ISSN 0197-663X

Willa Cather
Pioneer Memorial Newsletter
and
Review

VOLUME XLIII, No. 2
Fall, 1999

326 N. Webster Street
Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970
Telephone (402) 746-2653

Hiding in Plain Sight: Willa Cather and Ghostwriting

Deborah Lindsay Williams
Iona College

My Autobiography, by S. S. McClure, is a classic example of American autobiography. McClure comes to the United States as a penniless immigrant, finances his own college education, and struggles with one failing business venture after another until finally, through sheer hard work and gumption, he achieves the success he had long sought. Along the way, of course, he finds love and

— World Wide Photo

New York City, May 1944: S. S. McClure, Willa Cather, Theodore Dreiser, and Paul Robeson

happiness and citizenship, and wants to help his country realize its "very noble American Ideal" (266). Those who knew McClure well said that the autobiography was a precise portrait of the man, while reviewers praised it for capturing something "typically American" and for being a "plain and unvarnished record of a life of ceaseless effort," "clean-cut" and "classic as an elm tree."[1]

But as we know, this "typically American" book was in fact written by Willa Cather; McClure seems never to have set pen to paper. Cather — former managing editor of the magazine McClure founded and named for himself — wrote the book during the summer of

(Continued on page 26)

In This Issue . . .

1913, just after publishing her second novel, *O Pioneers!*. The autobiography, which appeared first as a serial in *McClure 's Magazine* and then as a book in 1914, contained a brief preface in which McClure said he was indebted to Cather's "cooperation" for the book's "very existence." And although some readers suspected that "cooperation" rather understated the nature of Cather's contribution, until relatively recently her role in the creation of McClure's life story has not been scrutinized. When it is discussed at all, it is usually described as having been good practice for writing in a male persona, something she would use to great effect in *My Ántonia* (1918), *A Lost Lady* (1923), and *The Professor's House* (1925), among others.

The autobiography, however, was more than simply a "practice session" where Cather flexed her writing muscles. There are parallels between the structure of McClure's autobiography and Cather's novels that go beyond her use of a male persona: in both cases, for instance, surface simplicity belies the far more complex narratives embedded within them. Thus when we examine McClure's autobiography more carefully, we realize that in many ways it is actually the antithesis of a "typically American" story: failure stories far exceed success stories, cooking recipes are given more weight than politics, and very little attention is given to the particulars of McClure's fame. Further, Cather's very presence as ghostwriter effectively rewrites the traditional subject-object positioning between men and women, so that even as the text attempts to write McClure into the tradition of U.S. (male) autobiography, its mode of creation — man's life written by a woman who is also a lesbian — deconstructs and destabilizes that tradition.

The autobiography thus parallels the way Cather's own fiction works: the seemingly artless surface stories of her novels act as cover stories for narratives that, as Marilee Lindemann has persuasively argued, scrutinize the "axes of difference — psychosexual, racial/ethnic, economic, and literary — that made the nation a space of vast energy and profound instability" (Lindemann, 4).[2] McClure's autobiography — and the nature of the collaboration between Cather and McClure that produced the autobiography — foreground questions of power and literary authority, of self-representation and secrecy, that can be productively brought to bear on a discussion of Cather's authorial self-representation. While she was ghostwriting McClure's life, Cather created her enduring public image: the straightforward prairie writer. She created an image of McClure that she thought readers wanted in the same way that she "ghostwrote" a marketable public Cather — an image that highlighted her regional affiliations and downplayed both gender and sexuality.

Just as McClure's text appears to be the classic autobiography, at least until we begin to look more closely, so too does Cather initially appear to be the classic ghostwriter: unacknowledged, silent, merely a conduit for another's thoughts, words, and experiences. Cather broke the code of the ghostwriter almost immediately, however, by "outing" herself as the writer of McClure's life. When Elizabeth Sergeant told Cather that she was reading McClure's story as it appeared in *McClure's,* Cather "admitted to having a hand in it" and boasted with a chuckle that "she could . . . write a better and truer McClure than McClure himself — and that was just the result of listening to him attentively" (Sergeant 125). This comment undercuts the other claim that Cather made about writing McClure's life, which is that she simply wrote down his stories exactly as she heard them. McClure told his stories to her in installments, coming once a week to the apartment that Cather shared with Edith Lewis. He would "walk up and down the living room, talking" (Lewis 71), while Cather — and maybe Lewis as well — watched and listened.[3] Cather didn't take notes during these living room performances but would later write out her ideas in longhand and give them to her secretary to type. There would seem to be a contradiction, then, in Cather's descriptions of writing McClure's story: an *exact* rendition cannot also be a "better and truer" version. Cather's ghostwritten McClure is her creation, an interpretation and appropriation of his performance — she is a better man than he is, at least on the page.

Writing McClure's life offered Cather the opportunity to shift the balance of power between herself and her former boss. The man who inspired fear in writers because of his ruthless editing now depended on her to shape his life story; she became the final authority. Sharon O'Brien points out that by asking Cather for help, McClure was "acknowledging that she was the better writer" (O'Brien 296), a request that must surely have been flattering. McClure's flattery notwithstanding, however, Cather's contribution to his life story was hidden from the public by the fact that only McClure's name appeared on the title page. Being hidden from sight — but able to reveal herself at any moment — may have actually added to her sense of power: power that emerged from having control of a secret. When she outs herself to Sergeant as the writer of the autobiography, Cather acknowledges her own success and reveals McClure's inadequacies; implicitly she highlights her powerful position.

