Today in History - May 7

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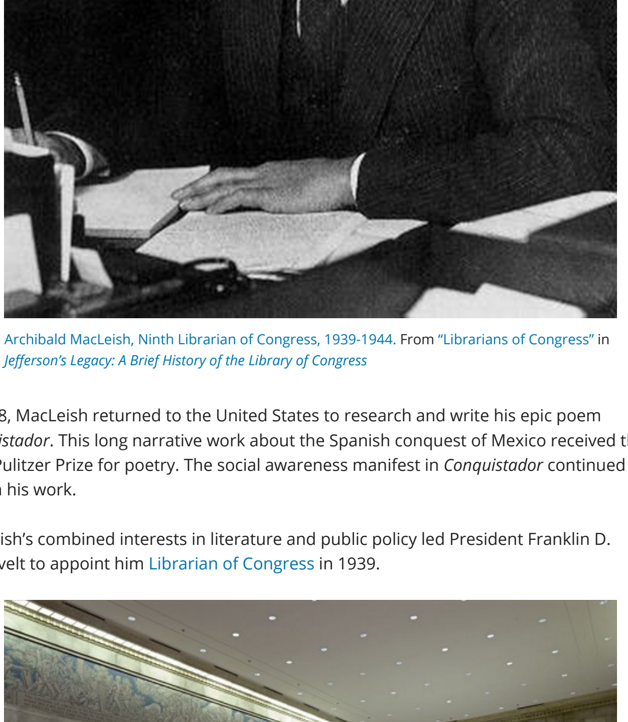
The Poet Librarian

Archibald MacLeish, poet, dramatist, and ninth Librarian of Congress, was born on **May 7**, 1892, in Glencoe, Illinois. He attended Yale University where he chaired the *Yale Literary Magazine*. After service in World War I, he graduated from Harvard Law School. MacLeish practiced law for three years before resigning and moving his family to Paris.

Like American expatriates Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway, MacLeish found Paris of the 1920s a creative haven. He produced several volumes of poetry during his years in France including *The Happy Marriage, and Other Poems* (1924), *The Pot of Earth* (1925), and *Streets in the Moon* (1926).

> *The first duty of the Library of Congress is to serve the Congress and the officers and agencies of government. Its second duty is to serve the world of scholarship and letters. Through both it endeavors to serve the American people to whom it belongs and for whom it exists.*
>
> Statement of Archibald MacLeish. *Quarterly Journal of Current Acquisitions*. Jul, Aug, Sep 1943. p.2



Archibald MacLeish, Ninth Librarian of Congress, 1939-1944. From "Librarians of Congress" in *Jefferson's Legacy: A Brief History of the Library of Congress*

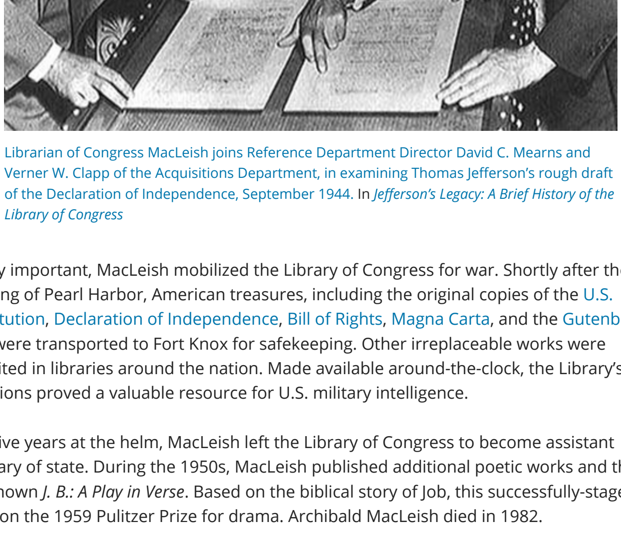
In 1928, MacLeish returned to the United States to research and write his epic poem *Conquistador*. This long narrative work about the Spanish conquest of Mexico received the 1933 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. The social awareness manifest in *Conquistador* continued to inform his work.

MacLeish's combined interests in literature and public policy led President Franklin D. Roosevelt to appoint him Librarian of Congress in 1939.

