

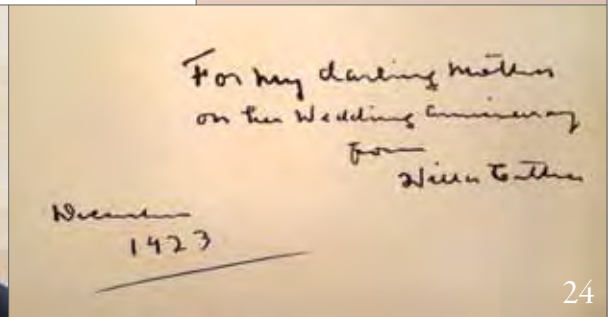
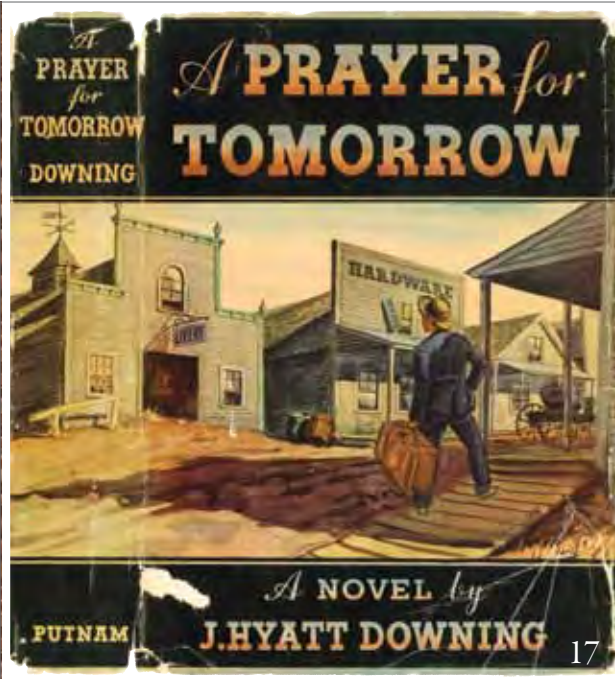
Prairie echoes of *A Lost Lady*  
Mary Ruth Ryder

“Matrix of memory”: The Red Cloud local news  
Daryl W. Palmer

“O Beulah Land” and *O Pioneers!*  
Steven B. Shively

# Willa Cather NEWSLETTER & REVIEW

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*On the cover: The dust jacket for the original 1938 edition of A Prayer for Tomorrow, courtesy of Mary Ruth Ryder.*



## Letter from the President Susan Maher

The first week of August, as I write this essay, is mid-summer on the calendar, the balance point between spring and fall's beginnings. Up here in the North Woods, hummingbirds are displaying some urgency at our feeders, a new set of flowers is opening up as others end their season, and a hint of autumn is in the air. Last night, heavy rains fell over the area, and this morning the lawn is glistening and dark green. The fullness of all reminds me of Cather's great summer scenes: Jim and Ántonia watching distant lightning or dancing under evening's afterglow; young boys camping on the river and dreaming of enchanted bluffs; Alexandra gazing over her acres and breathing in the life force from her crops.

A recent drive across Nebraska reminded me that summers aren't always so lustrous. The drought of 2012 is deepening its effects across the Plains. I have never seen the Platte River so low and dried up. Many farmers are facing disaster in their fields as

corn crops shrivel and brown. Even the hay looked stunted. The heat, 107 degrees one day in Omaha, was unbearable. During such extremes, the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie south of Red Cloud, provides landscape lessons we all can appreciate. The grasses and forbs on the prairie evolved with the climactic extremes. The hardiness of prairie ecosystems lies unseen, in the miles and miles of underground root systems, biomass that taps into whatever moisture is available and absorbs nutrients for the surface plant. The plants have strategies for drought, including dormancy, that assure survival, even during the hardest of times.

One can still see the topographical effects of the Dust Bowl driving Highway 136 from Red Cloud toward McCook, where winds scoured topsoil and blew clouds of it over the east coast where Cather lived. Prairies protect the precious soil and keep it intact. The Cather Prairie is a refuge this summer and a landscape of hope and endurance. Much of Cather's great fiction examines human drama upon the stage of this landscape. Ivor, in *O Pioneers!*, understood that the most enduring lessons come not from human ephemera, but from the nature of places like the Cather Prairie.



## Letter from the Executive Director Leslie Levy

*Energy.* It is the word that I would use to describe "Willa Cather, Poet: Making Herself Born," our 2012 Spring Conference and Scholarly Symposium. In the weeks approaching the conference, there was definite heightened energy as the Foundation finished the necessary preparations, working closely with conference director Robert Thacker. We felt fortunate to have several scholars arrive early for additional research and sightseeing. We thoroughly enjoyed having scholars and visitors spend dedicated time with us in Red Cloud in advance of the conference.

When the day arrived for the symposium that led off this year's conference, there was abundant nervous energy as twenty-one scholars presented an amazing and stimulating array of papers. The fascinating topics and original research shared during the symposium was truly wonderful. The evening's musical entertainment at Burlington Depot, provided by Mike Adams and Terry Sinnard, made a perfect end to a very successful day.

The conference was filled with a palpable energy as scholars exchanged ideas and experiences and traced the many connections between Cather's poetry and her later work. It was also enlivening to observe attendees greet friends and colleagues, old and new. Saturday's scholarly panels were educational and engaging—and provided impetus for great dialogue; Saturday's church service, in the sanctuary of the Episcopal Church, was poignant; and, the afternoon breakout sessions that delved into Cather's history, family and experiences that inspired her poetry were enlightening, delightful, and thought-provoking. Throughout the conference, we were surrounded by first-class art: Richard Schilling's amazing exhibit—*Portraits of the Prairie*—inspired by the sights and scenes of Red Cloud and Webster County; the Apollon art pieces inspired by Cather's poem, "Prairie Song," which set the mood for Saturday evening's entertainment; and, the main exhibit in the gallery—diverse and beautiful pieces inspired by poems in Cather's *April Twilights*.

Overall, it was a wonderful—and poetic!—three days. What I found so remarkable was the tsunami of energy and excitement that it created and that will carry us forward into plans for next year's conference celebrating the centenary of *O Pioneers!* as well as the International Seminar in Flagstaff.



# Recomposing Nineteenth-Century Nebraska: Red Cloud Newspapers and Cather's "Hired Girls" in *My Ántonia*

Daryl W. Palmer | Regis University

Everyone knows that memories of Nebraska are central to Willa Cather's fiction. Indeed, her deepest inspiration clearly came from first-hand memories. But many of Cather's memories are also, in a sense, collective. In *My Ántonia*, for instance, a surprising number of the novel's embedded stories once circulated freely through Webster County as recollection and gossip. More particularly, many of these stories took shape in prose in the columns of Red Cloud newspapers, where they spawned more conversation and even follow-up articles. The point I want to make in this brief essay is that Cather, as she composed fiction about Nebraska, was always recomposing an archive of "memories" preserved in newsprint. With this in mind, I want to study "The Hired Girls" section of *My Ántonia* as a case of re-composition in order to reconsider the relationship between Cather's craft and nineteenth-century Nebraska.

Cather's journalistic past, in Nebraska and beyond, has been studied in detail.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the connection between Cather's fiction and newspapers (from Red Cloud and elsewhere) has been documented. Timothy W. Bintrim, Richard Harris, Andrew Jewell, Mark J. Madigan, and Kari Ronning, among others, have shown how the novelist regularly returned to newspaper clippings as she constructed her narratives.<sup>2</sup> Such identifications allow us to set Cather's version against the reportorial kernel, which makes it possible to pinpoint the novelist's omissions, additions, and changes in emphasis. We learn a great deal about Cather's craft through this sort of mapping.

And we learn even more when we study *how* and *why* she transforms those archived memories in the pages of a novel. Basking in the success of *My Ántonia*, Cather invites the inquiry in her oft-quoted interview with Latrobe Carroll: "Just as if I put here on the table a green vase, and beside it a yellow orange. Now, those two things affect each other. Side by side, they produce a reaction which neither of them will produce alone. Why should I try to say anything clever, or by any colorful rhetoric detract attention from those two objects . . ." (*Willa Cather in Person* 24). She concludes, "The audience I try to write for is the one interested in the effect the green vase brings out in the orange, and the orange in the green vase" (24). Here is a vision of the novelist's craft as *rearrangement* and *effect* expounded in painterly terms that everyone seems to remember.

Cather might have made the same point with newspapers. Growing up in late nineteenth-century Nebraska, she saw the power of rearrangement and effect every week in the pages of A. C. Hosmer's *Red Cloud Chief* and George J. Warren's *Webster County Argus*. The *Chief* offered a full page entitled "City News," the *Argus* a full page called "The Local Department." Over the years, the headers changed, but the work remained the same. Dozens of diverse stories, some new, some extensions of the old, many echoing each other, were dropped into columns like so many oranges and vases. Week after week, the editors paid cursory attention to the effect of certain juxtapositions while allowing chance to produce most of the effects, some of them quite startling.

Consider, for instance, the 20 March 1885 edition of the *Chief*. Arranging a few of the stories in their columns will help to demonstrate the side-by-sidedness of this remarkable page of "City News."

<p>1 C. Wiener in Chicago</p>	<p>3 Need for electric lights</p>		<p>8 Lynching at Spring Ranch</p>	
	<p>4 Bridge repair proceeding</p>	<p>7 Sociable at Dr. Tulley's</p>	<p>9 Cooking Club banquet</p>	
<p>2 Delmonico restaurant opening</p>	<p>5 High school students give entertainment</p> <p>6 Complaining about express office</p>			<p>10 Part of G.P. Cather's timber claim burns in prairie fire</p> <p>11 Catherston literary closes</p>



**Bosford & Young**  
Are receiving orders for new  
from Chicago

**Plymouth Rock**  
**FOWLS.**  
Write for catalogue containing 12500  
one for each of the following:

**THE RED CLOUD CHIEF**  
A. G. NORMER, Proprietor  
FRIDAY, MARCH 20, 1885.

**A Good Bargain.**  
A lot of fine goods in a growing  
market at a low price. A lot of fine  
goods in a growing market at a low  
price. A lot of fine goods in a growing  
market at a low price.

**CITY NEWS.**  
A. G. Norman, who has been in the  
city for some time, has been in the  
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**RECOGNITION AT COTTAGE.**  
JAMES HENNINGSON died on Sat-  
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Miss D. M. HENNINGSON is in the  
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**ALL SORTS.**  
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Many readers probably began with the news about Mr. Wiener because it appears at the top of the column on the far left, but other readers' eyes rushed to Cather's timber claim because they recognized the name and feared the worst. And somewhere at the heart of this reading, the sociable, lynching, and banquet aggregation must have conjured up a peculiar effect. If one could prove that Hosmer intended some sort of social commentary on Nebraska life by the last juxtaposition, we might call this side-by-sidedness a strategy. Instead, it would be more accurate to think of it as a matrix of memory, a quotidian way of thinking about life in Nebraska that the author shared with the people of Webster County.

For Cather, it was also a matrix of personal discovery. In May, 1885, Cather must have searched these columns for her own name, eventually finding lavish praise for her performance in *Hiawatha* (Woodress 57). That summer the *Chief* announced the upcoming Baptist "lawn sociable" where "Miss Willie Cather, the child elocutionist, will give recitations" (24 July 1885: 5). In an adjoining column, she may have glanced at the notice of a sociable hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Kenney: "The house and grounds will be illuminated, and ice cream, cake, sandwiches and

lemonade will be served. Good music by local talent will be one of the features of the evening. All are cordially invited" (5). The effect of the juxtaposition had to be profound. Red Cloud was a vibrant community of food, drink, and entertainment. Against this backdrop, talent could shine. Indeed, talent flickered as an effect of juxtapositions. And Willie Cather was shining.

Perhaps because Cather first tasted fame through columnar juxtaposition, she took up the craft when she got the opportunity. By the autumn of 1888, she was writing a section called "High School Items" for the local papers. Cather reported on enrollment, student activities, and staffing changes. When occasion suited, she chastised. In the 24 January 1889 edition of the *Argus*, Cather noted: "A number of our pupils have formed a skating club which caused the absence of several large boys last Friday afternoon" (8). Cather liked to sign her columns "Willa Cather, Editor." Then, during the summer of 1889, in the midst of a vicious town

feud, Cather's father and Dr. McKeeby entered the newspaper business, taking over the upstart *Republican*. Willa, it seems, assumed many of the day-to-day duties (*Willa Cather in Person* 2; Bennett 24-25). Years before she began to write professionally for newspapers and magazines, Cather was thinking, writing, and arranging in columns.

From time to time, the mature Cather referred to herself as a "reporter" in fiction, but a careful examination of Cather's approach in "The Hired Girls" reveals the hand of an editor at work on pages that echo both the content and form of "The City News" and "Local Department." In order to scrutinize this phenomenon, I want to focus a series of local newspaper themes that Cather clearly invokes as she writes about Black Hawk in *My Ántonia*.

**Town People.** Jim Burden begins "The Hired Girls" with a

simple story of departure and arrival: "I had been living with my grandfather for nearly three years when he decided to move to Black Hawk" (139). Hosmer and Warren would have been delighted to share this kind of news with their readers, simply adding their own best wishes for success. Such items would have fallen into place amid dozens of other stories that chronicled the goings-on of Red Cloud and often included a few reflections about the nature



*Red Cloud's Miner house: as the Harling house in My Ántonia, "a veritable bastion of all things normal and good regularly celebrated by the Black Hawk newspapers." Seen here in the 19 January 1906 Red Cloud Chief.*

of life in a country town. In fact, the editors were particularly interested in documenting the positive impact of the town on its inhabitants.

