Willa Cather Newsletter & Review

Volume LIII, No. 3 Spring 2010

The Willa Cather Foundation

IN THIS EDITION

THE WILLA CATHER FOUNDATION

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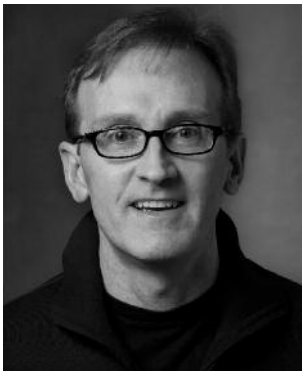
On the cover: "Preaching to the Mayas and the Aztecs," one of the murals at Santa Fe's St. Francis Auditorium.

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Jay Yost



What's the Willa Cather Foundation been up to lately? A lot! I'm constantly fascinated by the wonderful things our staff, volunteers, members, and Board Members are working on at any one time to help us fulfill our mission of promoting the life, times, settings, and work of Willa Cather. Since a critical function of a newsletter is actually communicating news, let me fill you in on a few tidbits.

By the time you read this, we will have successfully completed our third annual Prairie Writers' Workshop, led this year by noted author and University of Nebraska-Omaha professor, John T. Price (*Man Killed by Pheasant*). This year we ran the event over a long weekend so as to accommodate the schedules of aspiring authors who can't take a full week off from work.

Also by the time you read the great pieces in this edition (Bishop Griswold's is a true inspiration—which is handy in his line of work), we'll be in the midst of our 55th annual Spring Conference: "Food, Drink, and Willa Cather's Writing." We'll recreate some of the foods that Cather and her family loved, listen to more than twenty papers on the subject, and round out the Conference with a barn dance and meal based on the one in Cather's short story, "The Bohemian Girl." What's not to love?

And to make sure that you and your loved ones can bring the world of Cather into your very own kitchen, we've published a beautiful cookbook, *At Willa Cather's Tables*. Recipes range from Cather's Virginia roots to her family's history in Red Cloud (and beyond), and from favorites of the founders of the Willa Cather Foundation to present-day volunteers, members, and Board Members. Cather helped us understand her characters by her descriptions of what they ate, and the scholarly features of the Foundation's cookbook will help you to better understand Cather and her community. (You are cordially invited to purchase numerous copies—early and often.)

Our historical sites continue to get the recognition they deserve. The Pavelka Farmstead from *My Ántonia* has been selected this year as one of Nebraska's twelve "Hidden Treasures." This designation from "Heritage Nebraska," a coalition of historic preservationists statewide, will help us draw attention to this magical setting, and, we hope, make the search for funding its restoration a bit easier.

Finally, I'll mention that our third annual Exploritas (formerly Elderhostel) will be held the week following the Spring Conference. Under the guidance of Board member Bob Thacker, thirty participants will have the opportunity to learn how Red Cloud functioned as Cather's "Window to the World" and to experience that unique setting themselves.

So we at the Cather Foundation are marching onward, helping to ensure that Cather's many worlds continue to be celebrated for generations to come. We invite you to keep your cards and letters (and contributions!) coming so that we can keep Willa Cather a vital part of the 21st century.

THE WILLA CATHER FOUNDATION

NOT STORIES AT ALL, BUT LIFE ITSELF

The Right Reverend Frank T. Griswold,
XXV Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church

This piece was originally presented by Bishop Griswold, in slightly different form, at the Willa Cather Spring Conference, April 25, 2009.

I ENCOUNTERS

My first encounter with Willa Cather occurred while I was in high school, not because of a summer reading list or a class requirement, but because I had begun to think about ordination. At the time, my views of the priesthood were rather romantic, and literature that portrayed members of the clergy and their struggles and sacrifices confirmed and heightened my sense of call. It was during this season that I happened upon a copy of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, never dreaming that one day I, too, would become a bishop. The dignified Bishop Latour and the robust Father Vaillant were my heroes and also exemplars of the endurance and sacrifice I associated with ordination, albeit virtues that—should I be ordained—would be called upon in contexts quite different from nineteenth century New Mexico. It would not, therefore, be an exaggeration to say that Willa Cather is partly responsible for my having chosen the path I have chosen.

Some years later, after I had been ordained a priest and become rector of a parish in Philadelphia, I read an article, I believe in *The New York Times Book Review*, about a new edition of *The Professor's House*. In it the point was made that *The Professor's House*, with its story within a story, stood in marked contrast to Cather's earlier work. I don't remember what else was said in the article, or even who wrote it, but I found myself moved to buy a copy of the book and read it.

This led me on to read the whole corpus of her work, and to find, again and again, that her characters and their responses to what life set before them touched something deep within me, and enabled me to look more closely at my own life and some of the challenges I faced.

Again, a number of years passed, and I found myself paying an annual visit to Creighton University in Omaha for the purpose of making a retreat. On one such occasion, I happened upon the fact that the University had given Cather an honorary degree. At that point Red Cloud came to mind and I began to wonder where it was located in relation to Omaha. I asked the Jesuit who was overseeing my retreat if he knew how far away it was. His response was quintessentially Jesuitical: "I think that you should go there and make it part of your retreat. And, on the way, be on the lookout for Sand Hill Cranes; it's the season for their return." The next day I rented a car and set off at dawn the following morning; it was a dawn that fully matched one of Cather's meticulous and poetical descriptions. En route, I passed a newly plowed field south of Hastings, which was thick with large grey birds foraging in the soil. They were, to be sure, Sand Hill Cranes.

After arriving in Red Cloud and procuring a map of Cather sites, I made my way along the suggested route and found myself in the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie. A strong wind was blowing, and, as I strode into it, I thought of the men and women captured in Cather's prose who had faced into this same wind, not as a curious visitor from afar, as I was, but as homesteaders and settlers determined to make this harsh yet beautiful part of the world their home.

As I continued to walk, I came upon a hollow in which a group of young people huddled together out of the wind in the company of a woman who appeared to be their leader. Was this a school group of some sort, I wondered? Just then the woman noticed me and invited me to join them. She identified herself as Susan Rosowski. I accepted her invitation and found myself part of a Cather class and tour she was conducting.

Shortly thereafter, we moved on to the Cather house in town. I will never forget going up into the attic and passing through the unfinished area where her brothers slept and into Willa's bedroom with its papered walls and the window that looked out onto the street. I imagined her alone in her refuge giving vent to her imagination and storing away in her memory for further use the various encounters, personalities, and occurrences that were part of her life here in Red Cloud.

Later, I visited Grace Episcopal Church and noticed that she had given a stained glass window in memory of her parents. This was my first inkling that she had some connection with the Episcopal Church. I had assumed, as others had before me, largely on the strength of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*, that Cather had become a Roman Catholic at some point in her maturity. I later learned that she, along with her parents, had been confirmed in Grace Church. Under what circumstances, I wondered.

II "FAITH IS A GIFT"

In her biography entitled *Willa*, Phyllis Robinson, expanding upon Cather's comment, "the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts," offers a possible answer. She writes, "The year ended for Willa with an act of faith that was an affirmation of her most cherished ideals. On December 27, 1922, she and her parents were confirmed in the Episcopal Church by the Bishop of [Western] Nebraska, Dr. George Beecher. Willa had been raised a Baptist, but she felt a strong affinity for the Anglican Church, as much for the beauty of its ritual as for its position as the historic church in the new world. . . . But the great attraction for Willa was the sense of continuity with an old religious community. It was a church that placed a high value on the past. In spiritual matters too, Willa was looking back" (232).

Commenting on this same "act of faith," E. K. Brown in his critical biography writes, "The seriousness with which she was examining the world and herself in 1922 appears more sharply in an act than in anything she said. On December 27, in the company of her parents,

I imagined her alone in her refuge giving vent to her imagination and storing away in her memory for further use the various encounters, personalities, and occurrences that were part of her life here in Red Cloud.

she was confirmed in the Episcopal Church" (227).

Mildred Bennett in her book *The World of Willa Cather* tells us that the family had attended the Episcopal Church for a number of years and that the rector from whom Cather received instruction was an old friend. With regard to the bishop, we are told that he had been a missionary in the Nebraska Sand Hills and that "Miss Cather admired him and often said he was just the sort of man she could picture as the ideal bishop" (137). It has been said that Bishop Latour in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, whose character is drawn in large measure from that of the first missionary bishop to New Mexico, Bishop Lamy, includes elements of Bishop Beecher as well.

Until her death, Cather remained a member and supporter of Grace Church, and in New York, according to her intimate companion, Edith Lewis, the Church of the Ascension with its John Lafarge fresco over the altar was her spiritual home.

With regard to her own faith, Bennett comments that "Miss Cather found it difficult to believe. 'Faith is a gift,' she said; and she admitted that even her Catholic books were written out of admiration for a faith she could not quite accept" (137). It is my sense that one of the forces that drew Cather to make a formal commitment to the Episcopal Church was that the Anglican Tradition was one that gave place and high value to transcendence and mystery represented by sacramental and liturgical continuity with its Catholic roots, and, at the same time, possessed an open, pragmatic and somewhat skeptical spirit as a result of its emergence from struggles and conflicts of the Reformation.

At a time when unyielding certitudes about God and God's ways were the cause of wars, Richard Hooker in the sixteenth century, the great expositor of Anglicanism's comprehensiveness, observed that we live by "probable persuasions" rather than by immutable truth (158). Life is an unfolding encounter with mystery mediated by the quotidian whereby truth overtakes us not as a proposition, but as something we experience. I believe this confluence, not without tension, fitted the shape of Cather's soul.

We can see something of this tension reflected in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*. Bishop Latour and Euclide Auclair's skepticism regarding the extravagance of certain "miracles" becomes an invitation to a more sober and homely understanding of what is miraculous (50). Miracle is not denied; it is simply declared to exist in a more ordinary unfolding of life. Or put another way, the seemingly ordinary is, when viewed through eyes that are open to encounter the transcendent mystery of existence, both extraordinary and revelatory.

According to Edith Lewis, Cather's preoccupation as an artist was "bringing into being something beyond the situation or the characters of a story, something beyond the story itself—the unseen vision, the unheard echo, which attend all experience" (138).