In the process of writing McClure's life, Cather began to articulate what would become her public representation of herself as a writer: a listener who merely wrote down the stories she had heard. Discussing the origins of *O Pioneers!* in an interview published the summer she was writing McClure's story, for instance, Cather said the novel came from her childhood memories of listening to the stories of immigrant women. After a morning spent with one of these women, she would ride home "in the most unreasonable state of excitement," feeling as if she had "actually got inside another person's skin" (Bohlke 10) — an image of possession that is almost sexual.

Dear Readers of the *WCPM Newsletter and Review*,

We are enjoying a particularly busy and exciting time at the WCPM. Most of this activity is occurring right now in order that we meet the challenge grants which require us to have approximately $500,000 in new donations by the end of December. If we fail, so much hard work will have been for naught and our dreams for the Opera House will come crashing down.

With all of this in mind, I am writing to offer you who read the *WCPM Newsletter and Review* some opportunities to help. In this edition of the *Newsletter* you will find a list of the "Commemorative Opportunities" available and a listing of a variety of ways in which you can give. Please take time to become acquainted with this material and decide which of these opportunities fits you. In addition, if you know of someone close to you who might be interested, use this information to make the possibility of their giving more enticing. Contact the WCPM Office with any questions you may have. They will either help you from there or put you in touch with John Boomer, our fund raising advisor, who is prepared to provide support and financial guidance.

If you are planning to give a donation to the Opera House renovation project, now is the critical time. Consider the "Commemorative Opportunities." You may want to make a yearly pledge or choose one of the other "Ways to Give." To thank you for making your contribution, your name will be permanently placed on a special wall to be erected in the lobby just outside the second floor auditorium of the Opera House. But most important, we need to be sure to have contributions from everyone for the fund raising campaign right now. Of course, if you have already made a contribution that you consider adequate, then ignore this request and know that your donation is appreciated.

Remember that any funds you contribute right now work extra hard because they can be used as matching funds for the pending NEH grant proposal and as matching funds for the Kiewit Grant and the tourism grant, both of which must be matched by December!

We are half way there. With your help we WILL be at the finish line in December!

Sincerely yours,

Betty Kort, President

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation
Board of Governors

And of course, in ghostwriting McClure's life, she actually does "get inside" his skin.

Over and over again, both in her fiction and in her public descriptions of herself as a writer, Cather portrays herself as a listener whose writing is merely an artless transcription of what she heard — as if she is always ghostwriting someone else's story. Listening becomes tremendously powerful: it allows Cather to take possession of, to haunt, whomever she listens to.

Cather, however, rarely represents herself — or the act of writing — as powerful. Instead, she carefully constructs a public persona for herself as a plain-speaking Nebraska writer, whose work needs "no arranging or 'inventing' [because it] was spontaneous and took its own place" (*On Writing* 92). It is this image that has endured, despite the fact that Cather loved opera, fine food, good wine, elegant clothing, elaborate hats, and beautiful women. The prairie persona acts as a cover story for a different Cather — the opera-loving lesbian whose Epicurean tastes are matched only by her sophisticated attention to the craft of writing.[4] Her public identity — the middy-blouse wearing, plain-speaking, country writer symbolized by her famous Steichen portrait — disguised power as simplicity and cloaked Cather's modernist experiments as "just stories."

(Continued on page 28)

Cather's public persona is not precisely a fiction, but it is not an entirely accurate, either. It is similar to the image of McClure that emerges from the autobiography, which omits some details and highlights others in order to present an identity that would be both recognizable and marketable to the reading public. McClure's Horatio Alger-like tale neglects to mention that his staff — including the muckraking journalists Ida Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens — staged several walk-outs in protest of his management decisions and that in 1913 McClure was in fact being forced out of the magazine altogether. The happy partnership between McClure and his wife described in the autobiography is another fiction: the two were often estranged, in part due to McClure's philandering.[5] Nor does the autobiography have much to say about politics, an odd omission from the life story of a man whose magazine made such a powerful political impact. The autobiography focuses instead on the writers McClure met in his travels, although even here we can see Cather's choices at work. James Woodress has pointed out that the autobiography includes lengthy discussions of Robert Louis Stevenson and Kipling, authors whose work Cather admired tremendously; Woodress also explains that although McClure had "discovered Booth Tarkington . . . Cather never thought much of him and he is never mentioned" (249). Further, McClure's comments about writers and editing echo Cather's own statements about editorial policies, young writers, and "genius." The autobiography presents McClure in "his own voice," but that voice emerges from Cather — the ghost controls what the public sees and reads.

