

**HIRSCHMAN, SUSAN
PAPERS
1970-1991**

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INTRODUCTION

The Susan Hirschman Papers are comprised almost entirely of letters from Mary Q. Steele, the noted children's author from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to her editor and close friend at Greenwillow Books in New York City, Susan Hirschman. Mary Q. Steele was a writer for over 30 years who saw more than 20 of her books published during her career. She was also an amateur naturalist who spent much of her spare time tending to her flowers and exploring the Signal Mountain area where she resided for many years with her husband and three children. An inveterate reader, Steele's letters reveal her learnedness and love of nature as well as her unhappiness with her personal life.

Most of the letters are dated from 1970 to 1991. Although many are not dated, most of the letters appear to be from the 1970s and early 1980s. When Susan Hirschman donated the letters to TSLA, they were not organized in any manner. Some of the letters were in their original postmarked envelopes, but many were not. For those that were, the postmarked date was noted by the processing archivist and written on the top right hand corner of the letter in pencil. In some cases, the postmark was difficult to read, and thus the date is sometimes in question. The papers were in very good condition, although some yellowing and wrinkling had altered their original appearance. Thirty-three photographs, all in good condition, also show Mary Q. Steele's home and yard as well as her book signing visits to schools. The collection measures 1.5 cubic feet, and approximately 1 cubic feet of material, such as envelopes and newspaper clippings, were discarded during processing.

Although the vast majority of the papers include letters from Mary Q. Steele to Susan Hirschman, there is one folder of miscellaneous letters, some of which are addressed to Mary Q. Steele herself. The letters in the Susan Hirschman Papers are almost entirely personal in nature. The Children's Literature Research Collection at the University of Minnesota also has a collection of Steele's papers, the "Mary Q. Steele Papers, 1969-1979," comprised mostly of her work papers rather than personal letters.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mary Q. Steele, daughter of Gilbert and Christine Govan, was born on May 8, 1922, in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Her parents and her sister, Emmy West, were also well known writers, as was her husband, William O. Steele. Mary Q. Steele graduated from the University of Chattanooga, and wrote more than 20 children's and adult books, some of which were written under the pen name Wilson Gage.

Steele's first book, *The Secret of the Indian Mound*, was published in 1958. She received many awards for her writing, including American Library Association awards, Junior Literary Guild selections, a Newbery Honor Book award, and a Lewis Carroll Shelf award. Her writing career continued for more than 30 years, and included the successful Mrs. Gaddy books, *Squash Pie*, and *Cully Cully and the Bear*. Most of her books were written for a juvenile audience, but she was also a noted naturalist who enjoyed studying the flora and fauna of the Signal Mountain area. In *The Living Year: An Almanac for My Survivors in 1972*, she carefully describes the landscape and wildlife surrounding her home in East Tennessee. Her love for nature and the outdoors is strongly evident in this book, one of the few that she wrote for adults. In *The Living Year*, she writes, "I did not become a writer, but was born one, waking up in the morning to sort the day into scenes and characters and descriptions....How can I convey to anyone else the magic and the marvel of it, the vast astonishment of being alive? I'm not sure I can, but I intend to go on trying."

After a lengthy illness, Mary Q. Steele died at the age of 70 on July 6, 1992, at her home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She had three children—Mary Quintard Steele, nicknamed Polly, Jenifer Susan Steele, and Allerton W. Steele and one granddaughter, Melissa Steele-Ogus. Her husband, William Steele, preceded her in death having died in 1979.

Source:

"Mary Govan Steele dies; noted author, naturalist." *The Chattanooga Times*, July 6, 1992, A6.

