

John Jarmain Collection

John Jarmain was born in Hatch End, Pinner, Middlesex and educated at Shrewsbury School and Queens' College Cambridge where he read Mathematics. After graduating in 1933 he married Eve Houghton and moved to Somerset where they had two children: Mark and Joanna. He lived in Pilton, West Pennard and Street and from 1937 Jarmain taught Mathematics, English Literature and Italian at Millfield School in Street. In 1938 he sought a divorce from Eve. Immediately after war was declared in 1939, he joined up and was commissioned in July 1940. He served throughout the Second World War as a gunnery officer with the 51st Highland Division, part of the 61st Anti-Tank Regiment Royal Artillery, during their campaigns in North Africa and Sicily. He married Beryl Butler in the spring of 1940 before being posted to Scotland where he trained until 1942. Their first daughter, Janet Susan, was born during the war. Jarmain served in North Africa with 242 Battery from August 1942 till May 1943. He fought at El Alamein, Mersa Brega, El Agheila, Homs, Sirte, Buerat, Tripoli, Medenine, Mareth, Wadi Akarit and Enfidaville. After having been promoted major, he commanded 193 Battery and trained in Algeria before the Sicily landing in July 1943. In Sicily he fought at Vizzini, Ramacca, Gerbini and Sferro hills. Jarmain returned to the UK in November 1943. After further training, he took part in the D Day landing and was killed at St Honorine la Chardonnerette, in Normandy, by a mortar bomb on the 26th of June 1944.

His published work includes 'Priddy Barrows', a novel published in 1944, and 'Poems', a collection of poems published in 1945. Much of John Jarmain's best poetry, such as 'El Alamein', 'Sand', 'Fear', 'Orchids' and 'Leptis Magna', was written on the move, living rough in the desert in 'doovers' or small dugouts and writing by the light of the moon. The poems were always sent back in numbered airmail letters to his wife.

The 120 manuscript letters from Jarmain to his wife Beryl, whom he regularly corresponded after being shipped to North Africa and South Italy during the Second World War from June 1942 till November 1943, give a vivid account of the poet's experience of the war. It includes accounts of his embarkation on the troopship at Liverpool Docks, the sea journey via Capetown to Suez in Egypt, the time spent in the Western Desert learning the desert ways and fighting and Sicily landing. Jarmain records everyday aspects of his life in the desert, from the routine in the training camps to the battlefields. Sand and flies, dust storms and blackouts are mentioned together with the stunning landscape and nature surrounding him which he admires. Numerous are the references to local birds. War context is in the background and fear too, which becomes more vivid when describing air raids.

The letters also throw light on the effects of separation on family life and the soldier's difficulty to communicate with his family in England. Jarmain's attempts to describe his war experience and feelings on paper often encounter obstacles like censorship, precarious writing conditions and slow postal services only slightly eased by lettercards and airgraphs.

Archives and Rare Books Resources Held by the University of Exeter

EUL MS 413	120 manuscript letters by John Jarmain to his wife Beryl with whom he regularly corresponded during the war. Also including five copy letters of condolence and one additional copy letter from John Jarmain (1942-1944)
EUL MS 413/1/5	Manuscript letter including the poems 'Sleeping on Deck', 'Flying Fishes' and 'Yone May' and references to his life in the army and Capetown, dated 21 Jul 1942
EUL MS 413/1/31	Airgraph dated 26 November 1942, including references to Tobruk and the following journey through the desert and the Nile
EUL MS 413/1/52	Letter from Jarmain in Tripoli, dated 6 February 1943. Mentions Sicilian festivals, war prisoners, Jarmain's birthday, the desert, Roman ruins, nurses. Also mentioning his writing of, the poem 'For Alamein'
EUL MS 413/1/67	Manuscript lettercard including references to Monty or Bernard Montgomery and the new direct air service from Tripoli. The 51st Highland Division is also mentioned, dated 12 March 1943
EUL MS 413/1/155	Copy of letter from Jarmain in France dated 25 June 1944, mentioning the effect of war on the French landscape. Written the night before Jarmain was killed at Saint Honorine-la-Chardonne, Orne