Paradoxically, McClure's own voice emerges most clearly when he writes as someone else. McClure wrote a popular cooking column using the Puritanesque *nom de plume,* "Patience Winthrop." These columns were "very successful," the autobiography tells us, in part because McClure learned "a few things as well as they could be done" from the chef at a hotel in New York when he realized that his wife didn't know how to cook (180). We are taught the best way to cook meat (slowly, under moderate heat), and the best way to make a hard-boiled egg (eight minutes in water just below boiling). He also tells us how to make pastry, a set of instructions that makes baking an almost moral imperative. As a first step we are told that we should "of course" "have the stewed fruit ready" before we begin the pastry-making process, which ends with a firm admonition: "Making good pastry is such a simple operation that I have often wondered why there are so many poor pies in the world. The most important thing is to have the butter very cold, and about this I believe that many cooks are careless" (McClure 85). Cooks, it seems, have no excuse for their poor pies other than their own lack of discipline. McClure's success with pastry is actually one of the few unadulterated successes in the entire book: his business ventures fail more often than not, usually due to his self-admitted "restlessness," his tendency to be "fickle and inconsequential . . . not a good judge of business propositions" (59). He is a better baker than a business man — and more of a success when he writes cooking columns as a woman than when he tries to write an autobiography in his own voice.

Cather chooses to include McClure's authorial "cross-dressing" and omits or elides other, perhaps more pertinent "facts" from his life story, creating a porous and idiosyncratic autobiography that both echoes and anticipates Cather's other fictions. For example, McClure's idyllic memories of his boyhood echo the thoughts of Bartley Alexander, the central character of Cather's first novel, *Alexander's Bridge,* and McClure's descriptions of his mother as a woman of "unusual physical vigor" who was able to do "a man's work and a woman's work at the same time" (3) anticipate Jim Burden's descriptions of Ántonia Shimerda. The realities of the McClure marriage that are not described in the autobiography surface in the images of Professor St. Peter's marriage in *The Professor's House,* and the Irish and Midwestern landscapes so dear to McClure's heart are startlingly similar to the landscapes beloved of many Cather characters. Once we know what we are looking for, in other words, it is easy to see the ghostwriter; she cannot be dismissed as McClure's stenographer. The traces of Cather's presence in McClure's life point to Cather's sense of power over his story: in fact, it is almost more accurate to read *My Autobiography* by S. S. McClure as Cather's third novel, a work of collaborative fiction.

Cather's rendition of McClure's life story thus reflects both his idiosyncrasies and her own interests as an author, and it shows us how adept Cather was at manipulating images for public consumption. Her skilled presentation of self — emblematized by the Steichen photography — is what has endured: readers are still resistant to the idea of an urbane Cather. Betty Jean Steinhouser's attempts to stage a one-woman show based on Cather's life demonstrates this public resistance to a sophisticated Cather. Steinhouser says that she "tried to duplicate Cather's evening dress . . . I knew she liked to dress up and wear hats and all that." Audiences did not like this representation of Cather, however. They wanted the "middy blouse and the tie," so Steinhouser changed her ensemble in order to "give the people what they wanted and what makes them feel comfortable" (qtd in Carlin 3).[6]

Readers (and indeed many critics of Cather's work) are "comfortable" when Cather presents herself — or is presented — as a "typical American," the phrase used to laud McClure's autobiography. Not surprisingly, recent attempts to revise Cather's image by investigating her psychosexual make-up and by stressing the innovative complexity of her fiction have met with considerable resistance. For example, in a 1995 *New Yorker* essay, Joan Acocella rails against all

types of Cather criticism, but particularly against critics who are "tendentiously political" — by which she means, it seems, "wild-eyed" feminist critics generally and those who read Cather as a lesbian in particular. Acocella concludes her essay with the plea that Cather "become a non-topic again" and leave her books to "those who really care about them." If we "really cared" about Cather, Acocella's logic goes, we would pay no attention to things like sexuality, politics, or context. Her reasoning sounds similar to the moment in *The Wizard of Oz* when the wizard tells Dorothy and her companions to "pay no attention to the man behind the curtain": they should ignore the fact that the wizard is merely an image projected by a mortal man.

What Acocella and others seem not to realize is that discussions of Cather's sexuality do not limit or narrow Cather's achievements but rather open up new implications and possibilities. The public-private split in Cather's life helps us to see the connection between Cather's own "passing" as straight (or celibate, which is how Acocella reads it) and the way her texts "pass" as uncomplicated, nostalgic texts that appear anomalous in the modernist period for their apparent refusal to participate in the experimental interrogations of standards and norms being performed by writers like Stein, Woolf, or Hughes.

While we might argue that Cather's creation of a public persona for herself that closeted her lesbian identity reflects the policing powers of a heternormative culture, we can draw a parallel here with Cather's position as McClure's ghostwriter. In both cases, invisibility, or *apparent* invisibility, becomes a mode of power — power over access to secret knowledge and the power to escape definition and categorization. Cather can choose to reveal herself as the ghostwriter or to remain hidden, but her ghostly presence leaves an indelible mark on the text regardless. And although she presented herself to the public as everyone's favorite spinster aunt, she lived with Edith Lewis in the very heart of Greenwich Village, which as early as 1910 was recognized as home to an emerging neighborhood of gays and lesbians (Chauncey 235). It was a neighborhood where — unlike other neighborhoods in New York in the early teens and twenties — two women seen together ran *more* risk of being thought lovers than if they were seen together elsewhere in the city. Her Village address would seem to reveal the nature of her relationship with Lewis, but the relationship stays hidden, a ghost in plain sight, cloaked by both Cather's public silence and by cultural attitudes that presume and assume heterosexuality. Cather's sexual life thus stays hidden, easily overlooked, even if you were to find yourself in her living room telling her and her partner your life story.