Scope and Content

The Susan Hirschman Papers, 1970-1991, consist almost entirely of personal letters from the noted children's writer Mary Q. Steele to her close friend and editor at Greenwillow Books, Susan Hirschman. The material is arranged chronologically, and ranges from August 10, 1970, to September 10, 1991. Almost all of the letters, either left in their original postmarked envelope or without an envelope at all, were undated. In order to preserve the probable date of the letter, the date of the postmark on the envelope was written in pencil in the upper right hand corner of the letter. Unfortunately, many of the letters were no longer in their original envelope, so the dates of these are unknown. Some of the letters included photographs or newspaper clippings; the relevant newspaper clippings were photocopied and attached, and items of little interest were discarded. The photographs were photocopied and attached to the letters with which they were originally found. The original photographs, which include views of her home and garden as well as her book signing trips, were placed in a small archival box.

The letters reveal a great deal about Mary Q. Steele's personal life. She discusses her family life in depth, especially her parents, who are often quite ill, and her three children, Polly, Allerton, and Jenifer. She frequently writes about her children, especially Polly, who lives with her as an adult for long periods of time. Steele writes about other family members, including her husband and in-laws. Steele is often plagued by feelings of depression and anxiety; this mood permeates the tone of her correspondence. It is clear that Steele finds great joy in studying nature, reading books, and tending to her cats, but these pleasures seem to be overshadowed by her negative state of mind. Steele often discusses her writing as well as her philosophy about the nature of children's books. The recipient of her letters is always her editor, but Susan Hirschman was also her trusted confidante and beloved friend.

The strength of the collection consist of the detailed letters from Steele to Hirschman from the 1970s and early 1980s. It appears that the frequency of the correspondence decreased in the mid-1980s and the early 1990s, although it is difficult to state this with certainty because of the many letters that are undated. It is likely that the letters decreased in frequency in her later years because of health problems, such as arthritis in her hands. The weakness of the collection may be the absence of letters from Hirschman to Steele, which might shed more light upon both of their lives. There is one folder of miscellaneous letters that may include one letter from Hirschman to Steele, but the letter is not signed and the author is therefore in question. The other letters are from William Steele to Hirschman, from Steele's daughters to Hirschman, or from other friends of Hirschman to Hirschman. In rare cases, fan mail from a young reader is attached to one of Steele's letters; she sometimes comments upon the reader input that she receives from various sources.

Steele's eye for nature is clearly evident when one reads her letters to Hirschman. Her observations are subtle and poignant, as are her thoughts about her reading and writing. Yet, the value of the collection resides not only in the fact that the letters reveal the thoughts and emotions of a respected children's author, but also because they illuminate the daily life of an educated middle-aged woman living in the Chattanooga era in the late twentieth century. Her feelings of depression, loneliness, bitterness, and isolation may shed light on the status of women living in a time when gender roles were starting to be reexamined. Steele appears to be caught between the feminist changes of the 1970s and 1980s and the more traditional role of a woman. These conflicts are evident when Steele discusses her role as a wife, daughter, in-law, and mother.

It should be noted that the Children's Literature Research Collection at the University of Minnesota also has a collection relevant to Mary Q. Steele. The "Mary Q. Steele Papers, 1969-1979," were donated by Steele and her husband in 1970, and include holographs and typescripts, notes, galley proofs, front matter, a reverse positive photostat, and two pages of correspondence. TSLA owns several of Mary Q. Steele's books, including the Mrs. Gaddy books, *Cully Cully and the Bear*, and *The Living Year: An Almanac for my Survivors*. There are also two appendices attached to the finding aid for this collection: a bibliography of Steele's published works, and information about Steele's papers at the Children's Research Collection at the University of Minnesota. The web site for this link is <http://special.lib.umn.edu/findaid/html/clrc/clrc0187.html>

CONTAINER LIST

BOX 1

Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1970-1978

- Folder 1: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1970
- Folder 2: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, February-August 1971
- Folder 3: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, September-December 1971
- Folder 4: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, January-June 1972
- Folder 5: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, July-December 1972
- Folder 6: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, January-August 1973
- Folder 7: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, September-December 1973
- Folder 8: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1974
- Folder 9: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1975
- Folder 10: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1976
- Folder 11: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1977
- Folder 12: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1978