This conjunction of mystery and the ordinary, the transcendent and the immanent, in the unfolding of human life is attested to by religion and art as Professor St. Peter declares in *The Professor's House* in words that are surely Cather's own:

> I don't myself think much of science as a phase of human development. . . . I suppose we ought to be grateful for the distraction. But . . . the human mind . . . has always been made more

> interesting by dwelling on the old riddles, even if it makes nothing of them. . . . It's the laboratory, not the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world. . . . Art and religion . . . have given man the only happiness he has ever had. . . . With the theologians came the cathedral-builders; the sculptors and glass-workers and painters. They might without sacrilege, have changed the prayer a little and said, "Thy will be done in art, as it is in heaven." (55-56)

December 27, the day of Cather's confirmation, is, in the church Calendar, the Feast of St. John the Evangelist, who, in the gospel that bears his name proclaims, "The Word became flesh and lived among us." In scripture "word" is not simply spoken: word becomes event, words happen. The Word, according to John, therefore, takes place, becomes an event, becomes incarnate. One of the distinctive aspects of Cather's stories and novels is that they are not simply engaging or entertaining: they are revelatory. In the form of events that are both interior and exterior to her characters, they bear witness in their incarnate particularity to a word that transcends the written word; they point beyond themselves to something larger and more universal: call it art or call it religion.

The contemporary theologian Walter Brueggemann observes that Biblical truth takes the form of narrative or story. And if the Bible is largely story that is made the vehicle for revelation of the mystery that overshadows humanity, a mystery we name as God, then words that lie outside the canonical scriptures, written by poets and novelists, can also speak to our hearts and minds in ways that convict, illumine, and reveal truth about ourselves and the world. "The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation," T. S. Eliot tells us (199). Willa understood that gift.

The title I chose for these reflections—"Not Stories at All, but Life Itself"—comes from Cather's "sketch" (her word not mine) of Sarah Orne Jewett, her friend and mentor. She says of Miss Jewett, "[Her] 'Pointed Fir' sketches are living things caught in the open, with

light and freedom and air-spaces about them. They melt into the land and the life of the land until they are not stories at all, but life itself" (49). What Cather says of Miss Jewett's work is true of her writing as well; and it is Cather's ability to read the book of human experience with acuity and an apposite turn of phrase that makes her writing not simply engaging or interesting, but able to disclose.

Here, I am put in mind of a lecture given some years ago at the University of Chicago by Flannery O'Connor in which she spoke of the vocation of being a writer:

> A good story is literal in the same sense that a child's drawing is literal. When a child draws, he doesn't aim to make anything distinct, but to set down exactly what he sees, as his gaze is direct, he sees lines that create motion . . . . The lines of motion that interest the serious writer are lines of spiritual motion as they are perceived on the surface of life and followed deeper into some point where revelation takes place. This is simply an attempt to track down the Holy Ghost through a tangle of human suffering and aspiration and idiocy.

The discipline of following the lines of spiritual motion from the surface of life deep into some point where revelation takes place requires a careful sorting and sifting of what one observes along the way. As Cather insists in her essay, "The Novel Démeublé," a writer's power of observation and ability to describe what he sees, though necessary, are "but a low part of his equipment." What is crucial, she declares, quoting an essay by Prosper Mérimée about Nikolai Gogol, is "the art of choosing among the innumerable features that nature offers us. . . . [This] is more difficult than observing them with close attention and rendering them with exactitude" (36-37, translation mine).

Something is in its original element, observes another French writer—Antoine de St. Exupery—when nothing is left to take away. The novel *démeublé* is a novel that has been stripped of all unnecessary furniture and distraction in order that the reader is able to follow, with the author, the lines of spiritual motion that lead to revelation.

"How wonderful it would be," writes Cather in her essay, "if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre" (42-43).

Here tracking down the Holy Ghost and creating an open and uncluttered space into which "[t]he glory of Pentecost,"—again the Holy Ghost—can descend and reveal itself are one and the same undertaking (43). Both are integral to the vocation of a serious writer burdened with the task, and it is a burden not unlike the one imposed upon the prophets of old, of discerning and describing the vagaries of the human condition in such a way that we learn about ourselves and gain wisdom and insight from their words.

To go back for a moment to Cather's spare, and we might say, dateable, attic refuge: was it not in some sense the uncluttered space into which the "glory of Pentecost," a kind of acuity of spirit and perception, descended and took up residency in a young woman called to plumb the depths of her experience and express what she observed about humankind and the world in which we live in increasingly spare and limpid prose, a prose which at times is poetry?

E.K. Brown remarks:

> That art depended on the artist being able to find beauty and individuality in the world about him was not a conclusion to which she had come by reasoning: her own art was characteristically a flow of memories. (227)

Though she claimed that her characters, with certain notable exceptions, were composites and not particular people she had known, identification has not been difficult, sometimes with less-than-flattering effect. Red Cloud and its environs, together with its diverse population and cultures, were a continual outworking of mystery of the Word, in incarnation and narrative, that made the attempt to track down the Holy Ghost through a tangle of human suffering and aspiration and idiocy a vocation for Cather to be pursued indeed with gusto.

It is because we can see something of our own

aspiration and idiocy that we are so drawn to Cather's characters. You don't need to be imprisoned in a loveless marriage and a constricting way of life to identify with Clara in "The Bohemian Girl" who, when confronted by the possibility of freedom from both, draws back and resists.

III "FORWARD"

Reflecting upon Clara's reluctance, we might be moved to ask ourselves: how often do old sorrows, old hurts, old angers afford us a kind of dark pleasure that is hard to relinquish because our sense of having been wounded or wronged or constrained has become part of who we are, a source of energy and integral to our self-understanding? If we let go of them, what will be left and who will we be?

As I say this, I am mindful that this conference is taking place within the fifty days of the Easter Season with its continuing theme of resurrection. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, resurrection is celebrated with a kind of pictorial scripture in the form of an icon. The icon of the resurrection depicts the risen Christ standing on the battered-down doors of Hell beneath which, in a black abyss, are floating, locks and chains—symbols of constriction and imprisonment. To Christ's left and right are Adam and Eve, the symbolic progenitors of the human race. Christ has grasped each of them firmly by the wrist and is pulling them out of their tombs into the force field and freedom of resurrection. As one contemplates the scene, the tombs—rectangular stone boxes—represent bondage not only in terms of death but also in terms of the old sorrows and discomfort—biases and prejudices—that hold us fast, which we, so often, are loath to relinquish because they have become dear to us as they did to Clara.

Rather than grasp her by the wrist, as Christ does in the icon, Nils, in "The Bohemian Girl," places his hands under Clara's arms and lightly lifts her to her saddle and cries, "Forward" (38). As he does so, Clara is obliged to relinquish her old sorrows and discontent

One of the lessons Cather teaches us is how loss of self can become the narrow door through which we pass to a new sense of self and a new pattern of relationship to the world and those around us.

and to pass, not without cost, from death to life and from bondage to freedom. I often use this passage in giving retreats and spiritual direction. I ask: what are your old sorrows and discontents, your self-serving certitudes that are so dear to you that you cannot imagine being wrenched away from them? What invitation to freedom are you resisting out of fear? How is Spirit of the risen Christ inviting you into freedom? Who is your Nils urging you forward? Is it a person, an inner voice, or is it life itself nipping you in the heel?

"Suffering teaches us compassion," declares Euclide Auclair in *Shadows on the Rock*, after Blinker has told him of his past life as a torturer in France (130). One of the lessons Cather teaches us is how loss of self can become the narrow door through which we pass to a new sense of self and a new pattern of relationship to the world and those around us. A prime example of this dynamic is the transformation that occurs in Bishop Saint-Vallier, the new bishop of Quebec, who is described as arrogant, self-absorbed, self-important, and whose newly constructed and richly furnished Episcopal palace stands in marked contrast to the modest and humble apartment of his predecessor, Bishop Laval, whom he treats with distain. Only in matters of liturgical splendor, we are told, are the two men of one mind. In his first visit to Auclair's shop we see Saint-Vallier at his condescending best, and at his second many years later we find him altogether

...suffering can break through our self-constructed virtues and competencies and teach us to embrace the foibles and failings of others and our own as well— not with despair, but with compassion.

changed by years of humiliation as a prisoner of the English, followed by the even more humiliating experience of returning to France and finding himself not permitted by the King to return to Quebec because of the critical and disapproving reports of his conduct received at court from his Canadian flock.

Returning to his diocese after an absence of thirteen years, Bishop Saint-Vallier, now a much older man, pays a visit to Euclide Auclair. Sitting in Auclair's shop, he sighs and speaks of his predecessor, Bishop Laval: "Would it had been permitted me to return in time to thank him for his labours he underwent for my flock during the years of my captivity, and to close his eyes at last. I can never hope to be to this people all that my venerable predecessor became through his devotion and his long residence among them. But I shall be with them now for as long as God spares me, and I hope be deserving of their affection" (225). Antipathy and judgment have been transformed into respect and appreciation.

Euclide and Saint-Vallier continue their conversation. At its conclusion Cather observes, "Sometimes a neighbor whom we have disliked for a lifetime for his arrogance and conceit lets fall a single commonplace remark that shows another side, another man really; a man uncertain and puzzled, and in the dark like ourselves. . . . To be sure the bishop was a little theatrical in his humility, as he had been in his grandeur, but that was his way, Auclair reflected, and, after all, nobody can help his way" (228-29).

The transformation that has taken place in Saint-Vallier is further underscored as he leaves the shop, not to return to his palace because he "now proposed to spend the rest of his life in two small rooms in the hospital out on the Charles River" (229).

The human and compassionate heart revealed in Saint-Vallier draws forth compassion in Auclair as well. It is important to note that what brought about the change in the bishop was not some blinding illumination from above, a miracle so to speak, but rather a set of very human circumstances through which a heart of stone was transformed into a heart of flesh: "The very circumstances of our life show us the way," declared an old and very wise Russian monk to a young Orthodox layman who sought the secret to the monk's transfigured life (Bolshakoff and Pennington 50). The very circumstances of Saint-Vallier's life showed him the way and allowed him to return his flock, old in body yet new in spirit. Upon reflection, are we not able to recognize a similar dynamic at work in our own lives?

In contrast, we have in the same novel the figure of the recluse Jeanne Le Ber, who chooses to shut herself away from her family and society and Pierre Charron, who loves her. She lives immured in a hermitage attached to a church and builds a fire in winter not for her comfort, but to warm her hands so that she can embroider vestments for the clergy to wear at the altar. She quits her cell only at midnight to pray in the church before the Blessed Sacrament. When her dying mother calls for her presence, she responds only with her prayers. She is known far and wide for her extreme piety, and her reputation is supported by descriptions of her life that are straight out of the pages of a medieval book of saints.

Instead of life showing her the way, however, Jeanne has imposed herself on life with such ruthlessness and determination that she becomes a shell of her former self. Hidden in the church at midnight, Charron observers her face as she enters to pray: "It was like a stone face; it had been through every sorrow" (147).