In *The Lesbian Menace,* Sherrie Inness acknowledges the complex politics of a lesbian's choosing to pass for straight, but points out that we must also acknowledge the "subversive potential" of the woman who chooses partial passing. Such a figure, Inness argues, "has the ability to cast into doubt gender stereotypes and notions of what is acceptable femininity in a way that is not identical to that of a very 'out' lesbian but that is equally important. She has the opportunity to infiltrate the system at all levels" (173). Inness's comment seems germane to both Cather's life and to Cather's work: the surface simplicity of Cather's fictions masks moments of resistance and subversion; her fiction resists easy categorization and analysis, casts gender stereotypes into doubt, questions constructions of U.S. history, and does away with genre categories. The complexity and innovation in Cather's work seem to have been lying in wait for post-structuralist readers, as if Cather were presciently aware of what would develop in late-twentieth-century criticism.

Cather's secrets, in other words, allow her to have it both ways: she creates an authorial persona that seems somehow "above it all" while her novels continually engaged the ideas and innovations that also involved her more self-evidently "modernist" literary contemporaries.[7] Reviewers praised Cather's "artistic simplicity" (Woodress 301) and her avoidance of the "usual methods of fiction" (Thacker 30), comments that reinforce her public image and echo the positive reviews of McClure's autobiography, which was praised for being "vigorous and simple in its telling" and for avoiding "every fault that usually characterizes the self-told story of the self-made man" (Thacker 16). The public image that Cather created was marketable and powerful — and *safe.* To become more publicly queer, less of what Terry Castle has called an "apparitional lesbian" (4), would be to risk not only open expressions of homophobia but also to be affiliated, for good or ill, with a specific group and set of definitions. Such categorization, whether in life or work, was something that Cather fought against constantly. Secrecy — the closet — becomes her mode; she is a ghostwriter whose presence can be seen only if we know where to look.

Cather's life thus bears out D. A. Miller's description of the potential power inherent in a secret about the self:

> secrecy would be the spiritual exercise by which the subject is allowed to conceive of [herself] as a resistance; a friction in the smooth functioning of the social order, a margin to which its far-reaching discourse does not reach. Secrecy would thus be the subjective practice in which the oppositions of private/public, inside/outside, subject/object are established, and the sanctity of their first term kept inviolate. (207)

Through the creation of a public self whose sexuality seemed indeterminate or ambiguous, Cather attempted to closet her relationships with women. And this public image is still at work, still powerful, as proven by the sharp disavowals by readers and critics who want to believe in the image of the asexual writer who sacrificed all to craft. I do not mean to suggest in any way that we should ignore the pain associated with closeting, but I do want to stress that we must think carefully about the way Cather structured her closet and that

(Continued on page 30)

we must consider the possibility that for her, the closet was a site of power rather than a symbol of repression or denial.[8]

Castle has argued that the lesbian represents a "threat to patriarchal protocol" because she exists as a woman "indifferent or resistant to male desire" (4-5). Because the lesbian presents such a threat she "has been 'ghosted' or made to seem invisible — by culture itself," but has nevertheless managed to "insert herself into the larger world of human affairs" (17). In Castle's description, being "ghosted" is a disadvantage to be overcome, but for Cather, ghostliness is an advantage: it offers freedom and the power to subvert tradition. Thus when we read McClure's "typically American" autobiography with Cather the ghostwriter in mind, the definition of "typically American" no longer reinforces a stereotype but instead challenges it. The autobiography that seemed initially to fit so snugly into the U.S. tradition of male-authored autobiographies that parallel the rise of personal fortune with the celebration of nationhood, in fact narrates the story of man whose culinary advice matters more than his opinions about government and whose saga of individualist triumph is in fact a collaboration with a woman who represents a powerful threat to just that system in which McClure wants to position himself. Getting inside McClure's skin became, for Cather, one step in the process of learning to ghostwrite her own career, a trick that allowed her to remain both inside and outside the mainstream, to be both comfort and threat. Cather has been, in effect, haunting her own prose, waiting for us to learn to see her, in all her complex and contradictory disguises.

NOTES

I would like to thank Cyrus R. K. Patell, Merrill McGuire Skaggs, and Ann Romines for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

[1]These reviews are cited in Robert Thacker's excellent introduction to the Bison Books edition of McClure's autobiography. They are also mentioned in Professor Thacker's yet unpublished paper, "Willa Cather, S. S. McClure, and the Act of My Autobiography." I am grateful to Professor Thacker for so generously sharing with me his insights about the McClure-Cather relationship.

[2]Although Lindemann and I have similar understandings of Cather's project — what Lindemann calls "queering America" — we arrive at that understanding differently. I use the difference between Cather's public and private selves as a way to help us read her fiction; I am interested also in how Cather's highly developed sense of the literary marketplace contributed to the creation of her authorial persona.

[3]Thacker points out that by 1913 the lecture circuit was an important source of income to McClure. His constant mismanagement of the magazine's finances had resulted in the magazine being taken over, and McClure himself was relegated to a purely symbolic role in the magazine's day-to-day operations. On the lecture circuit, according to Thacker, McClure "embodied the Horatio Alger myth and he presented himself as such, both to his audiences and . . . to Cather during their sessions" (1997, x).

[4]Although the phrase "opera-loving lesbian" may sound reductive, I use it here to emphasize the difference between Cather's public persona and her private life. Although Cather's sexual identity is more complex than this phrase implies, it seems undeniable that same-sex attractions were a significant component of her private identity.