BOX 2

Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1979-1991 & undated letters

- Folder 1: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, January-August 1979
- Folder 2: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, September-December 1979
- Folder 3: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1980
- Folder 4: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1981
- Folder 5: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1982
- Folder 6: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1983
- Folder 7: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1984
- Folder 8: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1985-1986
- Folder 9: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1987-1989
- Folder 10: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, 1990-1991
- Folder 11: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, no date
- Folder 12: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, no date
- Folder 13: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, no date
- Folder 14: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, no date

BOX 3:

Letters from Mary Q. Steele, undated - Miscellaneous letters

Folder 1: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, no date
Folder 2: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, no date
Folder 3: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, no date
Folder 4: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, no date
Folder 5: Letters from Mary Q. Steele, no date
Folder 6: Letters from William Steele
Folder 7: Letters to Mary Q. Steele
Folder 8: Miscellaneous letters

BOX 4: Photographs

1. Mary Q. Steele home (?); "Did we show you Bagatelle? Look sharp and you'll find your ever loving Tante"; from letter of April 15, 1973
2. Mary Q. Steele's backyard and dogwood; from letter of April 15, 1983
3. Mary Q. Steele's backyard and dogwood; from letter of April 15, 1983
4. Mary Q. Steele's house, view of driveway and flowers; from letter of June 14, 1984
5. Mary Q. Steele's house, view of yard; from letter of June 14, 1984
6. Mary Q. Steele's yard; from letter of June 14, 1984
7. Mary Q. Steele's yard, from letter of June 14, 1984
8. Mary Q. Steele's yard, from letter of June 14, 1984
9. Mary Q. Steele's house and yard, from letter of June 14, 1984
10. Mary Q. Steele's yard, from letter of June 14, 1984
11. Mary Q. Steele's flowers in her yard, from letter of June 14, 1984
12. Mary Q. Steele's house and yard, from letter of June 14, 1984
13. Mary Q. Steele's yard; "Early March '85"; from letter of March 27, 1985

14. Mary Q. Steele's yard; "'84's mess-but '85 is going to be BEAUTIFUL"; from letter of March 27, 1985
15. Mary Q. Steele's yard with cat; "Rufus among the narcissus – '85"; from letter of March 27, 1985
16. Mary Q. Steele's yard; "'84's daylilies & Delphinium"; from letter of March 27, 1985
17. Mary Q. Steele's home at Signal Mountain; "'85 – I couldn't get it all in one photograph"; from letter of March 27, 1985
18. Mary Q. Steele's flowers at home, from letter of July 5, 1985
19. Mary Q. Steele's flowers, from letter of July 5, 1985
20. Mary Q. Steele's flowers, from letter of July 5, 1985
21. Mary Q. Steele's flowers, from letter of July 5, 1985
22. Mary Q. Steele's flowers, from letter of July 5, 1985
23. Mary Q. Steele's cat, from letter of October 1, 1984
24. Mary Q. Steele with her daughter Polly, who is newly married and in her wedding dress, from letter of September 11, 1979
25. Mary Q. Steele with young reader
26. Mary Q. Steele addressing Canton, North Carolina Junior High School, from letter of June 5, 1986
27. Mary Q. Steele addressing Canton, North Carolina Junior High School, from letter of June 5, 1986
28. Mary Q. Steele addressing Canton, North Carolina Junior High School, from letter of June 5, 1986
29. Mary Q. Steele with young reader, from letter of May 27, 1980
30. Mary Q. Steele with young readers, from letter of May 27, 1980

31. Mary Q. Steele signing books, from letter of May 27, 1980
32. Mary Q. Steele signing books, from letter of May 27, 1980
33. Mary Q. Steele with young readers, from letter of May 27, 1980

APPENDIX #1: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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