Cather follows suit. "We came to Black Hawk in March," Jim explains, "and by the end of April we felt like town people. Grandfather was a deacon in the new Baptist Church, grandmother was busy with church suppers and missionary societies . . ." (141). Cather makes the family's transition concrete with a list of institutional activities that were documented—in far greater detail—every week in the Red Cloud newspapers.<sup>3</sup> But the author of "The Novel Demeuble" had no need to rehearse such details in the manner of Balzac. A glance at the newspapers of the time suggests what she had in mind with her succinct account of how Jim's grandparents turned into "town people." Such transformations happened when people participated in those activities the newspapers chose to report.

(Perhaps Cather recalled her own coming out party as a child elocutionist?) Indeed, from the local editor's vantage point, the transformation was an effect communicated through the juxtaposition of many little stories.

**Boy Life.** When Jim remembers his own transformation, he announces a theme named by Hamlin Garland and dear to the hearts of Red Cloud newspaper editors: boy life. Jim explains, ". . . I was quite another boy, or thought I was. Suddenly put down among boys of my own age, I found I had a great deal to learn. Before the spring term of school was over I could fight, play 'keeps,' tease the little girls, and use forbidden words as well as any boy in my class" (141). Fighting, playing keeps, teasing girls, and swearing constitute Jim's "education."

Casual readers of *My Ántonia* probably think they know what Jim means when he says that he barely escaped the "utter savagery" of Black Hawk boyhood, but a return to Red Cloud newspapers suggests that we should not take Jim's metamorphosis for granted (141). A. J. Kenney, the founder of the *Argus*, established boy life as reportorial convention in Red Cloud. In a 29 September 1881 piece for the *Argus* titled "Bully Boy," he advised, "Some of the great men have been dull boys. Dryden and Swift were dull as boys" (3). On 20 October 1881, he opined: "The natural history of a boy is an interesting study" (4). It was an apt premise for a newspaper that, during Cather's youth in Red Cloud, published one story after another about the doings of town boys.

During Cather's memorable summer of 1885, Red Cloud "urchins" were particularly busy. One group, according to the 12 June *Chief*, found a human skeleton; others, according to the 27 August *Argus*, were gathering wild grapes and selling them (5). Later that summer, on 10 July, the *Chief* reported that a group of young boys "got into a rumpus with Herman Birkner and beat him shamefully" (5). Other items on the page described the Fourth of July celebration and called for street lamps. The 17 July *Chief*, across from a story about Guide Rock "base ballists," complained, "Some impecunious kids took the stove pipe off the county bastille on Monday evening, and treated it with a bath in the lucid waters of Crooked Creek" (5). The next summer, Editor Warren lost his patience in the 12 August edition of the *Argus* when he demanded that youthful melon thieves receive "a sound horse whipping" (8). Finally, on 21 March 1890, Hosmer was prepared to denounce "Red Cloud boys" who "roam the streets after night, free to see all the bad there may be, and free to form habits of evil" (4). While the editors of the Red Cloud newspapers liked to romanticize boyhood, they were also kept busy reporting and condemning all sorts of mayhem, misdemeanors, and incipient "evil." It seems clear that boys in

Red Cloud represented a cherished and, at times, disturbing liminality that people liked to read about. In formal terms, boy life stories were splashes of color, "yellow oranges" dropped on a table of newsprint.

In *My Ántonia*, Cather demurs. Contrasted with the real "savagery" of Red Cloud boys, Jim's playing keeps and teasing girls seems decidedly tame and decidedly *story-less*. As the section unfolds, Jim seems like a boy without a life. Nor does the situation change. As Judith Fetterley puts it in her compelling discussion of Cather as a lesbian writer, "we have seen no part of this boys' world. Instead, we have seen Jim hanging out at the Harlings, participating in female-centered family life . . ." (141). If we think of Jim as Cather's alter ego, we may suppose that she could not recompose a past she never had.

Just as fascinating, however, is the not incompatible notion that the mature novelist never stopped being the editor of "High School Items," the editor who snidely condemned the "large boys" who skipped school for skating club. Perhaps because the teenaged Cather shared Warren's sense of decorum in the 1880s, the mature Cather could not imagine a truly liminal boyhood for Jim. Nor could she use stories of boy life as yellow oranges in her fiction. Cather, to put it simply, was not writing "The Boys of Black Hawk."

**The Country Wife.** But something extraordinary happened when the writer turned her attention to females in Black Hawk. In Chapter four, Lena Lingard interrupts the autumnal bliss of the Harling's house. Temporarily, Lena displaces Ántonia as the "vase" in the novel. "She looked demure and pretty," Jim explains, "and made a graceful picture . . ." (154). Jim begins to recollect her hard life growing up "in the Norwegian settlement west of Squaw Creek" (159). Thanks to the clumsy attentions of Ole Benson and the jealousy of his wife, "Crazy Mary," Lena had been "talked about" (160). Jim proceeds to tell how Ole watched cattle with Lena, how Mary had returned from the asylum, and how Mary had attacked Lena on several occasions. All the while, Lena, "brushed and smoothed and dressed like a town girl," stands at the center of the chapter like a picture (155).

Returning to "The Local Department" pages, the reader searches in vain for stories about young women like Lena, but other women do take their place in the columns. References to the wives of prominent citizens abound, usually in connection with some social function. Stories about girls, of a certain social class, who distinguish themselves through skills like elocution, music, and college acceptances also appear. Occasionally, a woman found her way into "The Local Department" through other activities. On 13 August 1885, across from an item about Dr. McKeeby's "elegant phaeton" and an account of the



Fireman's Ball, the *Argus* reported that Mrs. Ole Hansen had been taken to the asylum: "Her mania seemed to be jealousy of her husband" (3). That Cather's story of Ole and Mary has its roots in the real life of Red Cloud is interesting, but it is the author's manipulation of the material, revealed through the comparison, that proves most fascinating. Although we have good reason to study Cather in a feminist tradition, her use of Mrs. Ole Hansen's story has more in common with the newspaper editor's craft than it does with the feminist critique of, say, Virginia Woolf. Like Warren, Cather has no interest in exploring either the wife's perspective or the idea of female "mania." Instead, the wife's story is inserted on a page devoted to a number of stories about the quotidian pleasures of life in a country town. It is an orange, piquing the reader's interest with news of aberrant behavior, a happening.

Cather takes up the challenge, setting the wife's stories against the "picture" of Lena. When Crazy Mary attacks Lena at church, Jim focuses our attention on Lena who "only laughed her lazy, good-natured laugh" (163). When the mad wife chases her across the prairie, Lena has to hide. But she remains "calm" (163). When Mrs. Shimerda blames Lena for Ole's behavior, Lena tells her flatly: "I never made anything to him with my eyes" (164). Set side-by-side with Mary's abject and oblique madness, Lena's calm intelligence glows like a picture. The effect is modern, journalistic, and quite different from anything Hosmer and Warren would have contemplated for their columns.

**Tramp Life.** In a curious twist, *Ántonia* takes center stage when she tells her story of the tramp who threw himself into the threshing machine: "One evening when we were picking out kernels for walnut taffy, Tony told us a new story" (171). The shift in Cather's method is subtle. Up until now, the circulation of stories over Webster County has shimmered in the background, but this scene allows us to gauge the difference between reporting and storytelling.

Red Cloud newspaper editors relished stories about tramps. On 1 May 1879, the *Chief* reported that a man traveling from Kansas "was assaulted by two German tramps and killed for his money and team" (4). In the 8 January 1885 edition of the *Argus*, across from a lament over the lack of fresh oysters, Warren tells the story of the tramp who "fell into the hands of an exasperated mob, was hung to a wind mill and cut down by the sheriff after he was pronounced dead by his self constituted executioners, but subsequently brought to life again by the aid of medical skill" (3). On 12 June 1885, just across from the story about boys finding a skeleton, the *Chief* told of four tramps who tried and failed to hitch a ride on a passing train:

"While the train was being switched in the Red Cloud yard, the ties became loosened and slid together, shaking up the 'bums' in a promiscuous manner and severely jamming the head of one of their number between two ties, nearly severing the tie that binds him to this mundane sphere" (5). On 29 January 1886, below a reminder about Valentine's Day, the *Chief* reported that tramps had broken into the house of A. J. Kenney, the former editor of the *Argus*, while the family was away on a trip (7). To editors who filled many a column with stories of euchre tournaments and ice cream socials, tramps were thrilling news. They conjured up a palpable yet mysterious threat to the community. Instead of sympathy, the editors either preached punishment or indulged in mockery.

Setting *Ántonia*'s tramp story against these real-life examples helps to highlight Cather's strategy of recomposing. Like the items in the "The Local Department," *Ántonia*'s story achieves oblique effects by being set side-by-side with other stories. In Cather's novel, the story of the tramp is juxtaposed with Jim's fond memories of bright winter nights with the Harlings. Readers of Cather's novel may feel some pity for the tramp, but we are probably moved more by the hospitality of the warm home and by *Ántonia* remembering Mr. Shimerda's suicide as she tells her story.

At the same time, Cather takes pains to distinguish *Ántonia* from a mere reporter. Perhaps, as Paula Woolley claims, the novel "is as much the story of *Ántonia*'s development as an artist as it is the story of Jim's vision of her" (150). If this is true, then we should pay particular attention to the way Cather's narrator describes *Ántonia*'s art. Remembering this occasion, Jim explains: "Her voice had a peculiarly engaging quality; it was deep, a little husky, and one always heard the breath vibrating behind it. Everything she said seemed to come right out of her heart" (171). In this passage, the former child elocutionist seems to be sketching a poetics of orality. *Ántonia*'s oral performance transcends mere reporting with a sincerity that no writer could duplicate. *Ántonia* is an artist in her own right.

But newspapers still matter. *Ántonia*'s auditors proceed to explore the macabre details: "Was he clear dead, Tony?" (173). They puzzle over the fact that the tramp carried nothing more than a penknife, a chicken's wishbone, and poetry. Jim remembers, "Some poetry?' we exclaimed" (173). Frances recalls, "It was a copy of 'The Old Oaken Bucket,' cut out of a newspaper and nearly worn out" (173). It would seem that everyone in Nebraska, even lonely tramps, used to cling to newspaper clippings, reading and juxtaposing the columns that seemed to encapsulate their lives.







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be pleased to show you our styles**

**C. WIENER, Prop.**  
Red Cloud and Wymore.

## ARE YOU GOING TO SCHOOL?

### The Red Cloud Chief.

C. HOSMER, Proprietor

School closes at Cutting's.  
Mrs. Linton is building a new barn.  
J. T. Clark, of Albia, is in the city.  
E. H. Baker, of Omaha, is doing the city.

Postmaster Shelby, of Kansas City is in the city.

The largest 100¢ table in the world at Cutting's.

L. C. Hoff, of Council Bluffs, was on our street Tuesday.

A. Galsha left Saturday night for Seward, Nebraska.

C. L. Eaton, of Bostwick, Neb., is doing business in the city.

The horse dealers on the streets Saturday reported having two horses stolen.

R. L. Ayres has a curiosity in the shape of a calf that was born without any hair.

The sheriff having possession of the Chicago Store, commenced invoicing Tuesday morning.

C. F. Miller, who has been clerk at the First House, has resigned and taken a position as clerk in Harber & Parker's grocery store.

The democratic flambeau club covered itself with glory Friday night. The boys looked nice and the fireworks part of it were certainly nice.

The water works will soon be in possession of crooked creek water. The tiling is being rapidly laid and the flow will be finished in a few

school weeks at Cuttings.  
J. P. Pasney, of Horton, is in the city.

G. W. Barker is in Lincoln on business.

R. V. Shiny and L. H. Wallace are in Lincoln.

A. Mortson and wife are spending a few days in Omaha.

The state republican delegation left for Lincoln Wednesday morning.

Mr. D. M. Platt and wife have returned home from their eastern visit.

J. M. Griffiths, National Bank examiner, is in the city today looking through our banks.

Mrs. Henderson and family, who have been visiting at K. Steers, have returned to Womer, Kansas.

The Union Labor party will hold a barbecue and basket picnic on the 11th of September in this city.

There is talk that work will soon commence on the Nebraska Southern. We hope so. Red Cloud must be up and doing at once if she expects to do anything.

The Emporia, Kan., Republican puts it in this style:  
Blaine runs the engine.

Mortie rings the bell.

Harrison goes to the White House.

And Cleveland goes to Buffalo.

Tuesday afternoon Chasley Gurney's barn caught fire in some manner and before help could be secured it burned to the ground, along with sheds, etc., making quite a serious loss to Mr. G. The smoke could be seen from the city very plainly.

### WILLIAM COLE.

The Colport Who Shot Grant at Golden Rock Hung to the R. & N. Railroad Bridge This Morning by citizens of This Place.

Game Rock, Neb., Aug. 20th.

Wm. Cole, alias Billy Bowlegs, a sort of would be cowboy, on Saturday morning at the hour of 1:30, fired into a crowd of men who had just come out of the hall at Golden Rock where a dance was being held, wounding Charles E. Grant, mortally as they supposed, but who may yet recover and Wm. Montgomery slightly.

Cole was captured a few hours later, and talk of hanging him was indulged.

He was locked up, however, and suffered a miserable existence until Sunday night, when a few persons whose names are unknown took him to the railroad bridge near town and swung him off into the other state of existence, at least presumably so.