[5]Thacker presents this information in his unpublished essay mentioned in note 1.

[6]Stephen Tennant, writer of the introduction to *Willa Cather on Writing,* detailed what Cather wore when she invited him to afternoon tea at her Park Avenue apartment: "black satin pyjamas [sic], a brilliant flamingo-pink tunic, and a cream shirt" (*Serious Pleasures* 212). Cather, in private, is a dandy, a far cry from the gently smiling, middy-blouse wearing prairie woman in the Steichen photo. Cather and Tennant discussed, among other things, a shopping trip for the early fall in order to "buy fur coats in preparation for winter," a discussion that evidently gave Cather great pleasure.

[7]In my article, "Cather, Woolf, and the Two Mrs. Ramsays," I point out that contrary to Cather's public disdain for "experimental" writers, she in fact has a deeply complex relationship with Virginia Woolf, a relationship that provides the subtext for *Lucy Gayheart.*

[8]In a recent essay, Patricia Cramer discusses Woolf's sexuality and writing in ways that are helpful here. Cramer writes that Woolf was "proud" when a self-described "Sapphist" story escapes detection by its editor, thus allowing the story's subversive content to be published. Cramer goes on to say that "Woolf crafted works that could 'pass' within the dominant culture and at the same time communicate subversive in-group messages to savvy readers," a comment that seems equally applicable to Cather. Woolf, according to Cramer, struck a delicate balance between "self-exposure . . . and disguise," as did Cather, and both writers use a "seductive and allusive style [that] simultaneously invites and resists detection" (Barrett and Cramer, 123). What I want to suggest here is that we can *use* Cather's astute manipulation of the public's desire for a non-threatening image as a tool to help us read her work, particularly the ways in which it challenges and subverts the very status quo that publicly she appeared to uphold.

Joanna Russ argues that the "masquerade" of Cather's fictions may have helped her to "speak more completely, more clearly, and less self-consciously than could, for example, Djuna Barnes in *Nightwood*. . . . The male mask [in Cather's fiction] enabled her to remain 'normal,' American, public, and *also* lesbian" (Russ, 156). Russ's comment is used by Acocella as a way to argue against "political" readings of Cather, but what Acocella omits from her own essay are Russ's final observations about Cather's work, which is that "under whatever disguise" Cather manages to create "records not of male but of female experience, indeed lesbian experience. In a sense not thought of by contemporary reviewers, and even possibly by Cather herself, Claude Wheeler and many other nominally male characters in Cather's work are, for lesbians, truly *One of Ours*" (157). In contrast to Russ, I believe that Cather was far too controlled a writer not to be pretty firmly aware of what it was she was doing — that very little happens in Cather's fiction that she didn't want to have happen — but I agree that masquerade became a creative force in Cather's writing.

WORKS CITED

Acocella, Joan. "Cather and the Academy." *The New Yorker* 27 November 1995: 56-67.

Barrett, Eileen, and Patricia Cramer. *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings.* New York: New York UP, 1997.

Bohlke, L. Brent. *Willa Cather in Person.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986.

Castle, Terry. *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture.* New York: Columbia UP, 1993.

Carlin, Deborah. *Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading.* Amherst, Mass.: U of Massachusetts P, 1992.

Cather, Willa. *The Autobiography of S. S. McClure.* 1914. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997.

Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940.* New York: Basic, 1994.

Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life.* New York: Oxford UP, 1991.

Hoare, Philip. *Serious Pleasures: The Life of Stephen Tennant.* New York: Penguin, 1990.

Inness, Sherrie A. *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity, and the Representation of Lesbian Life.* Amherst, Mass.: U of Massachusetts P, 1997.

Lewis, Edith. *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record.* New York: Knopf, 1953.

Lindemann, Marilee. *Willa Cather: Queering America.* New York: Columbia UP, 1999.

Luhan, Mabel Dodge. *Intimate Memories.* New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936.

Miller, D. A. *The Novel and the Police.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.

O'Brien, Sharon. *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice.* 1987. Rev. ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1997.

Russ, Joanna. *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction.* Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1995.

Sergeant, Elizabeth Shepley. *Willa Cather: A Memoir.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1953.

Thacker, Robert. "Willa Cather, S. S. McClure, and the Act of *My Autobiography*." Unpublished paper, 1997.

Watson, Steven. *Strange Bedfellows: The First American Avant-Garde.* New York: Abbeville Press, 1991.

Williams, Deborah. "Cather, Woolf, and the Two Mrs. Ramsays." *College English*, September 1998: 29:41.

Woodress, James. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1978.

Paul Robeson as Othello, Savoy Theatre, London, 1930

— Photo Courtesy of Paul Robeson, Jr., and the Red Cloud *Chief*

Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections of Paul Robeson's Othello in Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*

I know not if't be true
but I for mere suspicion in that kind,
Will do as if for surety. (I. iii. 385-9)

Donna Shafer-Riha
James Madison University

While Willa Cather was in France in the summer of 1930, completing *Shadows on the Rock,* Paul Robeson was across the Channel in London, starring as Othello. This production was not only newsworthy in Great Britain; the New York newspapers widely covered the London *Othello,* with the *New York Times* reporting that a Broadway opening of the play with Jed Harris as producer and Lillian Gish as Desdemona was imminent. Rumors also circulated that Gish, a silent film star, was planning to do a film version with Robeson (Duberman 138). Robeson and others were hesitant to do a film with an interracial marriage and murder, and the plans never came to pass. After the play closed in July 1930, Robeson returned to New York City to prepare for a cross-country singing tour that he was contracted to begin in January 1931.

