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Excerpt
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THE LETTERS
1933–2006

1930s Berkeley and Harvard

Alice Galbraith was John Kenneth Galbraith's older sister by four years. At the end of Galbraith's second year of graduate studies at Berkeley he wrote to her expressing uncertainty over whether he could financially contribute to the college education of their younger sister, Catherine Galbraith, for the following year. But he was hopeful that he might receive a lectureship and be able to help. Alice was then sending money to support Galbraith from her own meager salary.¹

To Alice Galbraith

May 16, 1933

[Berkeley, California]

Dear Alice,²

You will be rather surprised to get this letter since you have not written of late and I am much too sophisticated to respond to a bunch of newspaper clippings much as I like to receive them.

I want to ask you, however, about a matter, which I believe is of considerable mutual concern – my reference is to Catherine's³ going on to school next year. Father⁴ has written to ask me my opinion and I answered him in rather general terms for it is a matter on which I think it is a mistake to bring too much influence to bear. However, before going into that there is a more fundamental question to dispose of – that of finances.

You know something of my position at the moment. I may say that I did not get the fellowship to Harvard and things are in general not too bright in the profession generally and from a purely personal standpoint it is necessary to hang to anything which promises a living and a chance to carry on.⁵ However, I feel fairly certain in my own mind that unless something altogether untoward happens, I shall have the opportunity of carrying on here for another year in about my present status. That unfortunately will not permit me to be of any assistance for the salary

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which I receive is carefully calculated to aid one person only and further than that it will be necessary for me to subtract all possible funds from the current income to pay for preparation of my thesis should that be thrown on my shoulder. I do not see how you can be in a much better position and I am surprised at the way Father has been able to carry along in the face of conditions the way he has. Such being the case, the answer would seem to me to be one of waiting another year. That is rather unsatisfactory and I fancy a trifle discouraging to Catherine but between the two of us it is necessary to face such exigencies. It is of course possible that money might be borrowed from outside sources but that is something which should have a great deal of serious thought before it is recommended for a girl and for freshman work at that.

If the above were all that I had to say on the matter there would be little point in my writing but there is another possibility. There are rumors around the Foundation,⁶ and at the moment they are little more than rumors, that I am to be added to the staff of the Foundation and to the lecturing staff of the University. I am not supposed to be in possession of that particular information and a thousand things may intervene to prevent fulfillment. However, I am being considered and that much can be said. Should I receive this appointment I will be in a position to be of material help. My salary to begin with will be small but it will leave me sufficient to make some provision for Catherine, in fact I think I will be able to take major responsibility.⁷

Things have been proceeding in a routine way. Am still pressing forward under a heavy burden of work for the examination. My course work for the year brought me six units of "A"s and two of "B"s. We had an earthquake last night or rather early this morning of sufficient strength to awaken everybody and give you a distinctly funny feeling. It lasted for several minutes, rolled you about in bed and nearly shook the windows out of their casings.

Well I guess that is all of this rather lengthy effort. Write me as I indicated and remember to keep my confidence.

Love
Ken

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- 1 Galbraith received an annual stipend of \$720 his first year at Berkeley. On April 7, 1932, he received a letter from Professor George M. Peterson awarding him a research stipend of \$840 for his second year.
- 2 Sarah Alice Galbraith never married and was a teacher (1904–1977).
- 3 Catherine Galbraith was JKG's younger sister (1913–2002). She married Jack Denholm. Catherine and JKG had an especially close bond. She was a teacher, like her sister. A third sister in the family, Helen Kay Galbraith, was born in 1907 and died the same year from whooping cough. Galbraith had a younger brother, William Galbraith, "Bill" (1911–1997).
- 4 William Archibald Galbraith (1868–1938). Galbraith's father "Archie" was a farmer and director of a small insurance company. He was also a leader of the regional Liberal Party. Galbraith's mother, Sarah Catherine Kendall Galbraith, "Kate" (1873–1923), died suddenly in 1923.
- 5 JKG applied for a Royal Society of Canada fellowship for post-graduate work at Harvard University, which he did not receive.
- 6 The Giannini Foundation of Agricultural Economics is housed at UC Berkeley where JKG did his graduate studies in agricultural economics. Galbraith roomed at the International House during his years of graduate work. He would later quip that he was the only professor in the economics department at Harvard that did not have a degree in economics.
- 7 A section was edited for space reasons.

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In 1934, after three years at Berkeley, Galbraith went on the job market looking for a teaching position. At the American Economic Association meetings in Philadelphia that year he had a number of interviews. One was with the economics department at Harvard University. By chance they were looking for a junior researcher in agricultural economics for a one-year position. In late spring he heard that he received the position and wrote to M. R. Benedict, a faculty member in the agricultural economics department at Berkeley, about his decision to accept. It was the beginning of his lifetime relationship with Harvard University – a relationship that over the years had its ups and downs. Galbraith received his PhD from Berkeley in June 1934.¹

To M. R. Benedict

May 25, 1934

[Berkeley, California]

Dear Dr. M. R. Benedict:²

During the past week Dr. Black³ has communicated with me again making a definite offer of an instructorship at Harvard University. He was anxious for