At any rate Billy Bowlegs is no more, and Coroner Schenck is sitting upon all that remains of the once reckless and perhaps neglected boy. Of course the world is better off without such characters as Cole, and yet the means employed to rid the community of such people is questionable at least.

Rex Burbank spent an hour with Cole in prayer, and Cole felt deeply concerned for his spiritual welfare, and asked the minister to see that he should have a decent burial, and expressed a hope of a better and happier existence. What Cole's motives were for firing the fire shots from his

### The Republican County Convention.

The republican county convention met in the court house this afternoon and selected A. M. Walters chairman and D. F. Trunkley secretary.

On motion I. R. Hampton was nominated county representative.

John R. Wilson was nominated for county attorney.

John S. Hoover, of Blue Hill, was endorsed for state senator and allowed to select the delegates.

A. J. Kenney was endorsed for state representative and allowed to select delegates.

G. R. Chaney was endorsed for attorney general and allowed to select delegates.

The most exciting thing that took place in the convention was the unseating of the Wabous Creek delegation and seating another. It seems that a portion of the caucus withdrew from the place of election and nominated another delegation, while a number stayed inside the school house and went through the regular form. However the outside delegation seemed to be tainted with democracy and had to be ousted. After the routine work was over Col. Hoover selected his delegates to the senators' district convention, the names of which are: G. E. McKeedy, J. McNeny, G. Newsham, Isaac Fish, W. A. Arnold, C. F. Cather, W. G. Gamber, S. B. Wells, F. A. Sweeney.

G. R. Chaney was selected delegates favorable to him for the state convention as follows: J. McNeny, J. M. Chapin, D. P. Newsome, L. O. Moore, R. V. Shiny, L. R. Althoff.

August 1888: Mr. Wiener again shares the page with town news. And William Cole, alias Billy Bowlegs, meets a sordid end.

**Country Town Performers.** When Jim Burden remembers life in Black Hawk, he recalls the long winter, the drab month of March, and the excitement when Blind d'Arnault came to town. The pianist's performance is the "only break in the dreary monotony of that month" (175). The phrase is telling because the story of Blind d'Arnault's appearance is also a break in Cather's compositional strategy. Up until this point in the section, the novelist has dipped into collective memory for accents, here and there. But in this scene, Jim remembers being a part of Black Hawk "performance culture."

Although they would not recognize my terminology, Hosmer and Warren certainly did their best to tout recitals, high school concerts, and amateur theatricals. Visiting performers were announced weeks ahead of time. Positive reviews of their performances in other papers were published. Detailed reviews of Red Cloud performances always followed. The effect of all

these juxtaposed stories was obvious: Red Cloud was a country mecca for performers and performances.

In the midst of all this reporting, a few visiting performers stand out. For instance, every reader during the 1880s would have remembered the performances of John William Boone. On 8 October 1886, the *Argus* reported: "Blind Boone the musical prodigy, played to a crowded house Tuesday evening. Those who failed to be present missed a rare musical treat" (8). On 3 January, 1889, the newspaper was actively promoting an upcoming concert: "As a musician he is truly a wonder and to miss hearing him will be a matter of regret" (7). For Warren, Boone's appearances were all about wonder and regret. A country town newspaper, by definition, had to motivate its readers to come to town, spend money, and widen their horizons. Warren was always thinking in terms of civic opportunities.



Set against this backdrop, Jim Burden's memories of Blind d'Arnault are striking. Inspired by so many Red Cloud memories, the novelist could easily have stitched an opera house concert into her narrative, but she changed the setting to the Boys' Home, Black Hawk's "comfortable hotel" that looks a lot like the old Boys' Home of Red Cloud.<sup>4</sup> Jim tells a story of stealth, how he "ran downtown to the hotel and slipped quietly into the parlor" (176). He remarks the "atmosphere of unusual freedom" (176). This recollection merges seamlessly with another story of boyhood—the story of how d'Arnault discovered the piano by slipping into the parlor of the plantation house. Once there, in the narrator's words, d'Arnault "found his way to the Thing, to its mouth. He touched it softly, and it answered softly, kindly" (181). Set side by side, the stories imply that "boys" instinctually seek out performance even though the world inevitably resists. The novelist understood that there was nothing terribly original in this romantic notion. What makes Cather's version special, however, is the way she brings the romantic archetype to life by redeploying the principles of prairie newspapering.

Because she moves the Blind d'Arnault concert to the Boys' Home, the novelist can transpose her theme in a series of stories about dance. In "The Hired Girls," Cather's stories of piano playing begin at the Harlings' house, a veritable bastion of all things normal and good regularly celebrated by the Black Hawk newspapers. With Mrs. Harling playing the instrument, Frances teaches Jim and the others to dance (169). When Blind d'Arnault comes to town, Mrs. Harling echoes the editor of the Red Cloud *Argus*: "She told Antonia she had better go to see Tiny that Saturday evening, as there would certainly be music at the Boys' Home" (176). Jim remembers the pianist playing "a crashing waltz" that suddenly turns soft. D'Arnault says, "'Somebody dancing in there'" (183). Tiny, Lena, Antonia, and Mary Dusak have been secretly waltzing at the gentlemen's private performance. The men coax the young women out to dance, and Jim remembers seeing "in their eyes that brilliancy which is called—by no metaphor, alas!—'the light of youth'" (186). "Side by side," as Cather would put it, the stories of music and dance at the Harlings' house and at the Boys' Home "produce a reaction which neither of them will produce alone." The stories whisper of the transgression implicit in performance and ambiguously endorsed by Black Hawk citizens.

**Graduations.** As Cather did in Red Cloud, Jim delivers a speech at his graduation. He congratulates himself: "I thought my oration very good" (222). And he remembers the moment at the Opera House, how he looked at Mrs. Harling: "Her keen, intelligent eyes never left my face" (222).

Stories of youthful accomplishment were a staple in the Red Cloud newspapers, which always made a point of noting the

progressive nature of the community. In June 1890, the *Chief* added a particular spin to its report: "Miss Willa Cather treated the audience to a fine oration on 'Superstition vs. Investigation' which was a masterpiece of oratory." The story goes on to analyze Cather's speech before concluding, "Her line of thought was well carved out and a great surprise to her many friends."<sup>5</sup> The newspaper that had once announced the performances of the "elocutionist" recognized an obvious fruition.

When Cather transformed her own memories of graduation into Jim Burden's memories, she (consciously or not) drew upon the newspaper account. Mrs. Harling tells him: "'You surprised me, Jim'" (222). Then Antonia, a fine speaker in her own right, repeats the praise. She calls the oration "splendid" (222). Then she tells of meeting Jim's grandfather: "'He won't tell you, but he told us he was awful surprised himself, did n't he, girls?'" (223). Mrs. Harling and Jim's grandfather effectively "quote" the *Chief* with their "surprise." By putting praise and surprise in Antonia's mouth, Cather transforms the Red Cloud newspaper notice into an intimate moment of self-discovery for Jim that just happens to echo her own past triumph. The old story of community surprise becomes a personal memento, a priceless effect of the author's re-composition.

**Picnics.** In the novel, Jim remembers meeting Antonia and her friends in town on a Saturday. Antonia says, "'Anna's to drive us down [to the river] in the Marshall's delivery wagon, and we'll take a nice lunch and have a picnic. Just us; nobody else. Could n't you happen along, Jim? It would be like old times'" (225). At first glance, the invitation sounds utterly conventional.

Red Cloud newspapers reported church picnics, school picnics, and holiday picnics. They touted the first picnic of the season and the last. They described the annual Old Settlers' Picnics and the annual Ohio Picnic in Lincoln. A little story from the 20 May 1886 *Argus* is typical of the editorial approach: "The first picnic of the season is being held this afternoon by a number of young folks on Crooked Creek" (8). A longer story from the 30 August 1883 *Argus* describes the particular pleasures of a country picnic: "The day was pleasant and the drive was delightful. Late in the afternoon tables were spread with all the delicacies of the season, to which a hungry crowd of village picnickers did ample justice. The young folks tarried during the evening to trip the light fantastic" (4). Set side-by-side with stories of mercantile change, political dispute, births and deaths, picnic tales emphasize youthful pleasure that resists the passage of time. The natural rhythms of the good life appear as an effect on the newspaper page.

In Cather's novel, Jim Burden is entering, once again, a newspaper genre, but this is no ordinary story of a picnic in Nebraska. The "just us" suggests a special intimacy as the narrator

remembers remembering. The “young folks” ponder their families’ pasts on the prairie, and the story ends in amazement rather than revelry: “Presently we saw a curious thing” (237). The magnified plough, the trick of light that Jim describes as “a picture writing on the sun,” surprises the picnickers with a kind of occurrence that Hosmer and Warren would have reported had they heard the story. Unlike the Red Cloud editors, Cather has taken pains to juxtapose the happenstance with the young folks’ stories of the past. This fictional side-by-sidedness engenders an elegiac mood tinged with irony. The plough is “our vision” (237). Then, in an instant, it sinks “back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie” (238). Thanks to this juxtaposition, the quotidian newspaper genre is reborn as something wonderful. Like Yorick’s skull in *Hamlet*, the plough in *My Ántonia* has come to stand for the classic text, a synecdoche that seems to capture the essence of the work, a defining mood that early modern writers called *mutability*.

Toward the end of “The Hired Girls,” Cather’s narrator seems less interested in a powerful dénouement than in working out some sort of rapprochement with the “City News” and “The Local Department.” Tried and true reportorial genres for Hosmer and Warren, stories of graduations and picnics assured readers that life in a country town was simple, ordered, and full of seasonal satisfactions. Cather knew these generic expectations well. She had been reading such stories for nearly forty years. In *My Ántonia*, she seems to have recomposed these humble forms in order to produce a series of effects that feel like redemption and closure.

Individual newspaper stories may be ephemeral, but in forms like “City News” and “The Local Department,” appearing week after week, year after year, they endure. Because people clip these stories, share and archive them, they achieve a timelessness that has less to do with truth than it does with collective memory experienced as a series of effects. Throughout her long life, Cather was always reading, clipping, and recomposing stories from Nebraska.

#### NOTES

1. Bernice Slote, *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather’s First Principles and Critical Statements* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1966), 3-5; Sharon O’Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1987), 125; James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987), 89; M. Catherine Downs’ *Becoming Modern: Willa Cather’s Journalism* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna UP, 1999); Janis P. Stout, *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* (Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 2000), 34; David Porter, *On the Divide: The Many Lives of Willa Cather* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2010), 8.

2. For discussions of this creative process, see Kari Ronning, “Behind Obscurity: Real People in *Obscure Destinies*,” *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review* 48.2 (2004), 29; Richard C. Harris, “Historical Essay.” *One of Ours*, ed. Richard C. Harris (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2006), 613-75; Andrew Jewell, “Cather Archive: Publishing Cather’s Early Journalism,” *Mowers’ Tree: The Newsletter of the Cather Colloquium* (January 2006), 10; Timothy W. Bintrim and Mark J. Madigan, “From Larceny to Suicide: The Denny Case and ‘Paul’s Case,’” *Violence, the Arts, and Willa Cather* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2007), 109-123.

3. For examples of stories about Baptist church activities during Cather’s youth, see the *Argus*: (6 August 1885), 3; (31 March 1887), 8. See the *Chief*: (17 April 1885), 5; (18 September 1885), 5.

4. For more on the hotel’s history, see John March, Marilyn Arnold, with Debra Lynn Thornton, *A Reader’s Companion to the Fiction of Willa Cather*, Westport: Greenwood, 1993), 87.

5. Qtd. in March, Arnold, Thornton, *A Reader’s Companion to the Fiction of Willa Cather*, 549.

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# Beulah Land: Re-Considering the Ending of *O Pioneers!*