Is Jeanne's flight from life the cause of her despair? Has St. Paul's notion of Satan's masquerading as an angel of light, or as a greater good, or as a more noble path, seduced her and drawn her away from her former life, which gave joy to so many and to herself as well, only to turn her in upon herself in despair? Is this an instance in which the weight of despair is its own word of invitation to reassess or rethink or alter the direction she has taken? Cather doesn't raise the question, but it is there for us to ponder.

We then might ask ourselves, "Am I in thrall to some greater good that is really a form of temptation or ego-neediness—some noble image of myself, some idealized self—that is not who in truth I am called to be? Is my frustration or despair a summons to reexamine the choices I have made and possibly choose a new direction, a direction that may appear more modest and less noble, and, yet, in following I may find it to be more demanding and life-giving for me and for others than my self-constructed righteousness?

In *Lucy Gayheart* we are given the example of Harry Gordon whose heartless treatment of Lucy is largely responsible for her death and burdens him with a "life sentence" made heavier still by the fact that his refusal that fatal night to give her a lift is the secret he alone must bear (186).

However, instead of turning him in upon himself, Harry's suffering turns him outward toward the world. To be sure, it was in part a matter of assuaging the guilt he bore, but it was also the breaking free of the softer side of himself that Lucy had recognized under the well-tailored veneer of his Chicago-made suits.

His "life sentence" transforms him from being self-assured and self-serving, into a man who is able to transcend his self-interest for the sake of others: "Like many other men whose lives were dull or empty, Harry Gordon 'threw himself' as the phrase went, enthusiastically into war work; Red Cross, Food Conservation. Finally he went himself with an ambulance unit which he had helped to finance. He was gone for eight months . . . since he came back the townspeople had felt a change in him. . . . His friendship with old Mr. Gayheart grew closer and warmer. . . . He and his wife seemed more companionable. . . . And in business Gordon was more consistent" (177). These observations do not indicate that Gordon had become completely another self, but they make clear that the experience of those eight months had produced a significant change, and as Auclair had said of the change in Bishop Saint-Vallier, "After all, nobody can help his way" (229). Something of the old aggrandizing Harry remained.

For Willa Cather, the prairie and the sky above it, the song of the lark bore witness to that mystery as did music and art, all pointing beyond themselves toward a secret and hidden source.

We are also told, "As time dragged on [Harry] got used to that dark place in his mind, as people get used to going through the world on a wooden leg" (187). The wound, the remembrance of that last encounter with Lucy, was always with him, became part of him, just as the remembrance of Lucy became part of him and was "the best thing he had to remember" (187).

Wisdom lies in being able to accept our wounds, the thorns in the flesh or in our consciousness, that confront us daily with our imperfections and tempt us to become immured in a cell not unlike that of Jeannne Le Ber, except that our cell can be psychological or spiritual, rather than physical. We all have our wooden legs to get used to, but, as in the case of Harry Gordon and Bishop Saint-Vallier, suffering can break through our self-constructed virtues and competencies and teach us to embrace the foibles and failings of others and our own as well—not with despair, but with

compassion.

"Not stories, but life itself." The English Jesuit poet Gerald Manley Hopkins in a Commentary on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola describes the world as word, news of God. I think that this is how Cather understood the world. Given her sensibilities and shape of her spirit—her "way," to borrow from Euclide Auclair—Cather had a particular vision and a gift for following the lines of spiritual motion as they are perceived on the surface of life deeper into some point where revelation takes place. She was not afraid to attempt to track down the Holy Ghost through the tangle of human suffering and aspiration and idiocy.

This makes me wonder: was Cather after "the world broke into two" beset by nostalgia for a frontier past that was quickly vanishing, or was something deeper going on that was reflected in part by her decision to be confirmed?

If it was nostalgia, then I think it was nostalgia for a sense of mystery, a capacity for transcendence, something larger than our ability to know and construct and control, all of which were conceits of modern life and certain forms of religion. "Life was a rich thing," declared Professor St. Peter. "The king and the beggar had the same chance at miracles and great temptations and revelations. And that's what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own individual lives" (55).

For Cather, the prairie and the sky above it, the song of the lark bore witness to that mystery as did music and art, all pointing beyond themselves toward a secret and hidden source. The liturgy of the church in which Cather found her home also pointed beyond itself. It spoke a language of sign and symbol. It sought to name and celebrate but not contain or circumscribe that mystery. In its adherence to ancient forms of ritual and language, it brought the past into the present and stood ready to carry into the ever-expanding future.

It is within this mystery that each one of us lives and moves and has his or her being, and it is in the living and dying, the struggles, the failures, and the triumphs of men and women, old and young, who populate Cather's novels and stories that we find companions in our own aspiration and idiocy as we, too, attempt to track down the Holy Ghost . . . an attempt which should be pursued with gusto.

Frank T. Griswold *is a graduate of Harvard and Oxford. Prior to serving as the Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church, he was the Bishop of Chicago. Bishop Griswold has taught in theological seminaries in the United States and abroad. He is the author of several books, the most recent being* Praying our Days, A Companion and Guide.

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"Apotheosis of St. Francis"

275 STEPS FROM LA FONDA:
CATHER, PUVIS, AND SANTA FE'S ST. FRANCIS MURALS

John J. Murphy
Emeritus
Brigham Young University

Since our move to Santa Fe in July 2005, my wife, Sally, and I have attended many events in St. Francis Auditorium, part of the Museum of Fine Arts building opposite the northwest corner of the historic Plaza. A venue for lectures and concerts, including the celebrated Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, the hall is also accessible to tourists without their paying museum admission. The entire building is a major downtown landmark, a classic example of Pueblo-Spanish Revival style, designed by Rapp, Rapp, and Hendrickson and completed in 1916. (Embedded in the pavement running the length of the front are two-dozen bronze plaques—one of them devoted to Willa Cather—honoring artists who have contributed to the Santa Fe myth.) The façade combines elements of several Franciscan missions, foremost the one at

Ácoma, and the interior of the auditorium itself "recreated a Franciscan mission," as architectural critic Chris Wilson explains, "complete with elaborate ornamental gouge work, a herringbone ceiling, and a clerestory lighting scheme" (130). The walls of the hall are decorated with six murals depicting highlights in the life of St. Francis of Assisi and the history of Franciscan evangelizing in the Americas. Five of these murals were installed in 1917. The sixth, titled "Vision of Columbus," was added at a later date, circa 1936—conceivably to balance an organ installed that year (Sheppard 30).

As I stared at these murals during a chamber music recital a year ago last summer, I realized and then became convinced that they must have been inspired by the work of Puvis de Chavannes. Reacquaintance with the Puvis murals in the Panthéon during the 2007 International Cather Seminar in France no doubt helped penetrate my dullness. The glowing light, the pale coloring, the positioning of static figures, and the structural organization and religious content of the panels were obviously similar. Here were two sets of murals depicting patron saints—Geneviève of Paris and Francis of Santa Fe (The City of the Holy Faith of St. Francis of Assisi)—and arranged in single- and three-paneled sets. The Panthéon murals consist of two single panels (on opposite walls), each introducing a "triptych"; the Santa Fe murals follow the same plan on each side of the auditorium but add a triptych-type mural at the rear of the stage.

After some inquiry and a friend's gift of a 1989 monograph by Carl Sheppard on the Santa Fe murals, my hunch was confirmed. Sheppard writes as follows:

> . . . Pierre Puvis de Chavannes['s] . . . great murals for the Panthéon in Paris illustrated the life of the saviour of the city, Ste. Geneviève. For [the Boston Public Library], Puvis de Chavannes produced personifications set in tall, narrow panels, curved at the top, very similar to those which were to be designed for Santa Fe. The style of the French artist had great influence on the creation of the murals at Santa Fe. (34)

The five originally installed Santa Fe panels should be of interest to Cather readers because it seems highly unlikely she would not have seen them in this landmark building exactly 275 steps (by my own count) diagonally across the Plaza from La Fonda Hotel, her stopping place during frequent visits to Santa Fe from 1915 to 1926. She, too, (although much quicker than I) would have recognized the Puvis influence she shared with the three artists who painted these murals.

Puvis de Chavannes's influence on *Death Comes for the Archbishop* has generated a fair amount of critical speculation, considering the single paragraph acknowledgment Cather gave it in her 23 November 1927 letter to *The Commonweal*. She claimed that her introduction to the Panthéon murals inspired her to "try something like that in prose," that is, "something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment. . . . something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition," "to measure," as in the martyrdoms of the saints in the Golden Legend, "all human experiences [as 'of about the same importance'] . . . against one supreme spiritual experience. . . . The essence of such writing is not to hold the note, not to use an incident for all there is in it—but to touch and pass on" (*On Writing* 9). In 1965, Clinton Keeler attempted to apply these comments in his comparison of the Puvis murals and the *Archbishop*. Phyllis Rose more generally addressed Puvis relative to Cather's modernism in 1983. With the benefit of an excellent 2002 book-length study of Puvis by Jennifer L. Shaw (which, incidentally, never mentions

"Conversion of St. Francis"

Monumental style is evident in Cather's combination of vast and unbroken landscapes as background for large-scale characters.

the Panthéon murals), Italian critic Cristina Giorcelli in the following year extended Keeler's comparison. While my task here is not a detailed analysis of their arguments, certain of their conclusions do need to be affirmed simply because a comparison of Cather's novel and the Santa Fe murals is necessarily a three-way one involving Puvis. What qualities do all three works have as a valid basis of comparison?

Foremost seems to be what Keeler refers to as the "monumental style" used in Renaissance painting to depict "events ordered by a tradition" (256), or, as Rose nuances it, quoting Joseph Frank, "transmuting the time world of history into the timeline world of myth" (qtd. in Rose 143-44). Rose includes "monumentality" as one of the "aesthetic ideals of modernism" (124). (One is apt to forget, due to their style and subject, that the Panthéon murals were contemporary art when Cather saw them in 1902, the latter set having been installed in 1898, the year of Puvis's death.) Both critics relate this style (or ideal) to what Rose calls the "flat" and "almost friezelike" figures in Puvis that "emphasize the picture plane and refuse . . . to create the illusion of three-dimensional space," an "antinaturalistic" approach she sees duplicated in the *Archbishop*, "a series of stories so arranged as to blur the distinction between the past and the present, the miraculous and the mundane" (143). Keeler incapsulates such "flatness and . . . lack of accent" with "distant vision" (255-56), a term he borrows from Ortega y Gassett to indicate a reversal of (or deviation from) the trend toward subjectivity in art, a reversal emphasizing tradition and history rather than the individual artist. Keeler summarizes the process as the "distance" or "detachment" (256) of the artist, to which Rose refers in Cather as "anonymity" (139).