South Reading Room...Library of Congress John Adams Building. Carol M. Highsmith, photographer, 2007. Highsmith (Carol M.) Archive. Prints & Photographs Division

The Library of Congress's John Adams Building, originally called the "Annex," had been completed only a few months before MacLeish's appointment. MacLeish commissioned artist Ezra Winter to decorate the Jefferson Reading Room in the new building with four murals inspired by Thomas Jefferson's thoughts on freedom, labor, the "living generation," education, and democratic government.

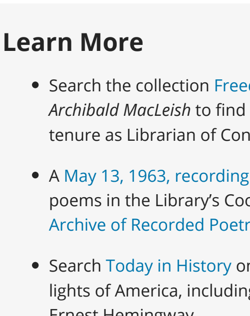
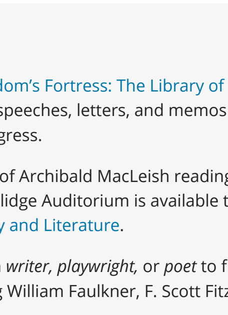
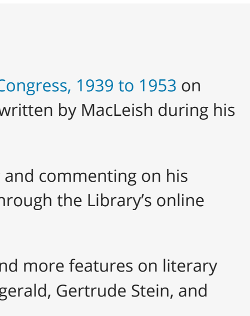
MacLeish faced the challenge of moving collections and of updating the administrative structure of the institution to fulfill its mission to Congress, to the American government, to scholarship, and to the American people. During his tenure as Librarian, MacLeish successfully reorganized the Library and extended the Library's connections to American writers and scholars.



Librarian of Congress MacLeish joins Reference Department Director David C. Mearns and Verner W. Clapp of the Acquisitions Department, in examining Thomas Jefferson's rough draft of the Declaration of Independence, September 1944. In *Jefferson's Legacy: A Brief History of the Library of Congress*

Equally important, MacLeish mobilized the Library of Congress for war. Shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, American treasures, including the original copies of the U.S. Constitution, Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights, Magna Carta, and the Gutenberg Bible were transported to Fort Knox for safekeeping. Other irreplaceable works were deposited in libraries around the nation. Made available around-the-clock, the Library's collections proved a valuable resource for U.S. military intelligence.

After five years at the helm, MacLeish left the Library of Congress to become assistant secretary of state. During the 1950s, MacLeish published additional poetic works and the well-known *J. B.: A Play in Verse*. Based on the biblical story of Job, this successfully-staged play won the 1959 Pulitzer Prize for drama. Archibald MacLeish died in 1982.

Ainsworth Rand Spofford, Sixth Librarian of Congress, 1864-1897; Herbert Putnam, Eighth Librarian of Congress, 1899-1939; L. Quincy Mumford, Eleventh Librarian of Congress, 1954-1974.

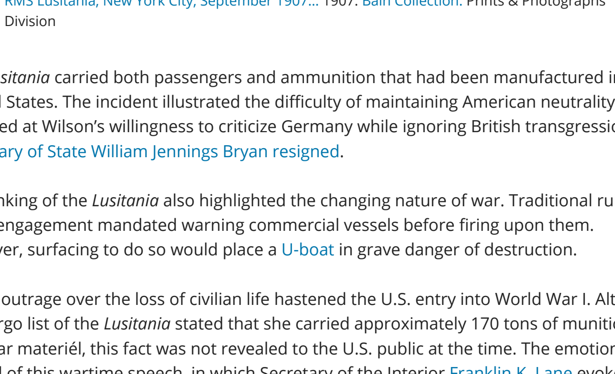
Learn More

- Search the collection Freedom's Fortress: The Library of Congress, 1939 to 1953 on *Archibald MacLeish* to find speeches, letters, and memos written by MacLeish during his tenure as Librarian of Congress.
- A May 13, 1963, recording of Archibald MacLeish reading and commenting on his poems in the Library's Coolidge Auditorium is available through the Library's online Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature.
- Search Today in History on *writer, playwright,* or *poet* to find more features on literary lights of America, including William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, and Ernest Hemingway.
- Search Today in History on such terms as *Franklin Roosevelt, Great Depression,* and *World War II* to read more about the era of MacLeish's tenure as Librarian of Congress and assistant secretary of state.
- Read more about the illustrious Librarians of Congress in John Cole's history of the Library, *Jefferson's Legacy: A Brief History of the Library of Congress*. Biographies of the Librarians, including the current Librarian of Congress, Dr. Carla Hayden, are also available on the About section of the Library's website. And for even more about MacLeish, see the post on the *Library of Congress Blog*, "The Warrior Poet (a.k.a. Fellow Traveler No. 1)."
- Examine a letter from Ernest Hemingway to Archibald MacLeish. Written in August 1943, Hemingway answers an earlier letter concerning poet Ezra Pound's mental health. This document is included in the Archibald MacLeish Papers which are part of the collections of the Library's Manuscript Division.

