

Nancy Pearn's offer letter from Curtis Brown, 26 June 1922: the beginning of the 'Queen of the Magazines and Newspapers'

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Note

NANCY PEARN'S OFFER LETTER FROM CURTIS BROWN, 26 JUNE 1922: THE BEGINNING OF THE 'QUEEN OF THE MAGAZINES AND NEWSPAPERS'¹

Nancy Pearn (1892-1950, also known as Nancy R. Pearn, or Anne Ross 'Nancy' Pearn) was a literary agent active in the British publishing industry during the first half of the twentieth century. During her years at Curtis Brown, from 1922 to 1935—particularly as manager of the Magazine Department in the agency's London office—she established a notable professional reputation in the transatlantic literary networks. Pearn represented a roster of prominent literary figures, including D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and Dorothy L. Sayers. Her shrewd understanding of the periodical marketplace and commercial literary culture not only secured substantial serialisation royalties for her clients, but also earned her the epithet 'queen of the magazines and newspapers', as noted by David Higham. Together with Higham and Laurence Pollinger—who, respectively, led the Departments for English and American Books in Curtis Brown's London office—Pearn co-founded the literary agency Pearn, Pollinger & Higham, described by George Greenfield as one of the five 'large and important [literary] agencies in the immediate post-war years'.² Despite Pearn's achievements, both public and scholarly attention to her remains limited. Existing studies, including recent research by Jonathan Long and Buxi Duan, have shown a tendency to contextualize Pearn's legacy primarily through her correspondence with her well-known clients, especially D. H. Lawrence.³ While Lizzie Broadbent's biographical article is, thus far, the only comprehensive account of Pearn's professional life, it focuses primarily on her Curtis Brown years and beyond, constrained by the limited archival materials related to her early career and personal life.⁴

Hence, the offer letter Pearn received from Curtis Brown, dated 26 June 1922 and held at the University of Delaware, is valuable in understanding the formative stage of her career.⁵ In a retrospective account, Pearn adopts a characteristically modest tone and states that her entry into the literary agent profession was grounded in the early secretarial training, claiming that she 'can be quite definite, and that is to advise any girl who hopes for a position in a literary agent's office to take in all-round secretarial training'.⁶ However, this letter suggests that Pearn's initial responsibilities extended well beyond routine clerical duties. By that point, she appears already to have been acquainted—professionally, and perhaps personally—with the managerial echelons of this transatlantic literary agency. The names mentioned in the letter—'Miss Watson' and 'Enid', for example—refer to Enid Jean Watson, who would later lead the Foreign Department in the London office and marry Spencer Curtis Brown. Similarly, 'Barnby' is A. W. Barnby, then General Manager of the New York office, while 'O'Bryen' is W. J. O'Bryen, manager of the Film and Drama Department in New York. This letter also reveals that in addition to her relatively well-known role as manager of the Magazine Department in Curtis Brown's London office, Pearn initially worked in the New York office and was involved in the administration of the Film and Drama Department—an aspect of her early career previously undocumented.

The significance of this offer letter lies not only in its rarity as one of the few extant archival materials directly related to Pearn's early professional life, but also in its testimonial value as an authentic record of her early managerial promise in a leading literary agency. This is reflected in the letter's content: Curtis Brown expresses full confidence in Pearn's capabilities despite never having employed her, entrusting her with responsibility for the 'dramatic and film work in New York', even while acknowledging that she knew 'nothing of that work'. The letter also includes his reflections on the anticipated post-war expansion of the 'continental business', further indicating that

¹ David Higham, *Literary Gent* (New York, 1978), 125.

² George Greenfield, *A Smattering of Monsters* (New York, 1995), 76.

³ Jonathan Long, 'Nancy Pearn', *Études Lawrenciennes*, 56 (2024); Buxi Duan, 'The "Golden ... Magazine Girl" of D. H. Lawrence', *English* (2025).

⁴ Lizzie Broadbent, 'Nancy Pearn (1892-1950)', *Women Who Meant Business* (2020), <https://womenwhomeantbusiness.com/2020/12/15/nancy-pearn-1892-1950/>.

⁵ MSS 0227, Nancy Pearn papers, Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, Newark, Delaware.

⁶ Nancy Pearn, 'Literary Agency', in *The Road to Success*, ed. Margaret I. Cole (London, 1936), 90-1.

Pearn was regarded by Curtis Brown as a trusted and capable professional from the very beginning. As current scholarship increasingly attends to the often-overlooked labour of behind-the-scenes literary intermediaries—especially agents who negotiated the commissioning and dissemination of literary works—this letter offers rare and valuable archival evidence. It not only deepens our understanding of Pearn's professional formation, but also contributes to broader efforts to examine the interpersonal and institutional dynamics, shaped by literary agents, that structured the early twentieth century literary marketplace and publishing culture. The letter is transcribed in full below:

6 Henrietta Street

Covent Garden

W.C.2

26th June 1922

Dear Miss Pearn:

Miss Watson tells me you are beginning to get a bit fed up with Texas. Well, O'Bryen who has had our dramatic and film work in New York, comes back in Aug. It occurs to me that tho' you know nothing of that work, it feels uncommonly safe, sound, and comfortable, if you were to take it on. We have some one else in sight, but Barmby who has interviewed her, doesn't believe she has initiative—and that of course is a fatal objection. Could you take it on the middle of August at \$30 per week to start with, and a rise as soon as you got it going? It clearly offers big possibilities, and at present is paying us well.

If it interests you, could you send me by "Marconi deferred" the cabled words "Accept. Pearn." Things may alter before I can get that

cable, as Barmby is coming over, partly on vacation and partly for consultation on this point, arriving about July 15. Your cable would be arriving before then, and I could at once cable you definitely in response. O'Bryen can't stay over there after Aug 15, and it would be very important for you to confer with him before he goes.

My wife, Marshall & Beatrice have just arrived in America, and I think they will be in New York before long. If you are to be there, let them know c/o the N.Y.O. – 116 W. 39th St. They'd love to see you.

Office going exceptionally strong again after a long depression in the publishing business. Enid is doing very well and continental business is beginning to look up again after almost complete frustration on account of exchanges.

I do hope we have soon have you with us again.

Yours sincerely,

Curtis Brown

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