Soon after Robeson's return from London, Moshe and Marutha Menuhin invited him to their apartment in the Ansonia Hotel in New York City for a small dinner (Southwick). Paul Robeson, Jr., remembers his father and the Menuhins enjoyed each other's company and met socially whenever their paths crossed in New York. The Menuhins also invited Willa Cather, whom they had just met in Paris. The time between the beginning of their friendship in France and this dinner had been one of the most difficult of Cather's life; soon after her return to New York in September, her mother Jennie had died following a two-year illness.

Weary from shuttling from New York to Pasadena for two years to visit her dying mother, Cather arrived at the Menuhins' that night. Robeson had written in his diary that American audiences struck him as "terribly crude," attending for entertainment, not for "love of Theatre" (Duberman 125), but Cather was an exception. As well as a "love of Theatre," Cather and Robeson shared many mutual acquaintances. Her publisher Alfred Knopf was a good friend of Eslanda and Paul Robeson, and he had introduced them to Carl Van Vechten and his wife Fania, who were also friends of Cather. The Van Vechtens had flown to London to see Robeson in *Othello* and had written Knopf, "He is magnificent, unbelievable" (Duberman 137). Cather also must have been impressed with Robeson. H. L. Mencken wrote in his autobiography, "Cather's associations . . . were largely with musicians and music-lovers. She was one of the most assid-

(Continued on page 33)

Nebraska
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA–LINCOLN

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln
and the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial
and Educational Foundation

present

The International Cather Seminar 2000

Willa Cather's Environmental Imagination

June 17-24, 2000

Arbor Day Farm's
Lied Conference Center,
Nebraska City, Nebraska, U.S.A.

For more information, contact:

Susan Rosowski
Department of English
University of Nebraska–Lincoln
Lincoln, NE 68588-0333
phone: (402) 472-6645
email: srosowsk@unlserve.unl.edu

It fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security. That night she had a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it... Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring.

— *O Pioneers!*

Mark your calendars.
More information to come.

uous concert-goers New York ever saw, and apparently had no social life save that connected with music" (254). He then says, "During the years following [1923] I saw her only occasionally, always at parties given by Knopf" (256). Robeson and his wife were also frequent guests of the Knopfs during the same time period (Duberman 664).

Cather had immortalized artists like Robeson in her fiction, and Shakespeare had been a presence in her life since her childhood. In the winter that she met Robeson, Cather formed the Shakespeare Club with the Menuhin children to improve their English. In their "club," they read Shakespeare's works aloud; Cather rummaged in secondhand bookshops to find the children her preferred Temple Edition of the plays (Lewis 171), but Lord Menuhin remembers that *Othello,* with its interracial romance, was not one of the plays that she read with them. When Cather and Robeson met, however, after his just-completed run as the Moor, the conversation would naturally have turned to a discussion of the play and Robeson's plans to bring it to the New York stage. When he finally did so in 1943-44, breaking all previous box office records during its lengthy run, Cather attended with Yehudi Menuhin, who had already seen it. She was so impressed by the performance that she sent tickets to her niece Helen Cather Southwick in New Jersey (Southwick).

In a letter dated May 4, 1931, Blanche Knopf told Cather that she hoped she was "now seriously thinking about doing the Virginia book" (Woodress 481), evidence that during this period Cather was finally considering setting one of her novels in Virginia, but it would be almost another decade before that novel finally appeared. Cather first produced *Obscure Destinies* in August 1932 and *Lucy Gayheart* in 1934. Knopf published the Virginia novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* in 1940 on Cather's birthday. Its "heroine" is Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert, a slave-owning matriarch Cather claimed to have modeled after her great-grandmother Ruhama Seibert, whom she had never met. Cynthia Griffin Wolff clarifies the greater similarity between Sapphira and Cather's mother Jennie, who had "a strong-willed, imperious nature, full of quick, eager impulses — quick to resent, quick to sympathize, headstrong, passionate, and yet capable of great kindness and understanding." Jennie, like Sapphira, is a proud woman who lay "month after month quite helpless . . . although her mind was perfectly clear;" Cather "had to watch her continually growing weaker, more ailing, yet unable to die" (Lewis 156-7).

