lovell Thompson, replied on January 29, 1982, that the projected biography was too long for Gambit; but he quoted his associate, Mark Saxton, as saying that it got "inside" the novelist more than did two other biographies, those of Melvin Landsberg and Townsend Ludington.<sup>7</sup>

Dos Passos' patience with Bernardin, despite his initial misgivings and subsequent weariness with the enterprise, speaks much for his friendliness towards and respect for fellow humans. Though Bernardin did not impress Dos Passos with his critical acumen, the novelist

appreciated his industry and lack of pretentiousness, traits antipodal to those of writers whom Dos Passos once characterized as "inkshitters." Dos Passos also believed that some good might come of his setting the record straight, even if Bernardin's book were never published. And indeed good has come of Bernardin's industry and Dos Passos' cooperation. The novelist's responses, usually off the cuff, might be erroneous as to chronology, but such errors can often be corrected through the materials that became public after his death. Of course, a critical reader must make allowances for Dos Passos' attitudes towards people and events at the particular times of his responses. Still, some of the information about people and events, and his outlooks on them, would not exist at all if it were not for his responses. In a future number of the Newsletter, we will look at many of the questions and answers in the correspondence, as well as at some of Dos Passos' spontaneous comments.

#### Notes

1. A chapter on the stays in Spain (1919-1920) of Dos Passos, McComb, and Dudley Poore, another of the novelist's college friends. For the letters between Dos Passos and McComb quoted in this article, see *John Dos Passos' Correspondence with Arthur K. McComb*, ed. by Melvin Landsberg (Niwot, Colorado: Colorado Associated University Press, 1991).
2. Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (1961).
3. This information appeared in a letter to the editor published in the January 2000 number of the Newsletter.
4. Telephone call from Ms. Yvonne Evans, July 30, 2001.
5. Telephone conversation with Ms. Jacqueline Bernardin, July 26, 2001.
6. Telephone conversation with Mr. Paul Bernardin, July 24, 2001.
7. Ms. Jacqueline Bernardin sent the present writer a copy of Lovell Thompson's letter.