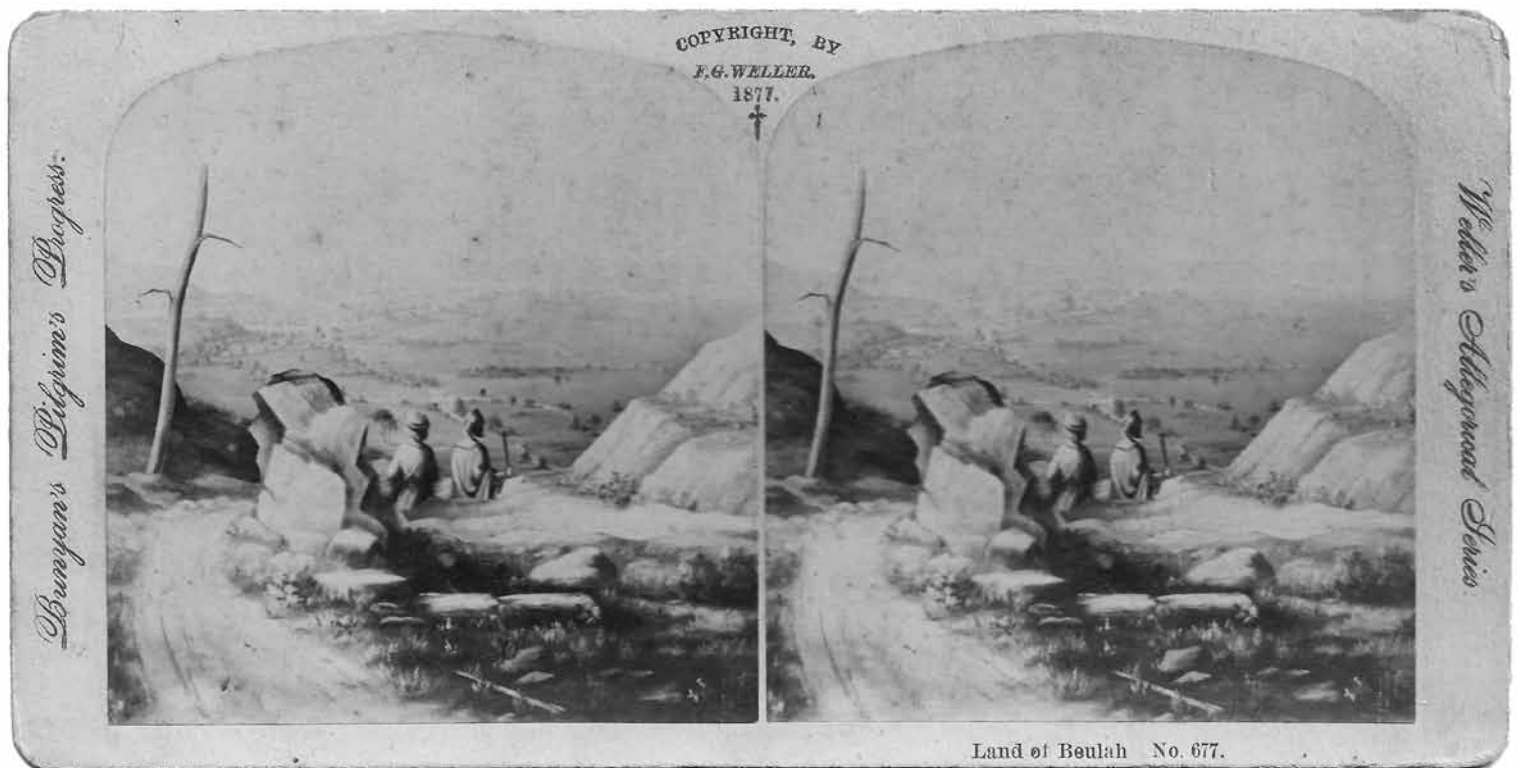
Steven B. Shively | Utah State University

Readers are often troubled by the marriage of Carl Linstrum and Alexandra Bergson that comes at the end of *O Pioneers!*, usually complaining either that the marriage is too contrived and too conventional as a plot device or that it won't be much of a marriage, lacking sex and passion, little more than a comfortable, convenient arrangement between old friends who happen to be particularly needy. I propose to reexamine the marriage of Carl and Alexandra, partly as a literal element of the narrative, but primarily as a spiritually centered, symbolic, metaphorical representation of mystical transformation and unity. The marriage becomes one of what Susan Rosowski has called "the revelations of perfect harmony in nature at the thematic center of [*O Pioneers!*]" (47). Cather draws on notions of marriage that are common in biblical and other religious texts, notions she and many others came to first in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and which cloak marriage with the religious and spiritual function of representing a supreme state of restoration.

In the bible, and in much religious literature and art, marriage is a highly symbolic act: to the Old Testament prophet Isaiah it symbolizes the highest level of unity between God

and the people, and it represents God's promise to restore the people to their land; in the New Testament marriage becomes a metaphor expressing the mystical union between Christ and the church. The most telling reference is Isaiah 62:4, taken here from the King James Version, which Cather preferred: the prophet gives assurance to the people by promising that "thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken, neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah; for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married." The marriage theme continues in Verse 5: "as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee."

"Beulah" is the King James translators' representation of the Hebrew word for "married" (the later Revised Standard Version substitutes "Married" for "Beulah") and its use here clearly establishes marriage as a magical state of delight that overcomes desolation. ("Hephzibah" translates in the RSV as "my delight is in her.") *The Interpreter's Bible* explains the transformation: "the names which best described Zion's past existence are 'Forsaken' and 'Desolate,' but these old names will give place to new, 'My



"Heaven's border land": Beulah Land as depicted in an 1877 set of 12 stereoviews of scenes from *Pilgrim's Progress*; published by F. G. Weller in Littleton, New Hampshire.



Delight is in her' and 'Married'" (719). In the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, Isaiah's promise not only forecasts a happy future, but it also binds together a triad of God, the people (the Chosen People), and land (the Promised Land). *The Interpreter's Bible* notes that "the close relationship between people and land is to be observed" (719). The marriage between Carl and Alexandra, which marks a movement from desolation to delight, will also include the land; Carl acknowledges that Alexandra's tie to her land will be at least as strong as her ties to him: "You belong to the land, as you have always said. Now more than ever" (272). Alexandra's delivery from her tiredness after the deaths of Emil and Marie, from her bleak outlook, from her "disgust of life" (264)—a delivery that comes with the arrival of Carl and the quick promise of marriage—reflects the movement in the Isaiah passage from Forsakenness and Desolation to delight, health, and marriage.

The use of the word "Beulah" to represent a particularly mystical form of marriage was well-known at the turn of the century. Cather undoubtedly knew the gospel hymn "Beulah Land," which was popular in both her native Virginia and in Nebraska and which draws its imagery, language, and themes from *Pilgrim's Progress*:

I've reached the land of corn and wine,  
And all its riches freely mine;  
Here shines undimmed one blissful day,  
For all my night has passed away.

My Savior comes and walks with me,  
And sweet communion here have we;  
He gently leads me by His hand,  
For this is Heaven's border land.

A sweet perfume upon the breeze,  
Is borne from ever vernal trees,  
And flow'rs that never fading grow,  
Where streams of life forever flow.

The zephyrs seem to float to me,  
Sweet sounds to Heaven's melody,  
As angels with the ransomed throng  
Join in the sweet redemption song.

Refrain:  
O Beulah Land, sweet Beulah Land,  
As on thy highest mount I stand,  
I look away across the sea,  
Where mansions are prepared for me,  
And view the shining glory shore,  
My Heav'n, my home, forever more!



*Good-will opens the Wicket Gate for Christian. From a 1778 edition of Pilgrim's Progress.*

Indeed, the closing pages of *O Pioneers!* are replete with echoes of this hymn: the rich corn fields, the dark night that has passed away, Carl as an earthly savior who gently walks with Alexandra, the "forever" nature of the land, the Edenic setting, the breezes, and the anticipated sea voyage to Alaska. When Carl and Alexandra "[pause] on the last ridge of the pasture, overlooking the house and the windmill and the stables," they share the hymn's high vantage point, and Cather's next sentence is hymn-like in echoing the theme of earthly concerns passing away for a more heavenly state: "On every side the brown waves of the earth rolled away to meet the sky" (272).

The hymn continued what was already a tradition of allusions to Bunyan; long before it was composed in 1876,<sup>1</sup> several writers with whom Cather was familiar incorporated the Beulah language and connotations. William Blake scholar



Gerda S. Norvig notes that Blake used the word “Beulah” over 170 times in his long poems *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, commenting that “Blake honored Bunyan’s evocation of the biblical Beulah by incorporating the name and state it represented into his own extended mythography” (41-42, 246). Robert Louis Stevenson, whom Bernice Slotte calls one of Cather’s “old favorites” (36) and whose influence threads throughout the Cather canon, captures the sexual and marital aspects of Beulah in the “On Falling in Love” section of his gently humorous *Virginibus Puerisque*: “a young man may occasionally enter, with the key of art, into that land of Beulah which is upon the borders of Heaven and within sight of the City of Love” (56). More significantly, perhaps, for *O Pioneers!*, Stevenson mentions “the Beulah of considerate virtue” in his commentary on Walt Whitman (108). Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose influence on Cather was large, made Beulah the last stop in “The Celestial Railroad,” his ambitious satire on Bunyan, Transcendentalism, Unitarianism, and Puritanism. The experience of Hawthorne’s pilgrims is not improved despite their more modern mode of transportation, a railroad. The train “announced the close vicinity of the final station house by one last and horrible scream”; the “infernal uproar, . . . besides disturbing the peaceful inhabitants of Beulah, must have sent its discord even through the celestial gates” (200).

Long before she wrote *O Pioneers!* Cather herself alluded to Beulah in her writing. In a charming journalistic piece on children’s books she wrote for her “Books Old and New” column in the *Home Monthly*, Cather, referring to her siblings (and likely to herself as well), wrote, “I knew some dear little children once who literally wore out copy after copy of Bunyan’s blessed *Pilgrim*. . . . [T]hey even dramatized and played it, and went about the house with rolls and staffs in all seriousness, climbing over Hills of Difficulty, floundering through Sloughs of Despond, wandering by the pure waters of Beulah Land and viewing afar off Delectable Mountains . . .” (336-37). Beulah also appears in her 1893 short story “The Elopement of Allen Poole,” a Virginia-based story which, like *O Pioneers!*, combines furtive love with a violent death.<sup>2</sup> It is significant that Cather uses Beulah in a story where the main plot element is an anticipated marriage. As Allen waits for the appointed time for the elopement and contemplates his life, “his eyes wandered to where the Blue Ridge lay against the sky, faint and hazy as the mountains of Beulah Land” (574). “Allen Poole” contains a number of passages that anticipate *O Pioneers!*: Allen’s view of “the Blue Ridge” suggests “the last ridge” that is the vantage point for Carl and Alexandra (272), and the short story, like the novel, is replete with “fields of wheat and corn,” blooming trees and flowers, and “the repose and



*The pilgrim and his burden: on John Bunyan’s tomb in Bunhill Fields, London.*

strength of [the land’s] immortality” (574, 576). The works share an evocative graveyard, a woman who leans her cheek upon the breast of her lover dying of a gunshot wound, and a final meeting place beside a tree (a chestnut in “Allen Poole” and a white mulberry in *O Pioneers!*). In her journalism and in her fiction, Cather demonstrates her familiarity with both the marital and paradisiacal meanings of Beulah.

The varied and influential allusions to Beulah by Cather and others flow from the most well-known riff on the Isaiah passage, John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the Christian allegory that Cather knew from childhood and continued to admire all her life.<sup>3</sup> The land of Beulah is the last stop for Bunyan’s pilgrim, Christian, before he enters the Celestial City of Heaven. Beulah is within sight of heaven, a lush paradise where angels walk and all is beautiful, a restful stop after trial and tribulation. Christian and his guide Hopeful enter “the country of Beulah, whose air was very sweet and pleasant. . . . [H]ere they heard continually the

singing of birds and saw every day the flowers appear in the earth. . . . In this country the sun shineth night and day; wherefore this was beyond the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and also out of the reach of giant Despair” (159). Amidst his several borrowings from Isaiah, Bunyan explicitly connects Beulah to the celebration of marriage: “In this land also the contract between the Bride and Bridegroom was renewed: Yea here, as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride so did their god rejoice over them” (159).

It is difficult to overstate the importance of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* to Cather. Slote establishes the significance: “From the beginning, as if by inheritance, Willa Cather absorbed the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Their presence in her writing is constant, insistent, pervasive” (35). Before Cather could read, her Grandmother read these books to her, and Edith Lewis recalled that Cather claimed to have read *Pilgrim’s Progress* for herself eight times in one winter in Nebraska (Lewis 14). In a 1924 Introduction to Defoe’s *The Fortunate Mistress*, Cather wrote that *Pilgrim’s Progress* contains “scenes of the most satisfying kind; where little is said but much is felt and communicated” (79).

I am suggesting that the similarities between the final section of *O Pioneers!* and the Beulah section of *Pilgrim’s Progress* place the novel’s ending not in the tradition of 19<sup>th</sup> century sentimental fiction but in Western philosophical and religious traditions.<sup>4</sup> Cather creates parallels not only to the literal journey of Bunyan’s pilgrim Christian, but also to his allegorical representation of a larger group. The last section of Cather’s novel, titled “Alexandra,” mirrors a traditional biblical and Bunyanesque heroic pattern, whereby the faithful seek a straight and narrow path for the journey of life but repeatedly face trials and tribulations that they overcome through moral behavior and strong companions. As the section begins, Alexandra has fallen from grace. Her wealth is little compensation for her despair over the loss of both Emil and Marie, and she is estranged from her surviving brothers. Like Christian in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, who has passed through the Valley of the Shadow of Death and has faced Giant Despair, Alexandra is literally in the shadow of death, caught in a storm as she visits the graveyard where Emil now lies buried.

Some of her despair is cleansed by the rainstorm—a symbolic washing after which she reassures Ivar that the rain has been helpful: “Ivar, I think it has done me good to get cold clear through like this, once. I don’t believe I shall suffer so much any more. . . . After you once get cold clear through, the feeling of the rain on you is sweet” (249-50). Upon returning home, Alexandra is soothed by a warm fire and a biblically-allusive, ritual washing of her feet by her servant girl Signa. Nevertheless, she remains in a state of distress: “As she lay alone in the dark,

it occurred to her for the first time that perhaps she was actually tired of life. All the physical operations of life seemed difficult and painful” (251). Alexandra also suffers spiritually as “her heart grew hard. . . . What was left of life seemed unimportant” (254).

Alexandra continues the Christian pattern of redemption by acknowledging her own guilt, doing penance, and forgiving Frank Shabata for his crime. First, Alexandra admits her guilt to herself; “She often felt that she herself had been more to blame than poor Frank” (252). Then she visits Frank in prison, forgives him, and promises to work for his release. She tells him, “Frank . . . I hope you’ll let me be friendly with you. I understand how you did it. I don’t feel hard toward you. They were more to blame than you” (260). The trip to the prison has been difficult for Alexandra, as Christian’s pilgrimage has been difficult for him. She is horrified by the prison and by what it has done to Frank; she emerges with the realization that “she and Frank had been wrecked by the same storm and . . . she had not much more left in her life than he. . . . A disgust of life weighed upon her heart” (264).