Robeson's own mother had suffered from poor eyesight and ill health, and her death had been even more traumatic than that of Jennie Cather. Louisa Bustill, a member of a prominent Quaker abolitionist family, had wed William Drew Robeson, a former runaway slave from North Carolina (Nancy, also a former slave whose return Cather claimed as her most vivid childhood memory, had run away from Cather's great-grandparents' home in Virginia in 1856, four years before William's escape). In 1904, when Paul was six, a coal from the stove fell on Louisa's long-skirted dress, and she did not see it. She was fatally burned and died after lingering several days. Paul was not present when the accident occurred, but his brother Benjamin was (Duberman 8). Eslanda Robeson included a vivid retelling of the accident in her 1930 *Paul Robeson, Negro:*

> She tried to beat out the flames with her hands, which were terribly burned. Ben tried frantically to help her, but her full skirts were a dreadful hindrance. When he realised the task was beyond him, he rushed out of the house terrified, screaming for help. A neighbour who was passing came to his mother's aid, put out the flames, tore off her hot clothing, sent Ben for a doctor, and did what he could to ease her pain. The doctor found that her skirts had partially smothered the flames close to her body and that her feet, legs and hands were horribly burned; part of her hair was burned off, and she had even swallowed some of the flame. He used quarts and quarts of linseed oil and limewater to try to alleviate her suffering, but she lay in dreadful agony . . . The doctors gave her opiates, and she lapsed into unconsciousness and died. (15-17)

In *Sapphira,* Till's witnessing her mother's death by fire is remarkably similar: "One night, lying in her trundle bed, she was watching her mother dress for the servants' New Year's party. She saw her mother's finery catch fire from a candle; saw her, in flames, run screaming out into the winter wind. The poor woman was fatally burned before the men could overtake her and beat out the fire" (70).

As Cather began to plot her story in the early 1930s, Robeson's influence was important not to one character in particular, but to the flavor and theme of the entire novel. Bernice Slote has pointed out, "Willa Cather's technique was never to follow a myth or allegory thoroughly and consistently. She wished rather to touch lightly and pass on, letting the suggestions develop as the course of individual imaginations might take them" ("Introduction" xxvi). In 1940, Cather wrote Dorothy Canfield Fisher that her writing *Sapphira* began with the recollection of Negro voices; it was just like listening to a phonograph. Her description may also indicate the significance of her meeting Robeson during the germination of *Sapphira.* Cather owned a phonograph, given to her by Alfred Knopf, which she enjoyed; Yehudi Menuhin made a gift of some of the classical recordings he had made (Woodress 448). Robeson became very popular as a singer of Negro spirituals in the 1920s and 1930s, which is remarkable because not only were other black singers not patronized by white society, but they also were not recording spirituals, the *lingua franca* of plantation blacks, Cather had not heard those black voices in Virginia since

(Continued on page 34)

1883, but Robeson's voice was widely heard in concert halls and on radio and phonograph recordings. His voice would have recalled to her the voices of her childhood.

It would also have stirred her lifetime of memories of Shakespeare's *Othello*. In the journalistic period of her youth, she had reviewed two performances of it in Nebraska in 1893 and 1895. In referring to the first, she wrote, "We can all remember the burly negro they made of Othello here last year . . . ah! would that we could forget!" (Slote, *Kingdom* 298-9) She enjoyed the 1893 performance, but said that the actor could not

> reach the intensity of those few simplified and terribly physical and direct emotions which make up [the] life of the barbarian . . . his Othello is entirely too well-behaved . . . you feel that the blood in his veins is cold when it should flow like molten lava . . . [the actor] was not the raging lion of the desert that Shakespeare tells us of, nor was his love the primitive, resistless force that scorched up the Moor's very blood within his veins, and the happiness in his heart. (Slote *Kingdom* 299)

Some English critics labeled Robeson's performance that of a "thoughtful, kindly man, civilised and cultured" (Duberman 137). After reporting that Robeson had had twenty curtain calls on the opening night, another reviewer commented, "For nobility of mind and rich beauty of utterance it is difficult to think the part could be better played" ("Robeson Acclaimed" 33). *Time* magazine (November 1, 1943) described Robeson as "not so much Othello as a great and terrible presence" (Duberman 664). Cather's enthusiastic response to the 1944 *Othello* seems to show her approval of his portrayal of "the great lion of the desert" and the impression of his grand presence, as masterful (a word Cather frequently applies to Sapphira) as her mother/Sapphira.

Cather's dismay at Othello's portrayal as a "burly negro" may reflect the belief that emerged about a century after *Othello* was written that Shakespeare did not intend for Othello to be black although he is called a Moor (Neill 190-2). Actors in the role until the late nineteenth century were usually Caucasian or Arabic in appearance. In the early nineteenth century, Ira Aldridge was a notable exception. He was born in the U.S. around 1807 and moved to England when the African Theatre in New York, in which he was an actor, failed. He had travelled throughout Europe and Russia where he was acclaimed as one of the greatest actors of his day. His repertoire included various Shakespearean roles; the most performed after 1827 was Othello. When Robeson began to prepare for his portrayal in 1930, he contacted Amanda Aldridge, Ira Aldridge's daughter. Robeson claimed that Aldridge had performed around 1860 in an all-black production of *Othello* that was barred from the U.S. *(Robeson)*, but in fact Aldridge never returned to the U.S., nor did he ever actively plan to during his career (Marshall and Stock 79). As a celebrated actor across the Atlantic, he never again felt a desire to face the racism of the U.S., especially as civil war approached. Robeson did not make it clear whether he received his misinformation from Ms. Aldridge or if it were a part of the folklore surrounding Ira Aldridge; as with so many black historical figures, Aldridge's life and career were not documented with any precision until almost a hundred years after his death in 1867.