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an immediate reply and it was necessary to come to a final decision on the matter rather quickly. He promises that the work will be assisting him with his courses, and he promises time for independent activity and the opportunity to take some courses. The salary involved, while not high, was somewhat more than that promised me here next year. After talking over the offer with some of the men here and as result of my own thinking on the subject I came to the conclusion that I cannot forego the opportunity for work in particular fields of interest under the men at Harvard as well the experience involved in working with Dr. Black. In talking the matter over with Dean Hutchinson⁴ this morning he was inclined to believe that the opportunity presented was one which held very definite promise. While expressing his desire that I stay with the Division here, he indicated that, in light of the prospects offered, I would go with his blessings. While I regret indeed the matter of severing my connection with the University of California, I feel that the additional preparation at this time will be of permanent value and that perhaps I am not closing the door of possible return at some time in the future. Consequently, I wired Black accepting the position and am looking forward to the work there next year.

I regret indeed that I did not have the opportunity of talking this over with you in detail. I am inclined to think, however, that you would have concurred with my decision in the matter.

I am making excellent progress in revising the thesis manuscript for bulletin purposes and hope to have it ready for the Editorial Office within a short time. I have taken a copy of the thesis over to Dr. Traynor⁵ and have also had the opportunity of talking briefly with him about the study. Dr. Erdman⁶ and the Dean will be given copies of the bulletin draft as soon as it is completed. As I will not be leaving in any case before the end of the first week in July, I think that it will be nicely rounded out during the time that I am here.

Things about the Foundation are pretty much the same as you left them. The peach hearings are in progress today and tomorrow and have attracted a very considerable crowd.

Looking forward to seeing you in a few weeks now, I am

Very Truly yours,
J. K. Galbraith

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- 1 Galbraith's dissertation was titled "California County Expenditures," Giannini Foundation of Agricultural Economics, 55, bulletin 582, Berkeley, CA: Agricultural Experiment Station. The year before he published his first academic paper with E. C. Voorhies and F. E. Todd, "Honey Marketing in California" (1933) in the Giannini Foundation series.
- 2 Murray R. Benedict (1882–1980) enjoyed a long career in agriculture, both as an academic and in government. In mid-career (1931) he received a PhD in economics from Harvard and joined the faculty of the University of California at Berkeley in agricultural economics and the Giannini Foundation. He was working in Washington, DC at the time Galbraith sent this letter.
- 3 John D. Black (1883–1960). Professor of economics at Harvard University; Black was a leading agricultural economist in the 1930s. He worked hard to recruit graduate students and faculty to support agricultural economics at Harvard. Black played an important role in JKG's early career and with his final success of getting tenure at Harvard years later; considered a mentor to Galbraith, who said about Black: "Students recognized that Black's norm in economics was a firm concept of social welfare which he rarely, if ever, paused to define, but from which he never deviated; and they realized that his norm in economic method was how well the technique contributed in a practical and visible way to practical problems of welfare." Williard W. Cochrane, "Remembering John D. Black," *Choices*, 1989, 32.
- 4 Dean of the College of Agriculture at University of California at Berkeley.
- 5 Roger J. Traynor (1900–1983). Became full professor at Berkeley in 1936. He focused on taxation and served as the 23rd Chief of Justice of California.
- 6 Henry E. Erdman (1884–1997). Taught at Berkeley in agricultural economics, and at the Giannini Foundation specialized on marketing in agricultural economics.

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Howard R. Tolley (1889–1958) was professor of agricultural economics at the University of California and head of the Giannini Foundation at Berkeley before going to Washington, DC to become director of the Planning Division of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). Galbraith described him in his autobiography as "a loveable, well-loved and extremely homely man, he had the appearance and something of the posture of an elongated frog."¹ Planning to head back east right after graduation in June from Berkeley, Galbraith was eager to have a contact in Washington for possible summer employment. When he arrived, Tolley offered him a job on the spot with the "princely" sum of nearly \$300 a month. He used his summer salary to pay back his student loan to his sister of \$500. Galbraith later remarked how pleased he was with getting the job, "and not since have I been short of money."² He started his position at Harvard University in September 1934.

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To H. R. Tolley

May 25, 1934

[Berkeley, California]

Dear Mr. Tolley:

I am not certain to what extent you have anticipated this letter by information from more direct sources, but to come quickly to the point, in any case, I am resigning from the University of California to go to Harvard as instructor under Dr. Black next fall.

Some few weeks ago Dr. Black got in touch with Dr. Benedict as to the possibility of my being available. I was naturally interested but as the salary and status were indefinite and Dean Hutchison did not encourage the move I thought no further of the matter.

Day before yesterday Dr. Black wired me a definite offer of an instructorship for next year. In addition he promised leisure to take courses in which I was interested without tuition and somewhat more salary than I would get here next year.

Were I interested in looking for a comfortable way of living, now that I have finished work for my degree coupled with comparative security in a job in which I believe I have demonstrated ability, I do not suppose I should have been favorably inclined towards the move East. As you know, however, my temperament is distinctly not along the above lines. To forego the opportunity of working under and with the Harvard group, particularly Black, Williams,³ and Bullock,⁴ in my special fields of interest would be contradictory to the scholarly interest, which I at least profess to have. Moreover, gaining a Ph.D. has not given me the feeling “of having arrived” and I am very anxious for further development in taxation and finance.