Lusitania Lost!

On **May 7**, 1915, the German submarine(U-boat) *U-20* sank the British ocean liner *Lusitania*. Approximately 1,200 civilians died; more than 100 were U.S. citizens.

In reply to President Woodrow Wilson's protest, Germany justified the attack on grounds that the British government intended to arm merchant ships. Prior to the *Lusitania*'s departure, the German government had warned that ships entering the war zone could be fired upon.



RMS Lusitania, New York City, September 1907... 1907. Bain Collection. Prints & Photographs Division

The *Lusitania* carried both passengers and ammunition that had been manufactured in the United States. The incident illustrated the difficulty of maintaining American neutrality. Appalled at Wilson's willingness to criticize Germany while ignoring British transgressions, Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan resigned.

The sinking of the *Lusitania* also highlighted the changing nature of war. Traditional rules of naval engagement mandated warning commercial vessels before firing upon them. However, surfacing to do so would place a U-boat in grave danger of destruction.

Public outrage over the loss of civilian life hastened the U.S. entry into World War I. Although the cargo list of the *Lusitania* stated that she carried approximately 170 tons of munitions and war materiél, this fact was not revealed to the U.S. public at the time. The emotional appeal of this wartime speech, in which Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane evoked the *Lusitania* to explain U.S. involvement in the war, would have been unadulterated by an issue such as the appropriateness of using a passenger vessel to transport arms:

> *We still hear the piteous cries of children coming out, out of the sea where the Lusitania went down, and Germany has never asked forgiveness of the world. We saw the Sussex sunk crowded with the sons and daughters of neutral nations. We saw ship after ship sent to the bottom—ships of mercy bound out of America for the Belgian's starving—ships carrying the Red Cross, and laden with the wounded of all nations—ships carrying food and clothing to friendly, harmless, terrorized people—ships flying the stars and stripes sent to the bottom hundreds of miles from shore, manned by American seamen, murdered against all law, without warning.*

The nation in arms

The Nation in arms[sound recording] /Franklin K. Lane.

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Share

"The Nation in Arms." Speech by Franklin K. Lane, U.S. Secretary of the Interior; [New York]: Nation's Forum, 1918. American Leaders Speak: Recordings from World War I. Motion Picture, Broadcasting & Recorded Sound Division

Learn More

- See Sinking of the Lusitania: Topics in Chronicling America to view historic newspaper articles documenting this tragic event. Search the entire historic newspaper collection Chronicling America for coverage of the events of World War I.
- Explore the online exhibit Echoes of the Great War: American Experiences of World War I.
- Search Today in History on *World War I* to locate additional features about the war, such as those on the Saint-Mihiel Offensive, Armistice (Veterans) Day, and General John J. Pershing, commander of the U.S. First Army in Europe.
- Search the collection American Leaders Speak: Recordings from World War I on *World War* to find additional recordings of speeches on the subject. Don't miss World War I, part of the Special Presentation, From War to Normalcy: An Introduction to the Nation's Forum Collection.
- Two additional collections—Stars and Stripes: The American Soldiers' Newspaper of World War I, 1918 to 1919 and Newspaper Pictorials: World War I Rotogravure, 1914 to 1919 are rich in WWI materials. The latter collection includes the essay "The *Lusitania* Disaster."
- Search the collection Panoramic Photographs on *World War* to retrieve over 300 panoramic photos of battlefields and military life. Photos associated with the battles of Meuse-Argonne are among these. During the fall of 1918, more than one million Americans fought with the French in this hilly region of France. Search on *Argonne* to locate these pictures.
- Search on *Lusitania* in the pictorial collections for photographs, drawings, cartoons, and posters of the *Lusitania*.
- A search in the collection Patriotic Melodies yields sound recordings and sheet music for George M. Cohan's 1917 hit song "Over There"—which embodied the spirit of the Great War.