Monumental style is evident in Cather's combination of vast and unbroken landscapes as background for large-scale characters seen primarily from the outside and "approaching the condition of gods, goddesses or saints" (Rose 130). Keeler and Giorcelli include light and color as key ingredients of such epic qualities. The translucence achieved through Puvis's use of monotones and pale light in the murals "suggests a patina in which all lines are softened; or the light seems a medium in which all objects and figures are suspended outside of time," writes Keeler, thus giving "the effect of a stylized monument" (253). "The manner in which the light and space are used [in the *Archbishop*], the manner of stasis instead of accent, of distant vision instead of perspective, of suffusion of light instead of dramatic action," he concludes, "is parallel to what is 'monumental' in Puvis's frescoes [sic]" (257). Giorcelli confirms this claim by listing color correspondences in Cather's text.

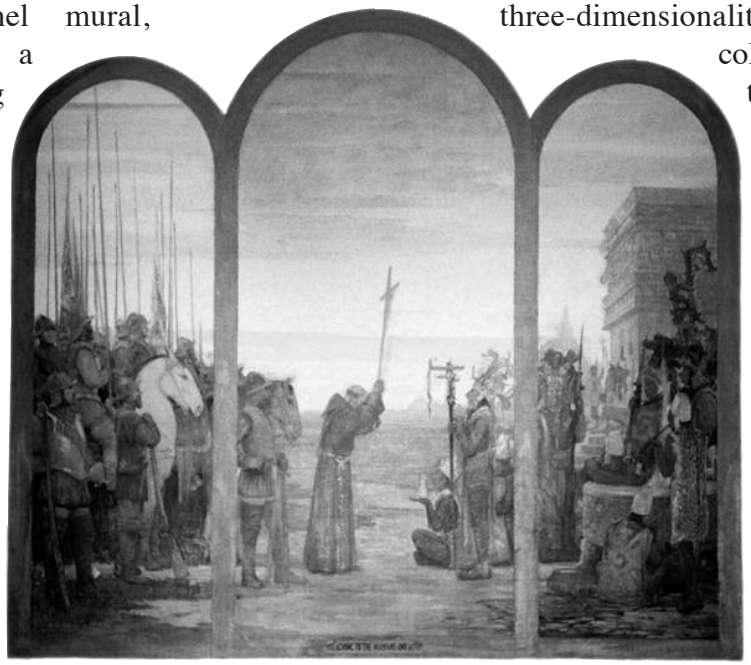
"Renunciation of Santa Clara"

Correspondences in subject depictions are easy to spot, if not always easy to interpret.

The landscapes in both [works] are sacralized through soft tones—light grey, azure blue, pale green, pink, yellow in Puvis's murals; in Cather's text the rising moon is a "golden rim against the deep blue velvet of the night" (112); the evening sky is "pale blue" (37); the clouds are "purplish lead-coloured" (64) or "rose-colored" (132); the sand dunes are "yellow as ochre" (89); the "olive-coloured" rabbit bush is "covered with a thatch of bloom, yellow as gorse" (94); in the evening the "yellow rocks" turn "grey" (91); the country is "pink and blue and yellow" (164), and the moon throws "a pale phosphorescent luminousness over the heavens." (211) (78, citations from the *Archbishop*).

Correspondences in subject depictions are easy to spot, if not always easy to interpret. For example, Puvis's initial one-panel mural, depicting Geneviève as a child praying before a twig cross affixed to a tree, parallels Latour before the cruciform tree. Puvis's first tripartite panel, Geneviève being blessed by two miter-wearing bishops, anticipates the joint expeditions of Cather's two missionary protagonists. Puvis's second single panel of a mature Geneviève watching over Paris under a full moon reminds Giorcelli of Latour's meeting with Sada on a full moon-lit night. Less obvious parallels include what seem to be diversions from the main subject: an invalid being carried from a house while the child saint is being blessed by the bishops; a collapsing male figure being attended by a solicitous couple at the feet of two indifferent friars as Geneviève distributes food during the siege of Paris in the second tripartite panel. Such "diversions" have counterparts in the inset stories defining the structure of the novel. There is also patterning in the murals that matches Cather's repetitions and variations of imagery (water, caves, vegetation) and incidents (miracles, death, clerical dinners). A final correspondence can be seen in Puvis's fragmentation of figures and events to accommodate the Panthéon's half columns that interrupt his scenes. Such absences allow the viewer to complete the scene, just as what Jo Ann Middleton identifies as "vacuoles" in Cather (55) encourage the creative involvement of readers.

Characteristics of Puvis's monumental style are immediately evident in the Santa Fe murals. The figures are stylized, allegorical, otherworldly; they are painted against expansive landscapes and resist three-dimensionality. The use of light and coloring is startlingly similar to Puvis's and creates the illusion of detachment and anonymity characteristic of distant vision. The color tones are soft; lines are indistinct; a pale glow suffuses each panel. The series is a clear example of history being transformed into myth by tradition. The murals are arranged according to "historical" chronology clockwise from the left to



"Preaching to the Mayas and the Aztecs"

the right of the hall, from "Conversion of St. Francis" to "Building of the Missions in New Mexico." They were titled and planned (to satisfy the tastes of their patrons, Edgar Lee Hewett and Frank Springer) by a young Mormon artist from Utah, Donald Beauregard, who died of cancer after finishing only one panel. The murals were completed by Kenneth Chapman and Carlos Vierra from the sketches left by Beauregard.

"The Conversion" (see page 70) is a single panel depicting Francis kneeling and looking toward a crucifix positioned above an arched opening through which the fortified city of Assisi is visible on a distant hillside. The saint has cast aside his rich garments for a life of poverty and extends his arms, palms up, in supplication. The panel is a counterpart of Puvis's Geneviève kneeling before the twig cross on a tree and of Cather's young bishop kneeling before the cruciform tree.

The second mural, a triptych, "Renunciation of Santa Clara" (see page 71), is a similar "conversion" scene in the life of the founder of the Franciscan nuns. Clara also casts off her rich garments; stands in a white shift; and is offered both a white rose, perhaps a symbol of virginity, and a red one by seemingly weightless figures that float above the flowery lawn to her left. To her right a more substantial figure gestures in despair at the renunciation. The landscape beyond is vast as in the Geneviève murals and Cather's novel, although the figures generally resemble those in the more allegorical murals Puvis painted for the Sorbonne (which Beauregard may have seen during his stays in Paris) and the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon. Cather saw a version of one of the Lyon murals, *A Vision of Antiquity*, in Pittsburgh when it was acquired by the Carnegie Institute in 1897, and she commented on the "individual isolation" of his figures, his "noble but angular ladies," and "pale primeval shades" in her early reviews (*World & Parish* I: 571, 763-64). The central panel of this mural is the only one Beauregard lived to complete. Each of the side panels presents what at first seem diversions from the main subject. To the right, St. Francis administers to a wounded and crippled peasant; to the left individuals respond variously to the central figure, and a young equestrian figure seems to be occupied elsewhere. As in the other three-part murals (and in Puvis's columnar separations), details behind the painted-in oval frames are implied.

The place of honor in the hall—the wall above the stage or platform—is given to the third mural, "Apotheosis of St. Francis" (see page 69), a verdant tripartite scene centering on the saint kneeling beside a gushing stream and offering a chalice of water to a female figure. Cather readers will be reminded of the "life-giving stream" and the "grass and trees and flowers and human life" in "Hidden Water" (29, 31). Aside from Francis and the young woman accepting the chalice, the figures seem detached, diversions from the main action—for example, a woman in the right panel lifts her baby toward fruit on a tree. However, Beauregard's original sketch identifies each as personifications, somewhat relating them to the saint's character and contributions. They are, from left to right, Art (with the palette), Theology (hooded), Religion (receiving the water), Literature (a young man), Philosophy (an old man), and Society (the mother and child) (Sheppard 24). It is not a stretch to note here the critical habit of associating the characters Latour encounters in the novel with particular virtues and vices.

Between the "Apotheosis" and the next mural of interest to Cather readers, "Preaching to the Mayas and the Aztecs," is the 1930s-installed "Vision of Columbus at Rábida," which expands the influence of Francis to the New World. "Preaching"

"Building the Missions in New Mexico"

(see page 72 and front cover) is a triptych mural dramatically illustrating the monumental agenda of transforming history into myth. As Sheppard indicates, this mid-sixteenth-century event would be "hypothetical," since "[n]o peaceable meeting ever took place. The Maya were still revolting in 1697. The scene, however, accords with the peaceful ideal of a religious society in the context of the mural cycle" (27). Noteworthy in this mural are both the extreme stasis of potentially explosive figures and the glowing expanse of sky.

Finally, and most directly connected to Cather's novel in subject matter, is the single-panel mural "Building of the Missions in New Mexico" (see page 73), depicting three Franciscans studying plans for the construction of a church. The figures are realistic, as is the expansive landscape of the mesa country beyond. Natives can be seen along a path leading to an Ácoma-like mesa stronghold. This mural emphasizes my argument for considering all of them as a probable influence on Cather. In them, the style of Puvis de Chavannes, which Cather claimed as an influence, was applied to the subject and setting of her narrative—building (or rebuilding) the missions in New Mexico.