Needless to say, I should like to have had your advice on this change but feel reasonably certain that you will be in sympathy with my decision. In talking the matter over with Dean Hutchison, while he was flatteringly anxious that I stay, he was also quite agreed that the opportunities offered were such that I should have difficulty in refusing. This, particularly so in that I was staying in academic work and looking forward to progress there. As you may guess it is with a good deal of regret that I look forward to

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leaving the University of California and I naturally hope that the step does not preclude the possibility of an eventual return with improved equipment for work in my particular fields.

With the semester over things have settled down to the customary summer routine here at the University. Tate was in Berkeley a few days ago and is still much enjoying his work with the Land Bank. I am afraid that he contemplates marriage within a few weeks. Rush started work with the AAA day before yesterday and is getting his christening in the peach hearings today. Allen is making excellent progress in his thesis and anticipates its completion by the end of the summer.

I am engaged in revising the thesis manuscript for purposes of publication and hope to have it nicely rounded out before leaving in the middle of the summer. The study has attracted some interest despite the deplorable lack of bibliographical incisiveness. The damning charge which was made in the Political Science Department a week or so ago and which came to my ears yesterday was that it showed far too much originality on the part of the author.

I shall look forward to a trip to Washington soon after my arrival in the East this summer. Looking forward to renewing my friendships there, I am

Very truly yours,
J. K. Galbraith

1 Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981, 25.

2 Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981, 36.

3 John H. Williams (1887–1980). Professor of economics at Harvard. Scholar in the field of monetary and international economics; involved in policy decisions during the New Deal.

4 Charles J. Bullock (1869–1941). Professor of economics at Harvard. Recognized for his work in taxation and forecasting.

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With just a one-year appointment at Harvard, Galbraith kept his options open for future employment. Though he received offers to work at the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Department of Agriculture in Ottawa, Canada, the only real choice Galbraith considered was between teaching at Harvard or

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Berkeley. The letter to Dean C. B. Hutchison discusses the possibility of coming back to Berkeley. But Galbraith stayed on at Harvard when John D. Black, professor of economics at Harvard University, was able to extend his contract. Throughout his career Black was a true mentor to Galbraith and gave him a number of important projects to work on when he first got to Harvard, which helped establish him in the world of academic scholarship.¹

To C. B. Hutchison

April 29, 1935

[Cambridge, Massachusetts]

Dear Dean Hutchison:

I am afraid that this letter is grossly overdue. It has been my intention for several weeks to convey directly to you my thanks for the consideration and good opinion implied in my recent opportunity to join the California staff.

I know that you will accept my assurance that it was only after lengthy consideration and with sincere regret that I passed by the chance to return to California this year. The basis of my decision – I think I can fairly say the only important one – was simply that a further investment of time in association with the work here appeared to promise more in future equipment and usefulness than any other apparent line of action. More and more I am impressed with the complexity of the economic problems with which we are attempting to cope and with the demands in training and experience, which they place upon the person with ambition to contribute in a permanently useful way. This past year has been an exceedingly fruitful one from my standpoint and I feel I have yet much to gain from my associates here. There is little need for me to labor my point of view on this matter for it is one for which you have more than passive sympathy.

I wish to again express my thanks and trust that you will consider my interest in the work at California as keen as ever.

With kindest personal regards

Yours very truly,
J. K. Galbraith

December 1937

- 1 One of his early projects led to an important co-authored paper with Black published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, “The Quantitative Position of Marketing in the United States,” May 1935, 394–413.

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During his second year at Harvard, 1935–1936, Galbraith moved on campus as a resident tutor at Winthrop House, with the benefit of free room and board. In his autobiography he described the luxurious accommodations he found himself in: “After my Irving Terrace lodgings, these accommodations – living room, fireplace, bedroom, bathroom, respectable furniture – were a great luxury. I even had a telephone.”¹ One of his students at that time was Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. – the beginning of his lifetime relationship with the Kennedy family. After two years at Harvard he was promoted to faculty instructor with a contract of three years. He widened his reading beyond agricultural economics to include Keynes and enjoyed conversations with his new colleagues in the economics department. In 1936 he met his future wife, Catherine Merriam Atwater, known as Kitty. She was the eldest of three children and the daughter of a New York lawyer. In 1937, to pursue his new interest in Keynesian economics, he applied for a Social Science Research Council fellowship to study at the University of Cambridge, England, and got it. With the fellowship in hand, he proposed to Kitty. Being reluctant at first, she finally accepted. They were married on September 17, 1937. The day after the wedding they boarded the SS Britannic for Southampton, England, with their convertible car. Below is a letter addressed to Galbraith’s father with the request that it be passed on to Kitty’s parents in Plandome, Long Island, New York. This was the last communication Archie Galbraith received from his son. He was killed in a railroad crossing accident on January 18, 1938. The last time Galbraith saw his father was at the boarding dock in New York the day after his wedding. The letter described their journey through Europe just before World War II.