



## Letters from Clara: One Intrepid Woman's Travels on the Eve of War, 1936-1939

**Janet Newman**

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*Letters from Clara* is an endearing account of an adventurous woman's global travels during a tumultuous time in history.

Eager to expand her horizons, Clara, a single, middle-aged woman from Wisconsin, set out to tour the globe after her mother's death in 1936. She traveled modestly, drawing upon her YWCA network and working for a time in Shanghai until bombings forced her to flee by ship. Shelling imperiled her ship; she then endured a typhoon and an earthquake while recovering from an injury in a Manila hospital.

Unfazed, she continued to South Asia and Europe, even as global political tensions mounted. She sailed along Africa's edge. When war was declared, her ship was encouraged to "lose itself for a time." Clara yearned to continue on to South America, but was forced to suspend her travels. During her three-year trip, she encountered missionaries, colonialists, an impoverished baroness, a fatalistic Italian aviator, and fleeing Czech Jews.

Though Clara's original sketches, diary, photographs, and scrapbook were lost, Janet Newman stitches her story together through her surviving letters. Throughout, historical and biographical notes and images are a source of continuity and context. Clara's missives report her experiences with wry humor, revealing her insatiable curiosity and spunky demeanor. Her naïveté, hunger for knowledge, and candid reactions to situations are honest. Her clear-eyed assessments of people also aim to keep an open mind; she shares opinions and debates about democracy, government, and nationalism, challenging her preconceived notions.

Like a time capsule, the travel narrative *Letters from Clara* follows a naïve but spirited woman as she witnesses chaos around the world just before World War II.

WENDY HINMAN (March / April 2022)

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