***John J. Murphy**, veteran Cather scholar and member of the Willa Cather Foundation, is the author of* My Ántonia: The Road Home*, volume editor of the Cather Scholarly Editions of* Death Comes for the Archbishop *and* Shadows on the Rock. *He co-directed the Eleventh International Cather Seminar in France in 2007 and is co-editor of the forthcoming Cather Studies 8 collection of essays from that seminar,* Willa Cather: A Writer's Worlds*, to be published this fall by the University of Nebraska Press. Professor Emeritus of Brigham Young University, Murphy retired with his wife Sally to Santa Fe in 2005.*

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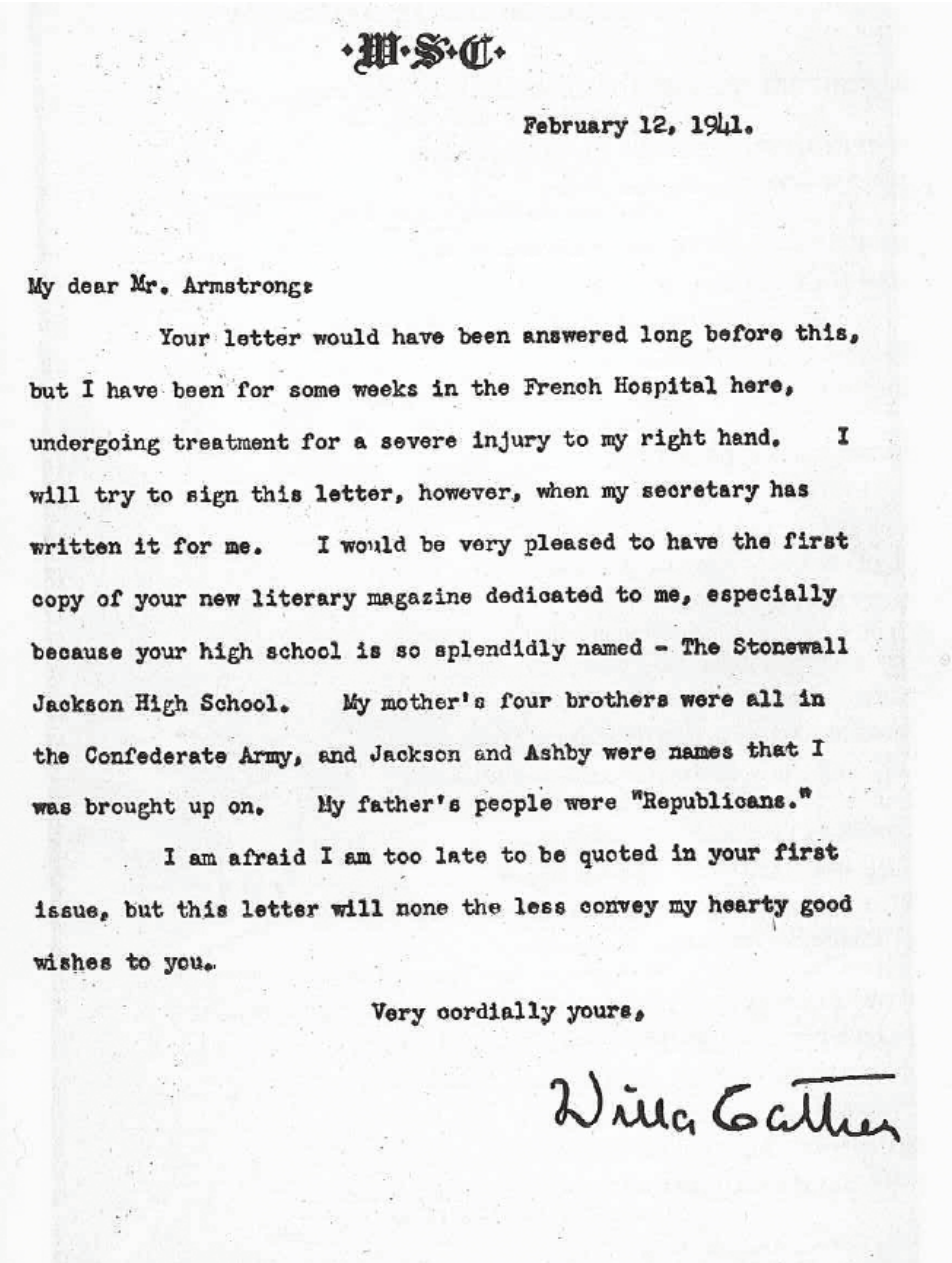
NEW LETTER AFFIRMS CATHER AS SOUTHERNER AND TEACHER

Ann Romines, George Washington Univeristy
& Steven B. Shively, Utah State University

Last August, a surprising envelope arrived at the Cather Foundation office from a retirement community in Claremont, California. In a letter, Angelyn Kelley Riffenburgh explained that she had recently found something among her memorabilia that two friends in the community, Cather scholars James Woodress and Margaret O'Connor, thought the Foundation would find interesting: a copy of her high school literary magazine. She explained, "My teacher was a great admirer of Willa Cather and dedicated the first issue to her." The envelope contained the first edition of *The Yearling*, published by students at Stonewall Jackson High School in Charleston, West Virginia, in May 1941. On page 3, the magazine features a letter from Willa Cather. Ms. Riffenburgh wrote, "It is a great letter with a lot of information. I hope it will be as meaningful to you as it is to me."

Cather's letter to Stonewall Jackson High School students in West Virginia is indeed meaningful and a boon for scholars and readers. First, because it has already been published, there is no prohibition of our publishing it here in full (as we are prohibited from publishing the thousands of unpublished Cather letters). Second, the letter is an important reminder of how much a Virginian Willa Cather still was in



W·S·C·

February 12, 1941.

My dear Mr. Armstrong:

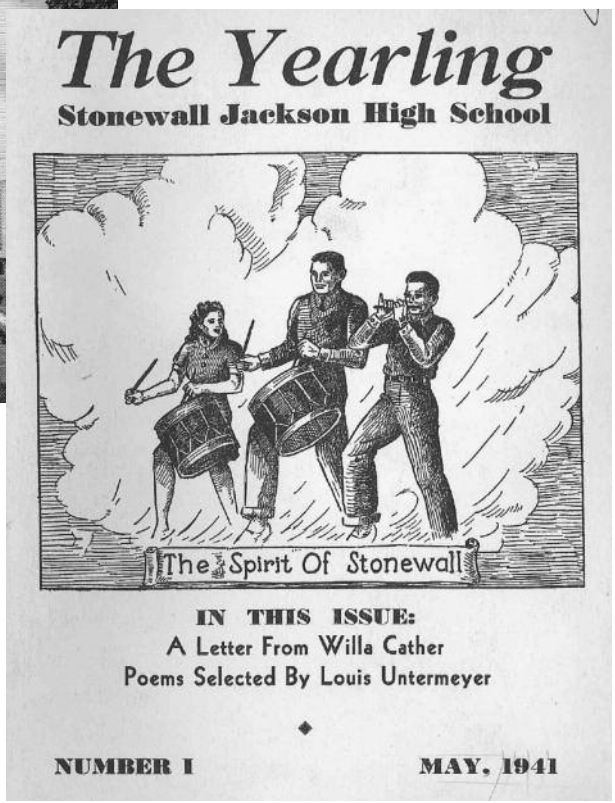
Your letter would have been answered long before this, but I have been for some weeks in the French Hospital here, undergoing treatment for a severe injury to my right hand. I will try to sign this letter, however, when my secretary has written it for me. I would be very pleased to have the first copy of your new literary magazine dedicated to me, especially because your high school is so splendidly named - The Stonewall Jackson High School. My mother's four brothers were all in the Confederate Army, and Jackson and Ashby were names that I was brought up on. My father's people were "Republicans."

I am afraid I am too late to be quoted in your first issue, but this letter will none the less convey my hearty good wishes to you.

Very cordially yours,

Willa Cather

Pictured left: Stonewall Jackson High School, in a postcard view c. 1941.



Pictured right: Volume I, Number 1 of Stonewall Jackson High School's literary magazine.

1941, at the age of sixty-seven. Her Virginia birthplace, where she spent her first nine years, was near the West Virginia line, and many family members and friends, with whom the Cather family kept in touch after the move to Nebraska, lived in West Virginia—which had, of course, been a part of Virginia until the Civil War. Cather underlines the extent to which issues of the war had been a part of the climate of her childhood. Stonewall Jackson High School is "splendidly named," she says, and she was "brought up on" such names as Jackson's and Turner Ashby's. Both generals, Confederate casualties, were based in the Shenandoah Valley, near Cather's birthplace, and were venerated locally. Ashby, although his name is less familiar today, is still a hero in Cather's Frederick County, and the local Confederate Memorial Day is celebrated annually on the anniversary of his death. In Cather's Virginia novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, which had been published just six months before she wrote this letter, she mentions the two generals, who were "both operating in Frederick County [and] . . . gave people plenty to talk about." In fact, she devotes two paragraphs to the career of Ashby, who died young and was admired by both Union and Confederate supporters in the area. "He was all that the old-time Virginians admired. . . . 'Shortlived and glorious'" (268-69). Cather tells the Stonewall Jackson students that her own four Boak uncles (her "mother's brothers") also fought in the Confederate army. This is a reminder that her memory could be slightly hazy about matters of family history; in fact, only three Boak brothers were Confederate soldiers (a fourth died before the war began). Cather also acknowledges that her father's family had very different allegiances—as "Republicans," they were anti-slavery supporters of Lincoln. Cather herself became a Republican as an adult—although her enduring fondness for Confederate heroism is still evident in this 1941 letter.

Teachers may be especially interested in Cather's letter because of its purpose to support high school students, a teacher, and a literary magazine. Cather knew such support herself, noting its importance in one

of her earliest surviving letters; in this letter, which she wrote at the age of 15 to Mrs. Helen Stowell (who lived on a Webster County ranch), Cather lists the books she is reading and remarks that her teacher had praised her literary interests in a comment on her report card. Cather later provided educational support for her siblings and her nieces and nephews, and, from her time as a schoolteacher in Pittsburgh, gave encouragement to her own students. "The Best Years," probably Cather's last completed story, is notable for County Superintendent of Schools', Miss Knightley's, generous praise of the young teacher Lesley Ferguesson. This new letter affirms Cather's life-long interest in the literary education of young people.

Cather's later years are often perceived as being marked by a retreat from the world and by a certain testiness about the burdens of fame. This letter, no doubt solicited primarily because of her fame, is pleasant, almost chatty, in mentioning her family and her Southern heritage. Cather's "hearty good wishes" seem sincere. Combined with her letters to former students and other teachers, her support of the education of her nieces and nephews, and the many references to teachers and students in her writing, this letter offers additional support that Cather's interest in education remained vigorous long after her own teaching career ended in 1906.

Cather's letter in *The Yearling* gains additional meaning when it is read alongside another letter she wrote on the same day; this letter, to a Mr. Watson, reports that she is glad young people like her books. Writing, she notes, can be a good experience. While Cather probably never read the selections in *The Yearling*, her support of these students' amateur writing suggests that she still remembered the importance of encouragement. That one of the student contributors valued the magazine enough to preserve it through the years and now makes it available to others demonstrates that Cather's teacherly instincts were keen.

Ms. Riffenburgh's gift of this copy of *The Yearling* is an important addition to the Cather Foundation's Archives. In addition to Cather's letter, the magazine demonstrates the enterprise of its young editors and their advisor, who also succeeded in persuading "world-famous poet and critic" Louis Untermeyer to judge student poems. In 1941 Willa Cather was much concerned by the acceleration of World War II in Europe, and many of the poems in the magazine—such as Untermeyer's first choice, "Battlefields"—are touched by intense patriotism and awareness of war and military life, anticipating the coming of Pearl Harbor later that year, and the changes that U.S. entry into the war would make in many of these young lives. Even the cover art, "The Spirit of Stonewall," suggests a revival of patriotic, military spirit, with three young musicians in modern dress marching as they play fife and drums. In a contemporary touch of which Willa Cather might have approved, one of the drummers is a girl. Our thanks to Angelyn Kelley Riffenburgh for this unexpected and wonderful gift!