Having walked the pilgrim’s path—her fall, her cleansing, her repentance—Alexandra, like Bunyan’s Christian, has thus been prepared to receive her reward. The parallels between Bunyan’s characterization of Beulah Land and Cather’s paradisiacal final scene are striking and suggest that Cather is invoking a broad historic and religious tradition of restoration and unity. Bunyan characterizes Beulah as a place of great “abundance,” with “no want of Corn and Wine,” a place teeming with life—singing birds, flowers, animals (159). Likewise, Cather surrounds Carl and Alexandra with images of abundance and beauty: “The sun was dropping low in the west when the two friends rose and took the path again. The straw-stacks were throwing long shadows, the owls were flying home. . . . Alexandra’s twelve young colts were galloping in a drove over the brow of the hill. . . . On every side the brown waves of the earth rolled away to meet the sky” (271). Like Bunyan, who draws on the power of the sun, Cather covers her final scene with the glow of the setting sun. Bunyan notes the “reflection of the sun upon [the Celestial] City” (160) and writes of the angels whose “faces shone as the light” (161); Cather draws on the language as well as the symbol of warmth and light: “the level rays of the sinking sun shone in [Alexandra’s] clear eyes” (273).<sup>5</sup> Cather’s religious allusions in *O Pioneers!* almost always suggest hope overcoming despair, mercy following judgment. In such a context, the reuniting of Carl and Alexandra, who come together after a long separation to take possession of their future in an atmosphere of pastoral peace and prosperity, of full fields of grain, newborn colts, and sunshine, is like the biblical representation of marriage—symbolic, larger than life, the highest representation of unity.



Cather's commentary on the ownership of the land lifts the possession of the land beyond the level of the individual; ownership is not so much what is recorded in the office of the county clerk as it is a matter of sympathy, something cosmic and mystical, irreducible to land titles. The idea is straight out of *Pilgrim's Progress*. In Beulah Land, the Pilgrims come to magnificent orchards and gardens and ask, "Whose goodly Vineyards and Gardens are these?" The answer is "they are the King's [that is, God's], and are planted here for his own delights, and also for the solace of Pilgrims" (160). Thus, the land will be there as long as God is there, and his gardens are for the use of Pilgrims, those who seek to do right and who struggle along the paths of Righteousness; at this point in their journey they have earned the delight and refreshment of the land's abundance. Alexandra echoes the notion of the eternal presence of the land as well as the idea of the land as a reward for those who are sympathetic and have demonstrated that they deserve it: "The land belongs to the future, Carl . . . I might as well try to will the sunset over there to my brothers' children. We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while" (272-73). In the context of *Pilgrim's Progress*, Alexandra's comments also suggest a decreasing interest in temporal matters and an increasing concern for that which is eternal, a concern that is heightened not only by the recent deaths of Amédée, Emil, and Marie, but also by the final lines of the novel, which forecast Alexandra's own death and symbolic resurrection as her life will be "give[n] out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" (274).

In *Pilgrim's Progress*, Beulah Land is a place near the end of life's journey, a place that offers a glimpse of Heaven, a place of refreshment and rest for pilgrims who have earned this reward, a place to tarry and sleep before crossing over into Heaven. Bunyan claims the metaphor of marriage for this place and its inhabitants. Cather draws on the same metaphor as she brings Carl and Alexandra from despair to their own place of comfort.

Alexandra, in fact, is not merely given solace, her desolation is not merely relieved with hope; she is transformed, certainly, but even more she is transfigured. Cather suggests a religious heightening of her very being as Carl looks at her in wonder: "in her face there was that exalted serenity that sometimes came to her at moments of deep feeling" (273). With this language, Cather lifts Alexandra into a state of exaltation that comes as no surprise; the entire novel has prepared readers for Alexandra's ultimate reward. Alexandra gives voice to her reward, using words that have religious as well as secular meaning: she says to Carl, "Do you feel at peace with the world here? I think we

shall be very happy. I haven't any fears. . . . We don't suffer like—those young ones" (273). Peace, happiness, lack of fear, lack of suffering—these are typically the religious pilgrim's rewards more than they are the rewards of the hard-working pioneer.

Cather borrows from Bunyan another image, easily overlooked, but which, in the context of these other allusions, affirms her message of spiritual restoration grounded in the traditions of historic religion. In *Pilgrim's Progress*, much is made of the gate to the Celestial City. This is not an open city which may be entered from many sides; there is a single way in, a gate the pilgrims must find and enter. The gate is accessible only through the land of symbolic marriage; the invitation is shouted by the Heavenly Host: "Blessed are they that are called to the Marriage Supper" (166). The gate is there for Carl and Alexandra also, repeated twice: "They walked toward the gate" and, one paragraph later, "They had reached the gate" (273). Cather anticipates the marriage when Carl embraces Alexandra and kisses her just before they pass through the gate together. In its symbolic meaning, marriage for Alexandra is a reward, yes, but it is also the doorway into paradise and eternity.

While I have focused on the ending of Cather's novel, its many allegorical suggestions affirm a reading that connects *O Pioneers!* and *Pilgrim's Progress*. Among the allegorical aspects that appear before the "Alexandra" section are the many paths Alexandra walks throughout the novel, her excursion to Ivar's homestead for advice, her journey to the river country and then back up to the Divide, the straightened roads and clearly delineated fields, the caricature-like and one-dimensional presentations of Lou and Oscar, Alexandra's dreams, and the white butterflies that flutter above the bodies of Emil and Marie.

Bunyan echoed the biblical book of Isaiah in the Beulah section of his book; as Cather uses the language and symbols of *Pilgrim's Progress*, she also calls readers to look to Isaiah. Alexandra is connected on a historic continuum back to Bunyan, to Christ, and to the ancient Chosen People of Israel. All of them travel through a wilderness that is both real and symbolic, and they all share the notion of marriage as a symbolic representation of the highest level of spiritual restoration. In addition, the prophet Isaiah affirms the covenant of God, the promise of the Lord to his people, and he undergirds that oath with "the arm of his strength" (62:8). The reference suggests the mystical god-like man who visits Alexandra in her recurring dreams, who lifts her up and carries her on the strength of his right arm, which is "dark and gleaming, like bronze" (251). Bunyan is drawing on both Isaiah and the book of the Bible that precedes Isaiah, the Song of Solomon.<sup>6</sup> I believe the Song of Solomon is likely one of the sources for Cather's language and imagery in describing





“... thou mayest see to the gate of the Celestial City”: Frederic Crowninshield’s 1899 sanctuary window in Boston’s Emmanuel Episcopal Church.

Alexandra’s dream. Consider these passages from the religious text: “His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me” (2:6), “My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away” (2:10). Cather borrows this sense of being lifted up and carried away, but even more she captures the rich sensuality of the lover in the Song of Solomon. Alexandra feels that he is “yellow like the sunlight, and [that] there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him. She could feel him approach, bend over her and lift her, and then she could feel herself being carried swiftly off across the fields” (186). He appears to her later in a “white cloak,” and “his shoulders seemed as strong as the foundations of the world” (251). The passage resonates the description of the biblical lover:

My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand. His head is as the most fine gold, his locks are bushy, and black as a raven. His eyes are as the eyes of doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, and fitly set. His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as sweet flowers: his lips like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh. His hands are as gold rings set with the beryl: his belly is as bright ivory overlaid with sapphires. His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold . . . His mouth is most sweet: yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem. (Song of Solomon 5:10-16)

My reading of this novel does not solve the marriage problem in Cather’s fiction. While the marriage of *Ántonia Shimerda Cuzak* fits the Beulah-tinged marriage of restoration and unity, most of Cather’s marriages do not. It seems likely that Cather’s views of marriage became more troubled as she observed dysfunctional marriages like those of Hattie and Sam McClure and of her own sister Jessica, and as marriage removed Isabelle McClung from her exalted place in Cather’s life.

Nevertheless, there is a rich allusive tradition of marriage and restoration, and Cather uses it. In the tradition of Isaiah and the Solomon poet, the New Testament Christ, church hymnody, and British and American literature, she takes ideas of love and marriage and represents them symbolically. She places her novel in a context which invites readers to consider the culminating marriage of *O Pioneers!*, along with the other allusions with which she ends the novel, as something more than a marriage, as the highest state of mystical, spiritual, and religious victory. Cather’s selection of Alexandra as her heroine, almost shockingly innovative in the specific context of the American West, is not so surprising when seen in the context of a broader historic tradition.

## NOTES

1. Edgar P. Stites, who wrote the lyrics, claimed he wrote the hymn in 1876. John R. Sweney, the composer, said the hymn was first performed in 1875.

2. The setting of “Allen Poole” in Cather’s childhood home in the Shenandoah Valley may also explain the allusion to Beulah. Mark A. R. Facknitz notes that Beulah has “long [been] a nickname for the Shenandoah region” (298).

3. In Cather’s last published novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Sapphira’s husband, the miller Henry Colbert, “found a comforter in John Bunyan, who also had been troubled” (68).

4. For a more complete study of the marriage plot in novels by American women, see Downs.



5. Bunyan and Cather may be using the common Christian pun on Christ as the son of God.

6. Most modern bibles label this book the Song of Songs; I use Song of Solomon because this was the choice of the King James translators.

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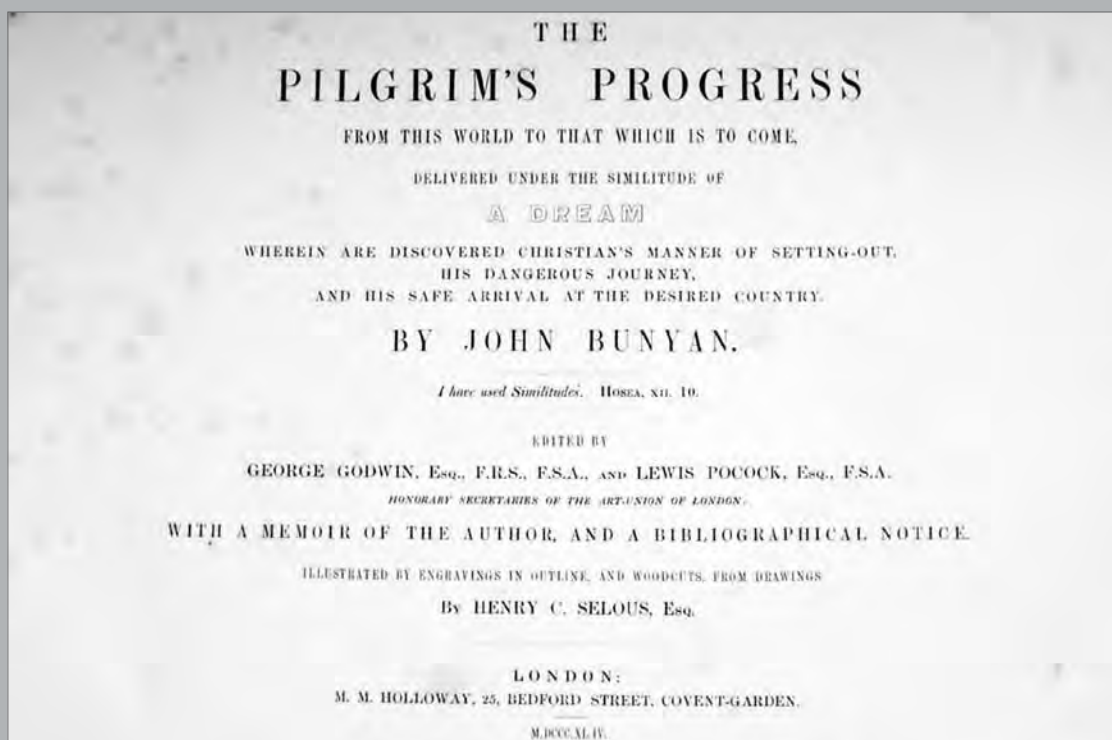
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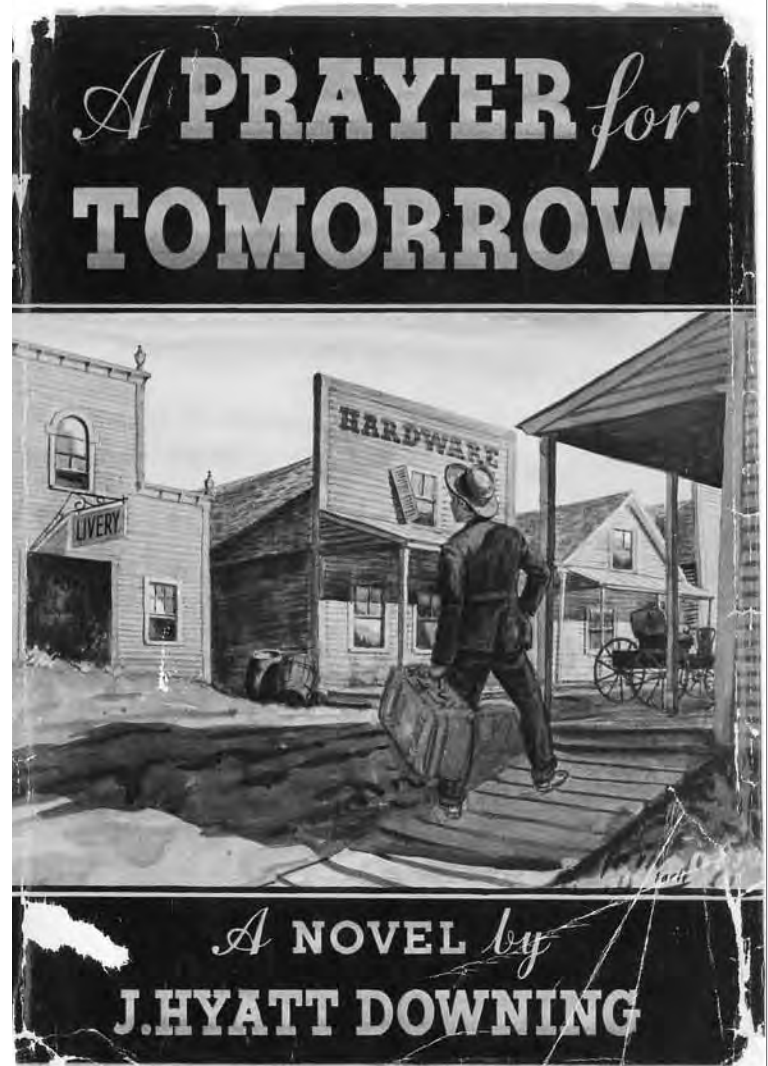
# J. Hyatt Downing's *A Prayer for Tomorrow*: Cather's *A Lost Lady*, Dakota Style