Ann Romines *is Professor of English at The George Washington University. She is author or editor of several books on Cather and American women's writing and cultures, most recently the Scholarly Edition of* Sapphira and the Slave Girl, *and is currently editing a Willa Cather cookbook.*

Steven Shively *is an Associate Professor of English at Utah State University, where he teaches courses in American Literature and English Education. He is co-editor of the journal* Teaching Cather *and the book* Teaching the Works of Willa Cather.

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THE WILLA CATHER FOUNDATION

GEORGE GERWIG'S DOUBLE TRAGEDY AND CATHER'S "DOUBLE BIRTHDAY"

Timothy Bintrim, Saint Francis University &
Kari Ronning, The Cather Project, UN-Lincoln

Figure 1: At center with circular stained glass window, the Charles W. and Henrietta Gerwig home at 66/906 Cedar Avenue, in former Allegheny City, prototype of the Engelhardts' mansion. Photo by Tim Bintrim.

When Willa Cather and George William Gerwig met at the University of Nebraska in 1891, George was a lordly master's student and a prominent "man on campus," while Cather was a lowly freshman, only beginning to imagine herself as a writer (Slote, *Kingdom* 18). During the 1891 school year, as George completed his master's thesis in English Literature (employing the "counting method" of Professor L. A. Sherman, whom Cather was learning to detest), both were active in literary societies and contributing to campus publications, including the *Lasso* and the *Hesperian*. During these same months, they also rubbed elbows attending plays and writing dramatic criticism for the Geres' Lincoln *Journal*. Bernice Slote contends Cather learned as much of the art of play reviewing from George as she had from Dr. Julius Tyndale (*Kingdom* 15). Often mentioned in the *Hesperian* that he served as business manager, George served as critic of his literary society when Cather was winning debates for her society (Ronning). Awarded his master's degree in 1895, George returned to his family home in Allegheny City (then an independent municipality north of Pittsburgh), secured an appointment as Secretary to the Allegheny City Board of Education, and married his high school sweetheart, Margaret McGrew, daughter of an Allegheny oil merchant.

Fortunately for Cather, George did not forget his associates. James Woodress surmises that during the early summer of 1896, George gave her name to James W. Axtell, the publisher of the *National Stockman and Journal*, who was just then seeking an experienced managing editor for his new venture, *The Home Monthly* (114). When Cather came east in July 1896, George continued to be her "good Mr. Gerwig," showering her with courtly attention surprising for a young man who had been married only a month. Cather wrote to Mariel Gere that one night George had taken her on a

steamboat cruise thirty miles down the Ohio River to the village of Economy and back. On the return trip, she flirted with a Princeton boy named Tony Cornelius while two African Americans serenaded them on banjo (W.C. to M.G., 4 Aug. 1896; Stout # 29). When teenaged Dorothy Canfield visited Cather a few months later, George took them both on a tour of the steel mills at Homestead (Brown 81). Curiously, nowhere in her letters does Cather mention George's new wife, Margaret McGrew Gerwig (Sullivan "Gerwig House" 23). Scholars have long assumed that the "Mrs. Gerwig" who introduced Cather to the city's women's clubs was she, but Margaret's name does not appear in the detailed attendance records for 1896-1901 of the Pittsburgh Women's Club, some of which are written in the elegant handwriting of the club's recording secretary, Mrs. Henrietta Gerwig ("Women's Club of Pittsburgh").

The records do establish beyond any doubt that George's mother, Henrietta "Lettie" Gerwig, was a power in the federated women's clubs of Pittsburgh and Allegheny City. It must have been she, and not Margaret, who invited Cather to the meeting of the federated clubs held at the home of the Rev. and Mrs. E. R. Donehoo at Beaver, where Cather claimed she stood and reeled off her "second prep" essay on Carlyle that her audience assumed was extemporaneous. Perhaps Cather exaggerated the splash she made at this meeting, for neither the club minutes nor the newspaper reviews of the meeting mention her oration (Women's Club of Pittsburgh Records). Although there was some truth in Cather's claim to Mariel Gere that "Pittsburgh was ruled by women's clubs," Cather appears to have exaggerated her own popularity when she claimed in a Lincoln paper that she had been asked to join a half-dozen clubs (Curtin 517, n. 18). Never a joiner, she probably attended few meetings during her Pittsburgh decade, and only then as a guest of regular members such as May Willard, Ethel Litchfield, and Isabelle McClung.

The lack of substantiation for her Carlyle splash story and the long mistaken identification of "Mrs. Gerwig" suggest that a closer look at Cather's friendship with the Gerwigs is needed, backed by the

Figure 2: Grave of Margaret McGrew Gerwig and her daughter Henrietta in the Gerwig family plot at Highwood Cemetery, Pittsburgh. Photo by Tim Bintrim.

sort of archival research that informs Peter M. Sullivan's article "The Gerwig House: Willa Cather's Friends on Pittsburgh's North Side" (*Western Pennsylvania History*, Summer 2003). Building on Sullivan's research, we find that despite the steadiness of George Gerwig's professional life—he kept a lifetime appointment as Secretary to the Board of Education in Allegheny City (1892-1911) and then Pittsburgh (1912-1929)—his personal life was rocked by a double tragedy, just at the beginning of the new century when Cather was depending heavily on him as a friend. This experience may have planted in her imagination the double loss experienced by Doctor Engelhardt in her late, long story, "Double Birthday" (1929), set in the Gerwigs' Allegheny City. Although Cather herself identified Dr. Julius Tyndale as the prototype of her aged doctor (Woodress, *Literary* 419), Tyndale seems to have suffered no profound personal loss equivalent to Doctor Engelhardt's twice losing his prodigy Marguerite Thiesinger: first through her eloping with an improvident insurance agent, and then to her early death.

When Cather first knew George and Margaret in Allegheny City, they were still living with George's parents and brother in the family home at 66 Cedar Avenue in the prosperous West Allegheny German neighborhood known as "Deutschtown." Located just

north of Pittsburgh across the Allegheny River, Allegheny City maintained its independence until 1907, when a forced consolidation with Pittsburgh hastened the neighborhood's decline, mirrored in the story as the social decline of the Albert Engelhardts, whose name sounds much like "Allegheny." Shortly before Allegheny was consolidated as Pittsburgh's North Side, its residential neighborhoods were re-numbered, at which time the Gerwig home became number 906 Cedar Avenue. Sullivan found the house still standing in good condition, its old number 66 incised in marble near the front door (24).

George's father, Charles W. Gerwig, may have been one of Cather's models for patriarch August Engelhardt in "Double Birthday"—"a gallant officer in the Civil War, and afterward a public-spirited citizen" (43). Like Dr. Julius Tyndale, Charles had served with distinction as an officer. For several decades after, Charles was active in local government, serving as Head Clerk of Allegheny County 1882-1887 and a member of the Allegheny City Council 1885-1899 (Harper 3: 254). Unlike the "pig-headed" but indulgent August Engelhardt, Charles had no "glass factory up the river"; instead, he worked as the secretary of the Teutonia Insurance Co., a firm owned in part by Henry Gerwig, a relative who, for several decades, paid the lease on 66/906 Cedar Avenue as well as the adjacent twin building, indicated on period fire insurance maps as Teutonia's neighborhood office (Sullivan 24-25). Charles's two sons, George and Edgar, both worked for Teutonia intermittently (Sullivan 25). While George made his career in public school administration, Edgar remained in actuarial work; by the early 1930s Edgar had become vice president of Republic Insurance, Teutonia's successor (Harper 3: 254).

Like her husband and sons, Mrs. Henrietta Gerwig had an executive personality. A member of the elite Pittsburgh Women's Club since 1893, she served as its recording secretary in 1900 and as club president from 1901-1902. One of the twin cities' most exclusive clubs, its membership was limited to about twenty ladies. Meetings were usually held at the Fifth Avenue Y.W.C.A. or at the homes of members. For her inauguration as club president on September 17, 1901, Henrietta Gerwig hosted a meeting at her home for twenty-two members and two guests. (Cather was not on this list.) A newspaper account of the meeting tells that "dainty refreshments" were executed in the club color, yellow, and that "both the dining and drawing rooms were done in the same shade, the decorations being goldenrod and other flowers of autumn" (Easton). The club heard many distinguished speakers during the late 1890s, including Burd Paterson (the president of the Pittsburgh Press Club) and columnists Arthur Burgoyne (the *Leader*'s "All Sorts" man), Erasmus Wilson (the *Commercial Gazette*'s "Quiet Observer"), and George Seibel, then Sunday editor of the *Gazette-Times* ("Women's Club of Pittsburgh"). All these journalists became Cather's friends during her first years in Pittsburgh; possibly some of these friendships were brokered by the Gerwigs.

For a short time after their marriage, George and Margaret Gerwig lived at his family's home on Cedar Avenue, an ornate, two-and-a-half story red brick row-house that Sullivan found looking much as it did when Cather frequented the neighborhood more than 110 years ago (See Figure 1) ("The Gerwig House" 25-26). Although in many respects the Gerwig house conforms with Cather's description of the Engelhardts' "many-gabled, so-German house on the Park, in Allegheny," Sullivan notes several differences: it is not a detached dwelling, but a row house with a twin next door; its circular stained glass window boasts a simple iris motif rather than the ornate Venetian scene described in the story, and the house is not wide by city standards, but is deeper than one would expect ("Double Birthday" 45). The complicated roofline with gables and turrets, ornamental brickwork, and location facing East Park all make 906 Cedar Avenue indisputably the prototype of the Engelhardt's mansion. What remains to be argued is that George and Margaret Gerwig are partial models for the composite characters of Doctor Engelhardt and Marguerite Thiesinger.

Sullivan determined that George and Margaret Gerwig's marriage had taken place on June 4, 1896, a little less than a month before Cather's arrival ("The Gerwig House" 23). It was a quiet ceremony because

the family was still in deep mourning for Margaret's mother, Margaret McClurkan McGrew, who had died the previous November at the age of 56 ("McGrew, Mrs. Margaret"). It appears the McGrews and Gerwigs, like the fictional Engelhardts, reused family names: Margaret's father, Algernon Percy McGrew, named his third son (b. 1880) after himself, and George and Margaret Gerwig would name their only son (b. 1900) Percy McGrew Gerwig ("A. Percy McGrew"). Their first daughter, Margaret Darsie (b. Jan 1, 1901), was given the name of her mother (who was 33 at the time, slightly older than Doctor Engelhardt, 25, when his namesake was born); "Darsie," as the younger Margaret would be known, had been given the name of a great aunt on her father's side ("Gerwig, George W., Mr.").

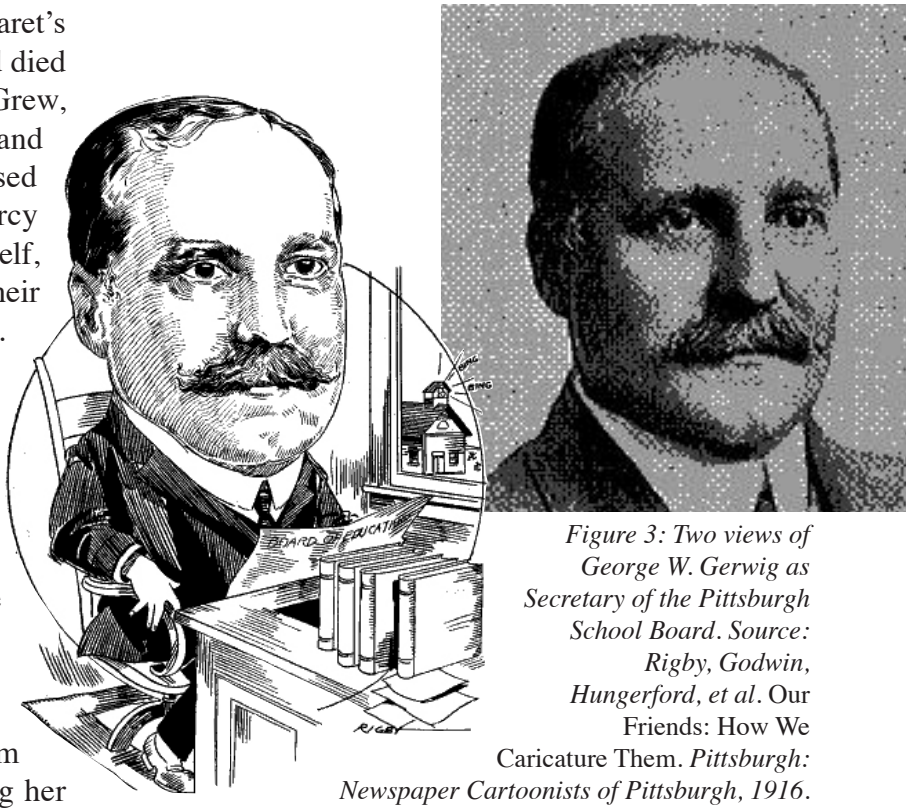

Figure 3: Two views of George W. Gerwig as Secretary of the Pittsburgh School Board. Source: Rigby, Godwin, Hungerford, et al. Our Friends: How We Caricature Them. *Pittsburgh: Newspaper Cartoonists of Pittsburgh, 1916.*

Evidently, Margaret McGrew Gerwig became pregnant almost immediately after Darsie's birth—and died seven months thereafter from complications of this third pregnancy, surviving her own mother by fewer than six years. Margaret was only 34 at her death ("Margaret Gerwig" obituary, July 11-12 *Commercial Gazette*). The cause of death, according to cemetery records, was "gastritis"—a general description for any swelling of the lining of the stomach, with many possible causes, including infection (Highwood Cemetery Records). The infant Henrietta, apparently named for George's mother, preceded Margaret in death by three days, on July 9, 1901. Although the deaths occurred at home (the George Gerwigs were then living at 1012 Fifth Avenue, Avalon, PA), funeral services were held at 906 Cedar Avenue in Allegheny City. Mother and child were interred beneath the same stone in Highwood Cemetery (See Figure 2; Highwood Cemetery Records).

For George Gerwig, as for Doctor Engelhardt, the death of his young wife and infant daughter must have been a "crushing disappointment" ("Double Birthday" 45). Cather's comment that Marguerite's "mother and grandmother had died of the same disease" ("Double Birthday" 52) may hint not just at the cancer which kills Marguerite but also the unrelieved strain of childbearing. George's reaction is perhaps reflected in the profound grief of Doctor Engelhardt, who, thirty years later, still mourns his "lost Lenore."

Although Cather favored the name Margaret and its variations in her short stories (March 464), the particular spelling of "Marguerite" may have been prompted by Margaret McGrew's childhood nickname, "Dasey," as she is named in the 1880 census (the common ox-eye daisy is known as the "marguerite") ("A. Percy McGrew"). (In Cather's story, Marguerite Thiesinger is known to the Engelhardts by a Germanic nickname for Margaret, "Gretchen.") Born in 1867, "Dasey" McGrew was exactly the age of her future husband, increasing the chance that Dasey/Margaret and George had been beaus at the Allegheny High School, where both would have graduated in 1885.

Cather did not attend Margaret's funeral, held at 906 Cedar Avenue the afternoon of Friday, July 12, 1901 ("Margaret Gerwig" Obituary). The *Nebraska State Journal* noted on July 9 that Miss Cather had arrived at Red Cloud the previous morning to begin her summer vacation. Thus, Cather must have learned of George's

Figure 4: The Gerwig family plot at Highwood Cemetery: Margaret and Henrietta, Percy, and George W. in foreground; George's parents in second row. Photo by Tim Bintrim.

loss some time after the fact and from a considerable distance (Ronning "Cather Chronology"). When she did learn of the double tragedy, we can imagine the difficulty of expressing her condolences to George and the elder Gerwigs.

After Margaret's death, George did not turn to moribund brooding as did Doctor Engelhardt. He did temporarily return to the family home, possibly to accept his family's help with two infant children. From later reports, it appears the children received care from a nanny named Mrs. S. M. Palmer ("Percy M. Gerwig"). Though a widower in his early thirties, George never remarried. In addition to his work as secretary to the Board of Education, he pursued graduate studies at the Western University of Pennsylvania (later the University of Pittsburgh), where he earned a Ph.D. in 1904 (See Figure 3; "Gerwig, George William").

In 1918, the world again broke in two for Dr. Gerwig. His son Percy had enlisted in the Marine Air Corps on his eighteenth birthday, hoping to enter active service before the war ended. On October 22, 1918, two weeks before he would have earned his aviator's wings, Percy was killed in a training accident at an air base in Miami, Florida ("Percy M. Gerwig"). Highwood Cemetery Records list "fractured skull" as the cause of death. The Great War ended just three weeks after Percy's death with the signing of the November 11 Armistice. In "Double Birthday," as Doctor Engelhardt is overcome by grief at Marguerite's impending death, he wanders like a stricken man about New York City's Central Park until he is transfixed by the scent of the flowering linden tree, a tree that, according to German mythology, had the power to assuage grief. Under the spreading linden tree Doctor Engelhardt "cried like a woman," demanding of heaven, "Youth, art, love, dreams, trueheartedness—why must they go out of the summer world into darkness? Warum, warum?" (53). If any other man would be justified in howling "*Why*?" at the heavens, it might be George Gerwig, who lost his wife when she was 34 and his only son when he was 18. But instead of plunging into doubt, George appears to have thrown himself into work, creative as well as professional. After his retirement from the Pittsburgh School Board in 1929, he continued as secretary for the nonprofit Frick Foundation, which funded summer scholarships for teachers and public school programming. Late in his life he organized the Percy Publishing Company, which published several of his own eleven books, whose titles—*Shakespeare's Ideals of Womanhood, Jesus: A Sister's Memories, Washington, the Young Leader,* and *Everychild: An American Ideal*—sound uncompromisingly idealistic.

George's daughter, Darsie, graduated from Wellesley in 1920, the year of her grandmother Henrietta's passing. Darsie married attorney Russell G. Nesbitt of Wheeling, West Virginia. George died Nov. 11, 1950, at Darsie's home in Wheeling ("Gerwig, George William"). His body was returned to join the rest of his family on the hillside at Pittsburgh's Highwood Cemetery (See Figure 4).

How then should this study of Cather's friendship with the Gerwigs affect our reading of "Double Birthday"? First, Cather's abiding debt to George as

mentor partially explains the authentic feeling that permeates her account of Doctor Engelhardt's double loss. Doctor Engelhardt, apparently a lapsed Catholic, makes peace with God under the linden tree after heaven allows him the chance to bear Marguerite's death pangs in her stead (53). Many years afterward, Doctor Engelhardt makes an occasional pilgrimage to the monastery of the Passionists in "the hills above Mount Oliver" (53). Like the brothers of Saint Paul of the Cross, he seems to have become reconciled to human suffering on earth through identification with Christ's Passion. Doctor Engelhardt's hard-won acceptance of God's ways may reflect Cather's admiration of George Gerwig, whose faith survived every trial.

Cather's silence about George's wife in her early letters from Pittsburgh seems to hint that she and Margaret had little in common. Cather had not been in Pittsburgh to share George's immediate grief, though she no doubt saw its effects later. Although no letters to the Gerwigs have been recovered, it seems likely that in September 1903, George, as Secretary of Education, helped her acquire a more enviable appointment at Allegheny High School. On her commute via streetcar from the McClungs' to the high school in Allegheny, she would have passed 906 Cedar Avenue daily, which was only a block from her workplace; at that time the high school, like the Gerwigs' house, faced East Park.

George's mother, Henrietta, also seems to have made a lasting impression on the young Cather; Mrs. Engelhardt's collection of fine table linen, one of the "survivals of a past more loosely woven," serves as the central symbol of the story ("Double Birthday" 41). Much of this linen, Cather mentions significantly, will be Young Albert's wedding gift to Elsa Rudder, who is also Uncle Doctor's designated heir, thus carrying a slip of German hospitality from the Engelhardts' glory days in Deutschtown, conserved on the dingy South Side, back again to Elsa and Carl's newlyweds' home in lower Allegheny ("Double Birthday" 54, 59). The gift of this linen assures us that Elsa is not coming down in the world by marrying a butcher in the Allegheny Market, but is carrying on the Engelhardt/Allegheny tradition of making a home comfortable and artistic, whatever one's material circumstances. Despite aging, modernization, gentrification, and decay, "Double Birthday" ends on a comic upswing, the prospect of a double marriage between Elsa Rutter and Carl Abberbock, Marjorie Parmenter and Young Albert. We can only hope that Doctor Engelhardt survives to be Best Man.

Note: We thank Peter M. Sullivan for critiquing a draft of this essay.