Mary Ruth Ryder

In 1938 when J. Hyatt Downing published his first novel, *A Prayer for Tomorrow*, reviewers found it a Sinclair Lewis-like study of a South Dakota Main Street as seen through the eyes of “a sensitive boy,” Lynn McVeigh (Greenspan 8). While plagued by a lack of economy of style (Marsh 7), stiff characters (Greenspan 8), and “misty sentimentality” (Gray 6), the novel was praised for its portrayal of prairie life in the boom and bust cycle in the Dakotas of the 1880s and 1890s. While Downing made an effort to “weave the thread of many lives into some kind of pattern” (Marsh 7) in his novel, the focus lay on the adolescent Lynn’s infatuation with Cynthia Carr, the beautiful and charming wife of a bank clerk who finds herself stifled by the pettiness and social limitations of small town life in a fledgling rural community transitioning from cattle country to farming. Strangely, what only two reviewers commented on, or even seemed to note, was the blatant similarity of Downing’s novel to Willa Cather’s novel *A Lost Lady* published some fifteen years earlier. Not only did Downing use similar plot details (e.g., a family of landed gentry who own a bank that goes under), but in describing his two principal characters and their relationship, he also echoed Cather, almost to the point of plagiarism.

Born in Iowa in 1887, Downing spent his early years in Hawarden, Iowa, where Ruth Suckow’s father served as minister of the church which his family attended (Wadden, “J. Hyatt Downing” 1). When Downing was a youth, the family moved to the tiny town of Blunt, South Dakota, where his father unsuccessfully tried ranching and, like Mr. McVeigh in *A Prayer for Tomorrow*, later operated a lumber yard for three years. The strained relationship between Downing and his father also parallels that of the protagonist and his father in Downing’s first novel. After several years of working a number of adventurous jobs in the West, Downing attended the University of South Dakota and after graduating unsuccessfully pursued newspaper work. After marrying and relocating to New Mexico in order to recover from tuberculosis, he returned to the Midwest, began writing and publishing short fiction in *Scribner’s Magazine*, and began selling insurance. When the company offered him a “handsomely-paid position on the condition that he ‘quit writing them damn pieces,’” he stopped writing for seven years (“J. Hyatt Downing” 2). During his short story period he “established friendships” with a number of writers in St. Paul, including F. Scott Fitzgerald and Thomas Boyd, and met others

like Sinclair Lewis. By 1931, he quit his job, returned to Sioux City, and made “a thorough personal commitment to a writing career” (“J. Hyatt Downing” 4). Ultimately, he published five novels and over thirty short stories. After selling the rights of his 1940 novel *Sioux City* to David Selznik, Downing moved to Los Angeles where for 25 years he wrote script for advertising and radio, as well as feature articles and stories (“J. Hyatt Downing” 5). His last published story appeared in 1963 in *Reader’s Digest*. Downing died ten years later in 1973.



In some ways, Downing’s life parallels Cather’s. She, too, made a conscious decision to withdraw from a very successful career in order to devote herself to writing, and much of her work drew heavily upon what she referred to as those most



formative years between the ages of eight and fifteen, when she, like Downing, moved to a small town on the prairie. Both writers' works describe the second phase of frontier life that defines "agricultural literature of the prairie plains" (Wadden, "Late" 203). These are accounts of emergent prairie towns bustling with optimism, of the ceaseless toil of bringing a land to fruition, and of the inevitable crushing blows of natural and economic conditions, all of which produce the stark realism of the pieces. Cather's 1923 novel *A Lost Lady*, like Downing's *A Prayer for Tomorrow*, focuses on this transitional phase of prairie development between 1880 and 1910, but for both "this historical situation . . . was a metaphor for the loss of sustaining moral values" (Wadden, "Late" 207). Similarly, for both, the setting serves as a background for revealing character and "becomes a metaphor for a character's moral condition" (Wadden, "Late" 210). To what degree Downing had read Cather's work may never be known, but for a Cather enthusiast, even a cursory reading of *A Prayer for Tomorrow* engenders surprise that the similarity of the texts went virtually unnoticed by its contemporary reviewers.

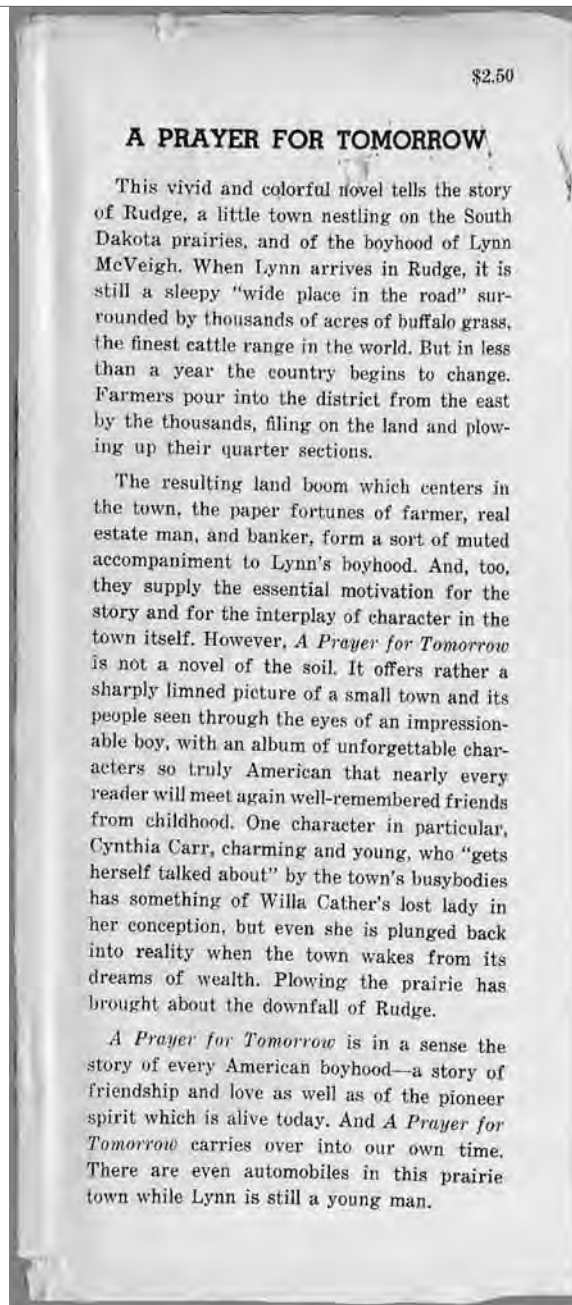
The *Book Review Digest* summary makes no mention of the lost lady whose presence so dominates the novel. Relegating Downing's novel to a "Tale of South Dakota Main Street . . . told from the viewpoint of Lynn McVeigh," the reviewer ignores the central role of Cynthia Carr (271). Jeannette Greenspan, writing for *The New York Herald Tribune*, briefly notes that Cynthia becomes "the social and cultural ornament of Main Street fabric to the adolescent adjustments of a sensitive boy" but credits the power of the book to the vivid descriptions of the land itself (8). James Gray in the *Saturday Review of Literature* sees in the novel "many small personal histories" and "tragedies of individuals" without mention of Cynthia Carr and decries the novel for its excessive "verbal embroidery" (6). Indeed, *A Prayer for Tomorrow* in its 342 pages is a far cry from Cather's compact and powerful *A Lost Lady* and its 166 pages. Only Fred Marsh in his *New York Times* review and Margaret Paige Hazen in the *Boston Evening Transcript* pointedly connect Downing's novel and Cather's, specifically in regard to the female protagonist and love interest of the narrator. Marsh writes that Downing's novel is a "plain tale from the prairies" with "a Lost Lady out of Willa Cather very much in the foreground" (7). Hazen calls Cynthia Carr "but a mild replica of Willa Cather's 'Lost Lady' or the lovely lost lady of 'The Sea of Grass' by Conrad Richter" and notes the similar means of characterizing her, "through the eyes of a young boy who admires her" (2). If Downing was attempting to emulate Cather in content, though not in presentation, or even if he were simply trying to tell a tale of character types, as

Wadden suggests in his defense of Downing ("Late" 212), the uncanny similarities to Cather's work call for close scrutiny of the novel. Wadden, the nearly sole and primary critic of Downing's work, was little concerned by the obvious echoes from Cather's novel just as he in his own article borrowed freely and without citation from reviewers of the novel.<sup>1</sup> Wadden asserts that he is "not so concerned . . . with comparing Hyatt Downing's fiction with that of other writers" ("Late" 203), but it behooves us to be concerned in light of professional ethics and literary scholarship.

The plot details of both novels depart little from a realistic account of the rise and fall of small prairie towns, when the promise of prosperity devolved into disillusionment as the environment and economics reshaped the lives of second generation pioneers. The McVeighs' story and that of the Forresters in *A Lost Lady* are not so different in their underlying elements. Cather's Sweet Water, like Rudge, South Dakota, in Downing's novel, is a town in transition. The generation of the Captain Forresters, who dealt with Indian problems, built railroads, and established banks, is quickly being displaced by shrewd entrepreneurs like Ivy Peters, who are driven only by profit motive. The "individualist ethic" (Urge 77) that drove men like Captain Forrester and the banker Colonel Winterslip in Downing's novel has little place in the "late nineteenth-century American bonanza economy" (73). Those who cannot or are unwilling to move on are thrust aside as outdated. The McVeighs come to such a place at Rudge. Once a thriving cattle town, recent annual rainfalls have deceived settlers into seeing a blooming prairie awaiting the plow. The cowmen, like those of Captain Forrester's generation, find themselves icons of a defunct world, and like the Captain they retreat from the scene. While young Lynn McVeigh finds the town revolting in its upstart ugliness, he realizes that those who would thrive must "readily break with old loyalties to place, time, and others" (73). The arriving homesteaders, who would gobble up the grasslands with their plows, are as insensitive to the beauty and serenity of the place as is Cather's Ivy Peters who would drain the Forresters' marsh and plant wheat. Niel Herbert notes in *A Lost Lady* that with the passing of Captain Forrester had come "the end of an era, the sunset of the pioneer": "The people, the very country itself, were changing so fast that there would be nothing to come back to" (144). So, too, does Lynn McVeigh realize when one of the last cowboys rides out of Rudge that "with the rider's departure, something was going out of Dakota that it would not know again, something which had made it colorful and interesting" (37). The country had changed, he thinks: "It seemed as definite as the end of a tale that is told" (37).



It is in the telling of that tale, and in the wording itself, that Downing draws most heavily from Cather. Lynn McVeigh and Niel Herbert could be brothers. Both are drawn to a lady older than themselves, the former embracing the noble values of the knight and his lady, as symbolized by the little metal knight that stands atop his family's coal burner, and the latter devoted, like Parsifal, to rescuing his damsel in distress, his Maid Marian. While their background circumstances differ, with Lynn estranged from an overbearing father who runs the lumber yard and Niel essentially orphaned by his mother's death and by a father surrounded by "an air of failure" (Cather 22), both young men attach themselves to their "lady," are fascinated and infatuated by her, and would protect her against all harm. When first meeting his lady, Lynn believes Cynthia to have "the loveliest face he [has] ever seen" (35). "Her hair, very black and shining with life," complements "a bright vivacity in her smile" and "the warm, deep brown of her eyes" (35). Her "singularly clear, pleasing voice" is punctuated by an occasional slight flush and "little laugh" (35, 36). From childhood, Niel Herbert is likewise attracted by Marian Forrester's "long black hair" (6), her "beautiful eyes, dark and full of light" (26), and her "inviting, musical laugh" (32). While Marian Forester has the "gift of mimicry" (38) and "mocking eyes" (27), Cynthia shows "light mockery" in her laughter (Downing 231, 332). Both share a "soft laughter" (Downing 302; Cather 26, 92, 71) and entrance the boys by the charm of their conversation. Cynthia's eyes, Downing writes, work some "magic of their own" (332), and Niel Herbert sees in his lady the same "magic of contradictions" (Cather 65). Cynthia charms Lynn's brusque father when they first meet in the same way that Marian Forester bewilders the Swede farmers who grin and shuffle their feet in the presence of this charming lady. Lynn is startled to hear his father "speaking in a voice he could barely recognize" (35) and



*"One character in particular . . . has something of Willa Cather's lost lady in her conception": from the flap copy.*

Enduring the lewd glances of nasty, old men and the vicious gossip of the town's well-bred wives, she shares with Lynn the secrecy of her opinions about Rudge and admits him into the intimacy of her thoughts. He accompanies her on shopping trips, carries her bundles, and is charmed by her presence. He cannot forget the "faint elusive scent which seemed a part of her charm" (41). He vows on "an impulse of affection" to "protect her against the uncouthness of this new, rough town" (41). His devotion to her "as the most wonderful woman in the world" (41) quickly shifts to suspicion, though. On afternoon, he escorts her home to find the town's brilliant but alcoholic newspaper editor awaiting her on the porch. Charlie Thyme good-naturedly teases Cynthia about having gained "another devotee," and Lynn leaves,

bowing slightly before Mrs. Carr (36). Niel's uncle, Judge Pommeroy, reacts similarly in Marian Forrester's presence, his voice assuming a ponderous and respectful tone that Niel recognizes as out of the ordinary as the Judge offers the elegant lady a chair and glass of brandy (27).