Tim Bintrim *is Associate Professor of English at Saint Francis University in Loretto, PA, home of Charles M. Schwab, the gambling "iron king" alluded to in "Paul's Case." His dissertation on Cather's Pittsburgh writings led to articles co-written with Mark Madigan on the journalistic prototype of "Paul's Case" and the restoration of C. S. Reinhardt's grave, and an earlier collaboration with Kari Ronning on Cather's friendship with Rev. J. R. Henry, the "Cumberland minister" of "Paul's Case." Tim remains interested in Cather's unrecovered journalism.*

Kari Ronning *is Research Associate Professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she is textual editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. As historical editor for* Obscure Destinies *and* My Mortal Enemy*, and as co-director of the Cather Journalism Project for the Cather Archive, she is particularly interested in the places and people Cather knew—an interest she shares with collaborator Tim Bintrim.*

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Smith College and the Willa Cather Foundation present

The International Cather Seminar 2011
Willa Cather and the Nineteenth Century

June 20-25, 2011
Smith College, Northampton, MA

Call for Papers

While we welcome a broad array of approaches to Cather's writing, we hope via the work of the 13th International Seminar to examine the legacy of nineteenth-century culture in Cather's life and work and to explore the transition from a Victorian to a modernist America. We envision this as a continuation and perhaps a complication of the conversation about the nature of Cather's modernism that emerged so fruitfully from the Chicago Seminar. The Seminar encourages papers addressing a wide range of intersections between Cather's work and this pivotal cultural moment, including the following:

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- **Willa Cather and Histories: of Race, of Sexuality, of Class Identity**
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- **Willa Cather, the Slave Narrative, and the Antebellum South**
- **International Approaches to Teaching Cather**
- **Willa Cather and New England**

The Seminar will take place at Smith College, in Northampton, MA, a setting replete with connections to Cather's life and work. We encourage papers that consider Cather and New England within the context of turn-of-the-century culture. Diverse perspectives are encouraged, as are proposals for sessions focused on exchange rather than formal presentation.

Interested contributors should submit abstracts of 500 words with a cover letter and brief résumé by March 1, 2011. Papers should be 10-12 double-spaced pages for a 20-minute presentation time.

Seminar Co-Directors

Anne Kaufman
Milton Academy
170 Centre Street
Milton, MA 02186
anne.l.kaufman@gmail.com

Richard Millington
Smith College
Northampton, MA 01060
rmilling@smith.edu

BETTY KORT: AN APPRECIATION

Bruce Baker

Betty and Ron Kort in the Red Cloud Opera House Gallery

After many years of devoted service to the Cather Foundation, Betty Kort has decided to return to private life. Her tenure has been a distinguished one: first as a member of the Board of Governors; then as Chair of the Personnel Committee; and then for several years, until 2008, as Executive Director. In all these responsibilities, Betty has brought intelligence, dedication, compassion, and understanding.

It is, however, with all the things she has done, the restoration of the magnificent 1885 Red Cloud Opera House that I think will be her most lasting legacy. In our negotiations with the architects and workmen, she attended to every detail, insisting that the task be done with integrity and respect for the heritage which was ours. I will never forget the Board meeting when she brought along a number of auditorium chairs and insisted—yes insisted—that each one of us sit in each chair before making a selection. ("Just forget the color right now; just concentrate on the comfort and the ability to move wherever seating is needed.") Of course, she was right, and a visit to the Opera House and participation in the various activities there is a testimony to her ability to know just what was right—but involving the Board with that decision.

A few weeks ago, we visited Red Cloud with our youngest son, his wife, and our nine-month-old grandson and spent two days touring Red Cloud—with the help of two docents whom Betty had hired. At the culmination of our visit, we spent considerable time in the Opera House. I was moved to tears when I showed them the plaque engraved with their grandmother's name on the beautiful Donor Wall that Betty had herself designed (saving us hundreds of dollars by the way!) and then moving into the auditorium, with my son, and his artistic wife commenting on the beautiful carpet on the stairway, the paint colors, the original floors, the tin ceiling. I remembered how Betty had wanted so much for the "right" ceiling. Betty's taste and talent, in short, are displayed for all to see and enjoy as countless numbers have—and will—visit this Foundation's splendid treasure.

As we drove home, I thought of the remarkable progress the Foundation has made during Betty Kort's tenure and the debt all of us—the Board, our membership, and countless visitors to come—owe to Betty, who has served us better than we could ever have hoped for or even imagined. All of us are grateful!

THE WILLA CATHER FOUNDATION

WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER & REVIEW

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Department of English
The George Washington University
annrom3@verizon.net

Robert Thacker
Canadian Studies Program
St. Lawrence University
Canton, NY 13617
rthacker@stlaw.edu

Steven Trout
Department of English
Fort Hays State University
strout@fhsu.edu

Send letters and news items to:

Newsletter & Review
The Willa Cather Foundation
413 North Webster Street
Red Cloud NE 68970
tgallagher@nyc.rr.com

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TWO MEMBERS OF BOARD OF GOVERNORS ACCEPT NEW POSITIONS

Joe Urgo Named President of St. Mary's College of Maryland

Dr. Joseph R. Urgo, member of the Willa Cather Foundation Board of Governors since 2000 and a frequent contributor to these pages, will join St. Mary's College of Maryland as President on July 1, 2010.

Previously Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, Urgo's research interests focus on Willa Cather and William Faulkner. His extensive published works include *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* and *Reading Faulkner: Absalom! Absalom!*, written with Noel Polk and recently released by the University Press of Mississippi.

Before joining Hamilton College, Urgo served as professor and chair of the English department at the University of Mississippi from 2000 to 2006. From 1989 to 2000 he was a member of the faculty at Bryant College, where he received the Bryant College Alumni Association Distinguished Faculty Award.

He is a native of Hartford, Connecticut, and received his bachelor's degree from Haverford College. He holds a master's degree from Wesleyan University and a master's and Ph.D. from Brown University.

Joe Urgo, planning his imminent migration to St. Mary's College of Maryland.

Sue Maher Assumes Deanship at the University of Minnesota Duluth

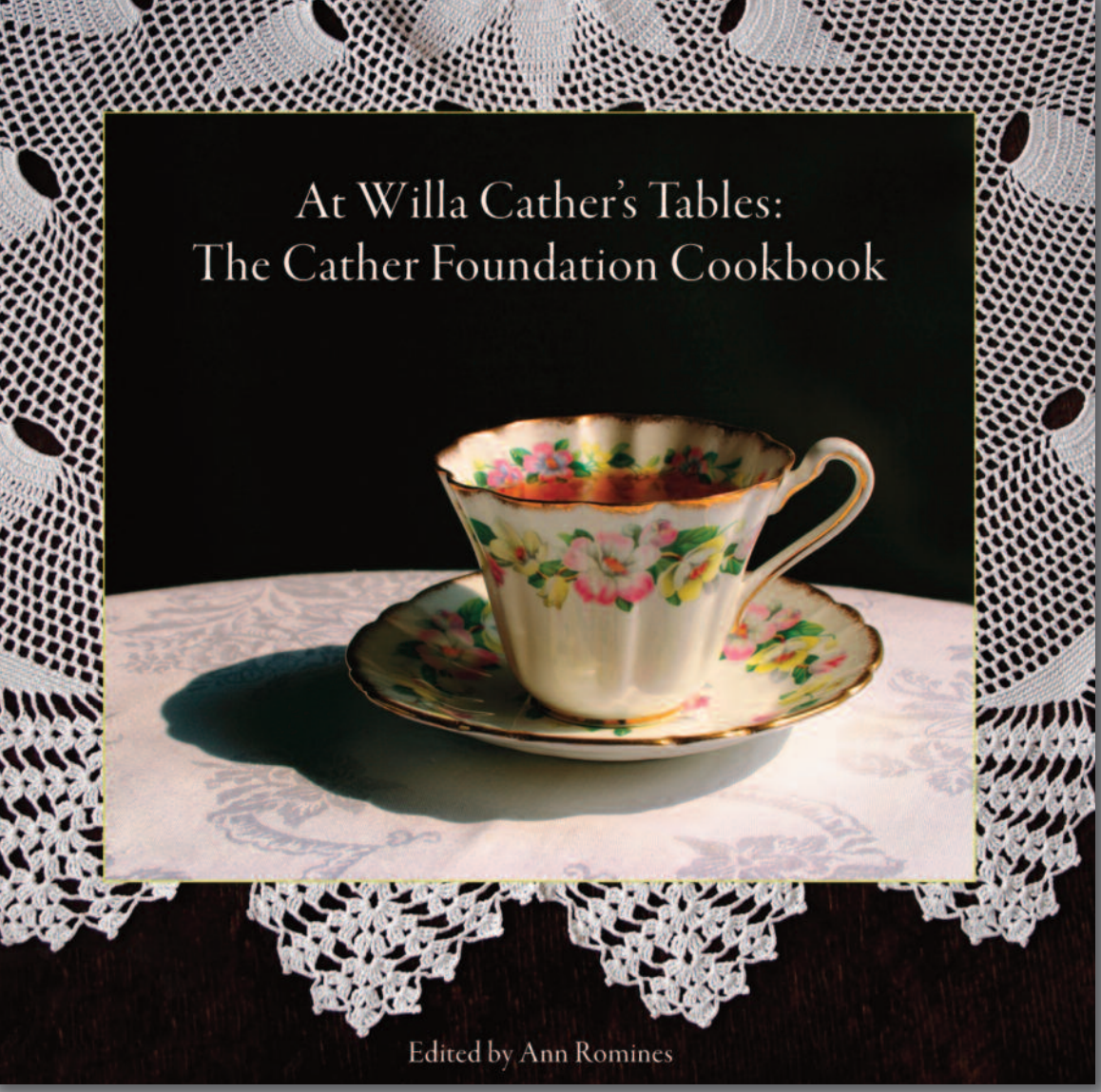
Taking the long way to Duluth, Sue Maher visits Chimney Rock in western Nebraska.

The University of Minnesota Duluth has named Susan Naramore Maher the new dean of the school's College of Liberal Arts, effective July 15, 2010. Previously the chair of the English department and Peter Kiewit Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), Maher has been a member of the Cather Foundation Board of Governors since 2005. She currently serves as vice president.

Maher has a B.A. from the University at Albany (State University of New York), M.A. from the University of South Carolina at Columbia, and Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Expert and widely published in the literature and literary cartography of the Great Plains, Maher has received teaching awards from UNO and the Western Literature Association.

In addition to her board service at the Willa Cather Foundation, where she spearheaded a productive and valuable visit to Red Cloud by UNO's Service-Learning Academy, Maher has served on the boards of the Western Literature Association, Nebraska Center for the Book, and the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center.

While her new appointment will take her out of Nebraska, Maher tells the *Newsletter & Review* that she isn't leaving Catherland. Her new institution is fully supporting her work with the Foundation, and Maher expects to become a whiz at journeying from Duluth to board meetings in Nebraska.



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