Just as their father figures pay homage to these ladies, so do the two boys who, on the cusp of manhood, envision their ladies as "belonging to a different world from any [they] had ever known" (Cather 33). They enshrine her as their goddess worthy of worship. In naming his lady Cynthia, Downing, even if unconsciously, equates her with the moon goddess, just as Cather does by describing Marian Forrester in Artemisian terms. Niel consistently associates Marian with moonlight and virginal whiteness, and her last name—Forrester—recalls Artemis' role as nature goddess. But, both Lynn and Niel are deceived in their adoration. Both have a rude awakening when their unstained goddess proves human, involving herself in an extramarital affair, and both dismiss their ladies, at least temporarily.

At first, Cynthia singles out Lynn in a kind of alliance against the ugliness of their small town (41).



recalling what he has heard about Charlie, that “he paid too definite attention to Cynthia Carr” (43). That winter, Lynn becomes increasingly aware of Thyme’s frequent visits to the Carr home, and he is haunted by what he had one evening overheard from the Carrs’ kitchen—Cynthia’s protests against Thyme’s advances. When rumors grow about Cynthia’s relationship with Thyme, Lynn knows “in a hidden corner of his mind . . . that Mrs. Carr had furnished some reason for the lifted eyebrow and the curious expressions . . .” (67). Eventually, Lynn feels compelled to defend the honor of his goddess, striking a man who is snickering with his cronies and making lewd remarks about her. Lynn subsequently estranges himself from Cynthia, visiting her only rarely with the excuse of having to prepare for his college entrance exams. “He did not want to talk to Cynthia Carr or . . . think of her,” Downing writes, and “A sick disgust for himself and for her washed through his mind” (201).

The case of Niel Herbert is similar. Willingly, he devotes himself to Marian Forrester, driving her about when asked, filling out her table at dinner parties, and keeping her aging husband company. He is bewitched by her skin’s “fragrant, crystalline whiteness of white lilacs” (26), and she remains for him “an excitement that came and went with summer” (23). He feels “an impulse of affection and guardianship” over her (69) and admits to her that she is always the same to him—“Lovely, just lovely” (30). But, like Lynn, Niel becomes jealous and suspicious when the very masculine, forty-year-old bachelor Frank Ellinger arrives at the Forrester home. Niel suspects that Marian asks him to take the Forresters’ young woman guest for a drive as a means of freeing herself from her hostess duties so that she can be with Ellinger. A dutiful devotee, he complies with her wishes. Some weeks later, when Mr. Forrester is away on business, Niel has an experience that shocks him into



*J. HYATT DOWNING knows the land of which he writes. “I believe,” confesses Mr. Downing, “that I was conscious of the appalling waste and futility in the attempt to make an agricultural region out of the more arid sections of South Dakota when I was a youngster. An old time rancher once said to me as we were watching one of the first tractors rip a six foot ribbon of buffalo grass sod from the virgin prairie: ‘There she goes, kid. All hell and the angels won’t never bring her back.’ After leaving the University of South Dakota I made many, many futile attempts at short stories, chiefly about the glamorous country around Jackson’s Hole in Wyoming and my experiences surveying there. Scribner’s at last took a long look at one of these and then bought several more. And so, through short stories to ‘A Prayer for Tomorrow.’ I am married, have a son seventeen years old who is beginning to think I should creak a little when I move quickly, and I have lived pretty much everywhere, including New Mexico, and also New York, where I tried hard to learn the language, but never did. At present I am living in Sioux City, Iowa.”*

*In his author’s note, J. Hyatt Downing writes of the South Dakota prairie of his youth: “There she goes, kid. All hell and the angels won’t never bring her back.”*

reassessing his lady. In early morning, the infatuated Niel walks to the Forrester home, bearing tribute of nearly opened roses for Mrs. Forrester. Laying them upon the doorsill of her bedroom, he hears the fat, lazy laugh of a man and a woman’s laugh, “impatient, indulgent, teasing, eager” (71). Niel withdraws hastily, throwing away the roses that to him now smell far worse than weeds. Bitter and “blind with anger” (71), Niel tells himself that “This day saw the end of that admiration and loyalty that had been like a bloom on his existence” (72) and determines to leave as quickly as possible to begin college in Boston. Niel’s attitude toward Marian Forrester in the final chapter of Cather’s novel provides a source for Lynn’s earlier disgust for his lady. Cather writes, “[Niel] went away with weary contempt for her in his heart” (145).

Each young man, his ideal crushed, now distrusts his vision of perfection. Their responses to their now defiled goddesses are almost identical. Lynn wonders if this “lovely gracious lady” harbors some secret and looks for “some revealing sign of inner coarseness” in her. “What was her secret?” Lynn asks (Downing 97). Niel reacts to his disillusionment by clumping all women into Marian’s class: “Was that their secret?” he

wonders. “. . . [W]as their brilliancy always fed by something coarse and concealed?” (Cather 72). After discovering Marian in a tryst with her lover, Niel questions, “What did she do with all her exquisiteness when she was with a man like Ellinger?” (84). Similarly, after observing the shadowy figures of Cynthia and her supposed lover Charlie Thyme near the edge of town one night, Lynn questions, “What did she do with all her loveliness when she was with him?” (Downing 245).

Both young men go off to college in part to escape from their crushing emotional blows and disappointed hopes. Both ladies subsequently experience a reversal of fortunes. The boom

years of farming on the South Dakota prairie fade, and drought devastates the region. The bank of Rudge fails, and Colonel Winterslip commits suicide after losing all of his money in paying off as much as he can of the bank's debts. Cynthia's husband, the bank clerk, abandons her, leaving no forwarding address. In a scene almost directly out of *Cather*, Cynthia calls Lynn on the telephone, the desperation in her voice evident and frightening. Fearing that their conversation will be overheard by Mrs. Reinlander, the exchange operator and notorious town gossip, Lynn has an "uncomfortable feeling of responsibility" for Cynthia (300) and a sense of "impending disaster" (321). He tells her to hang up and promises that he will come right over. Likewise, Marian Forrester discovers in a newspaper article that her lover Frank Ellinger has married and rushes to Niel's rooms where she places a long-distance call to Ellinger. Niel feels the same uncomfortable responsibility to save her from further gossip and reminds her that Mrs. Beasley, "the indefatigable reporter of everything that went over the wires" (110), would hear every word. In desperation, he cuts the phone wires before Marian can implicate herself in an affair. Marian's personal circumstances are further complicated in that her husband Captain Forrester suffers a stroke after his bank in Denver fails. The Captain nearly bankrupts himself in paying off all the little people who believed in him and invested in his bank. Niel knows that Marian is terrified by the prospects of her future, but, as he prepares to leave for college, she apparently light-heartedly warns him, "You'll never be twenty again" (83). She encourages him to take a pretty girl out to supper but not to forget her. In like fashion, Cynthia advises the college-bound Lynn to seize the opportunity to enjoy and experience life while he can. She is truly glad for Lynn when he is appointed to the Naval Academy and predicts that he will wreak "havoc among the hearts of the girls who come down for the hops at Annapolis" (176). She tells him that youth is all that counts and is "all that is worth living for" (Downing 176).

Both young men, who had long resented their ladies treating them as boys (*Cather* 28, 30, 65; Downing 99, 126), later return from school to find their ideal ladies broken and changed. Marian's skin is "no longer like white lilacs," and little lines have appeared at the corners of her mouth (*Cather* 94); Cynthia is thinner, pale-cheeked, and has "tiny wrinkles" that fan out from the corners of her eyes (Downing 336). Cynthia, now alone to make her own way financially, has taken on the care of the prize chickens that her husband raised. Lynn admires her for her determination to "get along someway" (323) but bristles at seeing her doing manual labor and dressing in her husband's old overcoats and trousers. He knows that she "instinctively

recoiled" (326) from such work but sees in her "strength and resources of character which would somehow carry her through" (324). Once the queen of Rudge, she now is under the "mordantly triumphant gaze of her enemies" (326). When Lynn comes back to Rudge after his third year at Annapolis, Cynthia admits that she has been waiting for him: "Do you know, today the words: 'Lynn is coming, Lynn is coming' kept going through my mind. And this afternoon it occurred to me quite suddenly that your return, seeing you again, marks the end of this part of my life for me" (327). In answer to his query about what has happened to her in the intervening two years since he has seen her, she replies, "I have simply—lived. No, I have existed . . . I have done what I never supposed I could do" (337). Niel Herbert, too, returns from college to find Marian Forrester at the mercy of Ivy Peters who rents her land. Like Cynthia, she now needs money to survive, and she has resorted to doing much of the kitchen work and labor once relegated to her hired girls. She admits her eager anticipation of Niel's return, saying "every night for weeks, when the lights of the train came swinging in down below the meadows, I've said to myself, 'Niel is coming home; there's that to look forward to'" (93). When the Captain suffers a second stroke, Niel finds her at the mercy of her "enemies," the townswomen who boldly invade her kitchen and rummage through her house on pretense of relieving her of her nursing chores. Upon the Captain's death, she, like Cynthia, learns to survive "on any terms" (145), even by allying herself with the unscrupulous Ivy Peters.

Yet, each young man confesses that the essential woman remains unchanged for him. In response to Cynthia's comment, "You're a man, now," Lynn says, "I haven't changed where you are concerned" (Downing 336). When Marian comments to Neil, "And now you're a man and have seen the world!" but Niel counters that in the world he's found "Nothing so nice as you, Mrs. Forrester" (*Cather* 93). Lynn measures the toll that "the lonely years, the hardship, the self-denial had done to [Cynthia]" (Downing 336), and Niel wants to carry Marian away "from age, weariness, adverse fortune!" (*Cather* 92). They fear for their ladies' futures. Niel eventually loses track of Marian who remarries and moves to South America. Lynn parts from Cynthia when her husband returns to take her to live with him in Texas. But, for each, their lost lady remains what Niel calls a "bright, impersonal memory" (147) from a time and world that could never be recaptured. Lynn words his reaction differently, but the concept is the same: ". . . he had discovered, as one sometimes does on rereading a loved book a new meaning and beauty in old and familiar lines" (Downing 324).



Whether Downing drew directly upon Cather or merely repeated a story common to the male adolescent experience on the plains during a transitional period in history may never be determined, but *A Prayer for Tomorrow* appears to repeat the story of *A Lost Lady* in a South Dakota setting and bears uncanny resemblance to the earlier novel in plot, character development, description, and dialogue. Wadden was indeed correct when he concluded an article on Downing with this comment: “The best had been written before him. Willa Cather could do it all—characterization, setting, plot, presentation of significant themes” (“Late” 214). Downing undoubtedly knew that, too. If F. Scott Fitzgerald feared that he had copied from Cather’s *A Lost Lady* in creating Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* and subsequently apologized to Cather, one wonders, “Was an apology due from J. Hyatt Downing?”

#### NOTE

1. In his article “Late to Harvest: The Fiction of J. Hyatt Downing,” Wadden writes that Downing “tells the story of the adolescent adjustments of a sensitive boy laid against the elaborate and detailed Main Street fabric of Rudge, a small prairie town” (213). Greenspan’s review, which goes uncited by Wadden, reads: “Lured by the offer of free land, the Carrs came . . . Cynthia to become the social and cultural ornament of Main Street fabric to the adolescent adjustments of a sensitive boy” (8).

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# Frederick M. Link

# 1930 - 2011

*The following remembrance of the scholar Frederick M. Link first appeared in the October 13, 2011 newsletter of the English Department of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. We thank Beth Burke, Kari Ronning, and Guy Reynolds of the Cather Project for this tribute.*



It is with great sadness that we learned of Professor Fred Link's passing, Friday 7th October, 2011. Fred was one of the trio of distinguished UNL Professors—the late scholars Susan Rosowski and Chuck Mignon were the others—who helped establish the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition during the past two decades.

Neither Fred nor Chuck was a Cather scholar to begin with. At the end of their “formal” academic careers as textual critics, they remade themselves as Cather critics, and in so doing helped to establish this MLA-vetted edition. Paid only by intermittent stipends, Chuck and Fred laid the foundation of the wide-ranging scholarship we see in the Edition—itsself now the basis for digital versions of Cather's texts.

Fred joined the Cather Edition in the early 1990s, after his retirement. Although Cather was not his field—he had edited late seventeenth and early eighteenth century texts—his expertise in scholarly editing quickly made him an indispensable part of the team. He edited *A Lost Lady*, *Obscure Destinies*, *Shadows on the Rock*, *Alexander's Bridge*, *One of Ours*, and



*Two of the household spirits of the Cather Project: Chuck Mignon and Fred Link, hard at work. Note Chuck's horseshoe taped to the office nameplate. Photograph by Beth Burke, 2006.*

*Lucy Gayheart*, and co-edited *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Youth and the Bright Medusa* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. In addition to being a meticulous editor of literary texts, he was an incisive editor of his fellow editors' own essays, doing his best to bring us to the level of his own lucid prose.

Old school in his rigor and precision, he remained open to new approaches and new colleagues. His wide range of knowledge in other fields made him an indispensable editor of the historical apparatus as well as the textual—his hand and mind are in the other volumes of the edition even when his name is not on the cover. His insights, his bone dry wit, and commitment to the highest standards of scholarship are greatly missed.



*“He had lost his way, and was trying to get back to the trail, with only his compass and his sense of direction for guides”: one of Harold Von Schmidt's 1929 illustrations for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, from the Helen Cather Southwick Collection.*



# The Foundation Receives a Priceless Book Collection

Thanks to the deep generosity of Jim and Angela Southwick, the Cather Foundation is now the proud owner of a large and important collection of books inscribed and presented by Willa Cather to the people closest to her. The Helen Cather Southwick Collection, as it will be known, also includes numerous valuable editions owned by Cather's parents or other family members.

The collection had been the property of Jim Southwick's mother, Helen Cather Southwick, the daughter of Cather's brother James. Many of the books were gifts from Cather to her parents and her sister Elsie, into whose hands the collection passed with the deaths of Cather's parents and the sale of their family home. As a regular visitor to Elsie Cather in later years, Helen Cather Southwick came into possession of a substantial share of Elsie's library upon her death, including this collection.

The collection comprises some fifty volumes, of which half are significant presentation copies inscribed by Cather to her loved ones. One of the standouts of the collection is a copy of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* with a special note written on a fragment of a Knopf mailing label mounted inside: "Advance copy—Book not out until September 15th." On the page just beneath this label Cather has written:

*Hoping my father  
will enjoy this nar-  
rative of the old  
Southwest, as it was  
in his young man-  
hood.* Willa Cather

New York  
August 16, 1927

Charles Cather would have received this book soon after suffering a heart attack in August 1927. He died of a second attack on March 3, 1928.

Another presentation copy of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is of a first printing of the 1929 edition with drawings and designs by Harold Von Schmidt. Cather inscribed it "For Edith Lewis from Willa Cather." Lewis, Cather's companion for more than four decades, accompanied Cather on several trips to the Southwest; her own itinerary of their 1925 trip to New Mexico (in the Charles E. Cather Collection at the University of Nebraska) includes extensive notes on their travels and draft materials in Cather's hand.

A uniquely valuable volume in the collection is a 1923 first edition, first printing of *A Lost Lady*, one of twenty signed and lettered copies—this one is "J." Written inside is "For my darling Mother on her Wedding Anniversary from Willa Cather December 1923." This volume is unlikely to have been read—many of its pages remain uncut.

The collection also contains a limited first edition copy of the 1923 *April Twilights* (number 209 of a printing of 450), bearing this inscription: "For my father, from his loving and grateful daughter, Willa Cather April 4th, 1923." Cather's inscription is a lovely echo of the book's dedication, "To My Father for a Valentine."

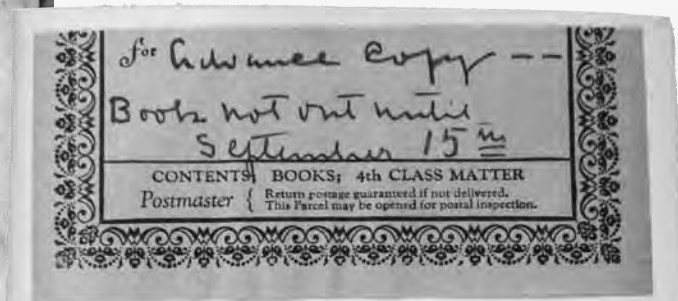
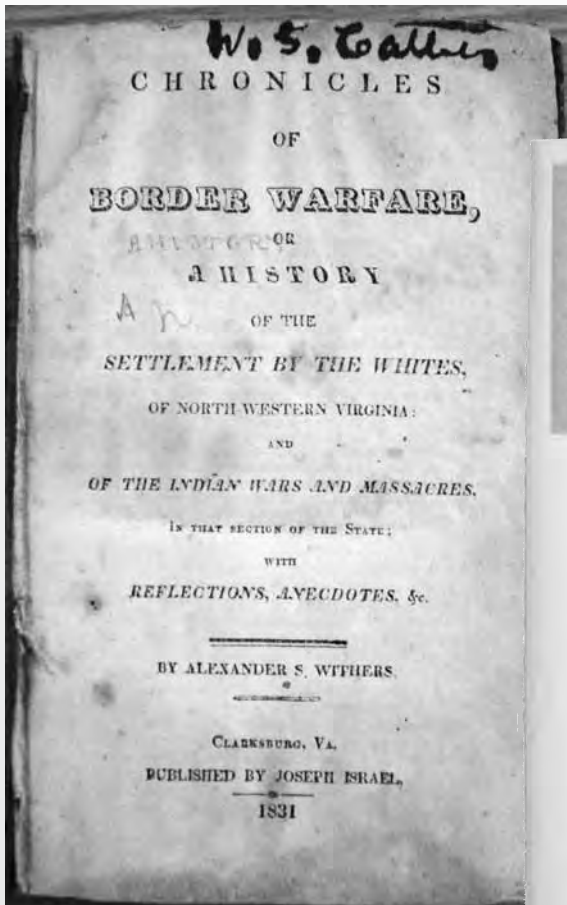
A number of books in the collection are by authors other than Willa Cather, some of them inscribed to Elsie, including *The Normans* by Sarah Orne Jewett, *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* by Sylvia Townsend Warner, and *The Wagnerian Romances* by Gertrude Hall. Cather contributed the introduction to the latter work.

One inscription, probably to Elsie, reads "A book from a dear friend of mine—I think you will like it. W." This appears in Edith Oliver's *Without Knowing Mr. Walkley*. The book contains an earlier inscription as well, to Cather: "For Willie, this book about the country where Stephen lives and which he hopes to show her one day. June 1938." Here Cather appears to have passed along a gift to her from—it seems safe to conclude—her friend Stephen Tennant, who would later write a sensitive introduction to the 1949 *Introduction to Writing*.

The book in the collection with the deepest history, not to mention longest title, is *Chronicles of Border Warfare, or a History of the Settlement by the Whites, of North-Western Virginia: and of the Indian Wars and Massacres, in that Section of the State; with Reflections, Anecdotes, &c.* Written by Alexander S. Withers and published in 1831, the collection copy bears a pencil notation: "William Boak February the 18th 1851." Cather inherited this very worn first printing from her maternal grandfather; she signed her own name to the title page.

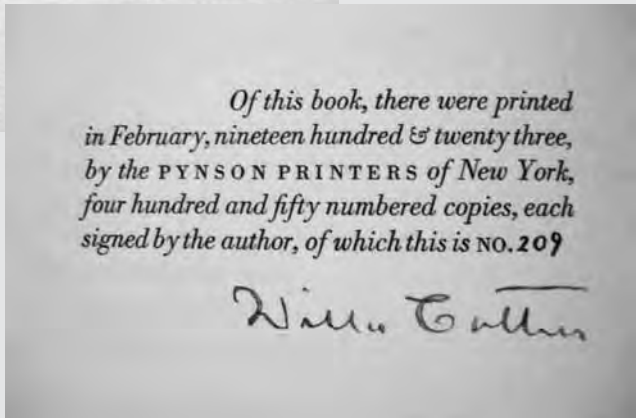
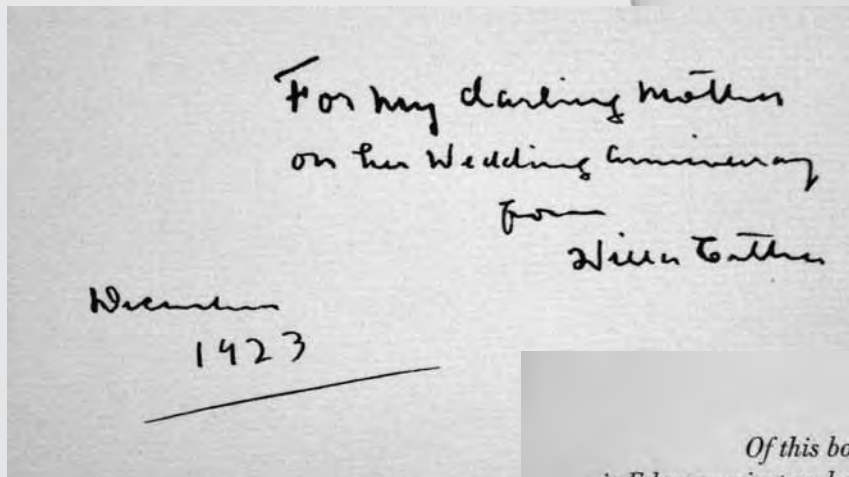
The Helen Cather Southwick Collection is a unique compilation of volumes inscribed by Cather and presented to her family. It will occupy a central place in the Cather Foundation's holdings. It also represents another example of Helen Cather Southwick's lifelong commitment to the legacy of Willa Cather.





Hoping my father  
 will enjoy this nar-  
 rative of the west  
 Southwest, as it was  
 in his young man-  
 hood. Willa Cather

New York  
 August 16, 1927



Details from some of the important volumes in the Helen Cather Southwick Collection.



# Think of your gift to the Cather Foundation as an investment. Here is one of the dividends...



*The original floors at historic Grace Episcopal Church have been beautifully restored.*

Please support our work with a bequest in your will, or by naming the Willa Cather Foundation as a beneficiary of your retirement assets.

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## The Cather Foundation Welcomes A New Education Director



We are pleased to announce the appointment of Tracy Sanford Tucker as our new Education Director. A resident of Fairbury, Nebraska, Tracy comes to the Foundation with an M.A. in English from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, with specializations in creative writing and Great Plains studies. She

has served recently as a peer tutor at Southeast Community College in Beatrice, Nebraska and a research assistant at

the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her professional background also includes graphic design and freelance photography; prior to returning to college to complete her studies, she was an award-winning designer for the *Beatrice Daily Sun*.

Tracy's responsibilities include oversight of the Foundation's academic and public programs, educational grantwriting, archival and collections management, and editorial participation in the *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review*.

Tracy began her duties August 13, 2012. Please join us in welcoming her to the Foundation and wishing her all success in her new role.



# Willa Cather NEWSLETTER & REVIEW

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## **The Willa Cather Foundation** **Established 1955 by Mildred Bennett**

Leslie C. Levy, Executive Director

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# Shopping with Willa

“Professor St. Peter has just gone and bought me a grand mink coat! Isn't he extravagant?”

— *Willa Cather in a January 11, 1926 letter to Irene Miner Weisz*  
*Newberry Library, Chicago*

Professor St. Peter of *The Professor's House* may have bought Willa Cather a mink coat, but Cather presumably did not require the professor's assistance as personal shopper when she picked it out. And we suspect she had no particular objection to his extravagance.

From her earliest years, Cather's distinctive and assured personal style blended vivid self-expression with varying degrees of deference to contemporary style and cultural norms. While much has been made of the adult's Cather's preference for practical, everyday wear—witness the famous middy blouse—she had an equally well-documented taste for the chic and luxurious and finely crafted.

Two of the fine articles of clothing in the Willa Cather Foundation's collection bear labels from Jay Thorpe, a large, exclusive women's wear shop on West 57th Street in Manhattan. From 1920 until 1962, the shop sold high-quality, often avant-garde fashion to an elite and wealthy clientele. It is amusing to imagine Cather sitting in the shop's coolly modern showroom as she selects her favorites from the elegant stock, which featured imported French couture as well as the work of resident designers.

One of the pieces purchased from Jay Thorpe is a lightweight chocolate-brown coat-dress that might qualify as one of Cather's down-to-earth everyday pieces, except perhaps for its impeccable details and tailoring. Its understatedness stands in contrast with the other Jay Thorpe piece in the Foundation's collection, a dramatic clutch coat of fuchsia silk velvet with broad fur collar and cuffs. If the dress speaks quietly and subtly, this amazing coat announces itself at full voice. Here is a wonderful reminder that the serious writer had a diva side.



Vogue, 1941.

“I remember the first time I saw Willa, rustling out to a dinner party in a shimmering rose charmeuse satin and an opera cloak. We hung over the bannister to watch her sweep down the hall majestically—that dingy hall of 60 South Washington Square. . . .”

— *Cather's friend Achsah Brewster writing in The Child, her unpublished memoir*

*As excerpted in Seeking Life Whole: Willa Cather and the Brewsters by Lucy Marks and David Porter, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009*

*Cather's clothing from Jay Thorpe:  
Silk velvet clutch coat with fur  
collar and cuffs (right) and brown  
lightweight coat-dress (far right;  
its label appears below). The  
accompanying dress of sheer black  
and grey net has no label.*



*Jay Thorpe's 57th Street shop, 1944. Photograph by Gottscho-Schleisner from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.*

# Prairie Preservation

*Helping the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie return to its native state*



*During this spring's prescribed burn.*



*Immediately after the burn.*



*One week later.*



*Two weeks later.*

This botanical treasure is gradually re-emerging as its old self, thanks to several years of restoration efforts including eradication of invasive species, removal of thousands of volunteer trees, and reintroduction of native plants.

The latest prescribed prairie burn was conducted this spring; these pictures show the burn area during and just after the fire. Funded in part by the Nebraska Environmental Trust, the prairie burns promote the growth of native plants and suppress invasive brome grass, which can easily overtake damaged prairie ecologies. A healthier prairie is also one that can better withstand drought conditions.



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