Robeson was very conscious of being the first black actor in America to play a black Moor with a white Desdemona, as well as being Aldridge's spiritual heir. The political climate of the 1930s, especially in the South, did not lend itself to a black Othello, an issue Robeson addressed in his interviews. In a radio interview in London which was reported in the *New York Tribune* (June 8, 1930) and the *New York Times* (June 9, 1930) and broadcast over WABC in New York and in the rest of the nation over the Columbia Broadcasting System ("Robeson Hopes" 23), Robeson said,

> "In Shakespeare's time . . . there was no great distinction between the Moor and the brown or the black . . . Surely, most of the Moors have Ethiopian blood and come from Africa, and to Shakespeare's mind he was called a blackamoor. Further than that, in Shakespeare's own time and through the Restoration, notably by Garrick, the part was played by a black man" (Duberman 611).

Robeson envisioned Othello as a prince of Africa, able to believe Desdemona's alleged infidelity because he does not understand the rules of Venetian society; Iago leads him to believe that casual infidelity there is an accepted practice. Robeson also identified the tragedy as racial in an interview given the day before *Othello* opened in London: "I feel the play is so modern for the problem is the problem of my own people. It is a tragedy of racial conflict, a tragedy of honor, rather than of jealousy . . . The play was written before slave traders made the Negroes a race problem . . . I am approaching the part as Shakespeare wrote it and am playing Othello as a man whose tragedy lay in the fact that he was sooty black" ("Interview by G. W. Bishop" 31).

Robeson had just begun to formulate his interpretation of the role in the summer of 1930, but his son Paul Robeson, Jr., states that his father saw the Moor's tragedy as the result of bred-in-the-bone superiority, not inferiority. For example, when Othello greets the ambassadors, he barely bends his head to them. Robeson, Jr., said his father played the murder of Desdemona as an execution: her constantly putting forth Cassio might be part of an attempted coup, proven by her taking him as a lover, and her infidelity was an outrage to his pride. Sapphira Dodderidge's calculating campaign against Nancy is also the offspring of wounded pride and the threat to the established social order at the mill house. In both Cather's and Robeson's tales, the threat of chaos breaking into a well-ordered universe is real whether physical

infidelity has occurred, or not. Robeson's emphasis on Othello's innate pride and sense of superiority, so similar to Sapphira's, set his portrayal apart from that of any other actor who has also interpreted the role.

During the 1930s, Cather and Robeson's lives took widely different paths. While *Sapphira* simmered in her mind, Cather worked on a collection of essays and the *Autograph Edition* of her books. In 1937, after finishing *Lucy Gayheart,* she began writing *Sapphira and the Slave Girl.* During the same time, Paul Robeson made a succession of commercially successful movies that he anticipated being expressions of African nationality, but which ultimately disappointed him. By 1938, Robeson had departed for Spain, then in the midst of civil war, and Russia, and his involvement in movies tapered off in favor of his singing career. In April of the same year, as Willa Cather recovered from the 'flu, she decided to motor to Virginia with Edith Lewis. That year, Easter fell on the weekend of April 16-17, a month later than in 1856 when Sapphira Colbert visited her sister in Winchester for Easter. It was also the month of the fifteenth Apple Blossom Festival, a celebration some Winchesterians still celebrate more enthusiastically than Easter. If Cather were there during the Festival while Winchester was packed to overflowing, she managed to arrive and leave without word of her visit leaking to the local press, but she would have been aware that that was the best time to see the mountain laurel and all the other Virginia greenery that would feature so prominently in the new novel. She would also have seen the lingering signs of a fire that had leveled most of Gore on August 5, 1930; because of the Depression, the rebuilding was slow (Funkhouser).

This Virginia had not changed much since Sapphira's day; it was still racially divided. When Cather traveled back to Virginia in 1938, she could not have missed the subtle segregation that kept the races separate, even though Frederick County had a low black population. In 1938, the Handley Regional Library in Winchester (where Cather's photo now hangs in the lobby) was off-limits to blacks (Noble, "Seventy Years" B2). Whites and blacks attended separate schools, with no high school for blacks existing in Frederick County (Noble, "A Teacher" B10), although the Frederick Douglass School in the city of Winchester housed grades one through twelve (Greeb). It was also in 1938 that "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" was endorsed as state song, although some Virginians even then expressed their concern about the lyrics ("A Note"): "There's where the old darkey's heart am long'd to go, there's where I labored so hard for old massa . . . There's where this old darkey's life will pass away. Massa and missis have long gone before me, soon we will meet on that bright and golden shore, there we'll be happy and free from all sorrow, there's where we'll meet and we'll never part no more" ("Official State Song").

By May, Cather had returned to New York, and one of the bleakest periods of her life began. Someone accidentally smashed her hand in a drugstore that month. In June her brother Douglass died of a heart attack, and in October Isabelle Hambourg died in Italy. In November, a hurricane ravaged her retreat at Jaffrey. Nationally and internationally, the Depression still hung over America while the threat of war rumbled in Europe. Cather, who had seen the world split in two after the Great European War, began writing with white-hot determination. Her companion Edith Lewis remembered, "She worked at *Sapphira* with a resoluteness, a sort of fixed determination which I think was different from her ordinary working mood; as if she were bringing all her powers into play to save this, whatever else was lost. She often worked far beyond her strength" (184). What emerged was supposedly her favorite childhood tale: that of her great-grandparents Jacob and Ruhamah Seibert and a runaway slave named Nancy. Since few facts about the intimate fabric of their lives and relationships were known, Cather wove fiction around the facts, crafting a tale of jealousy and revenge, peopled with both black and white characters — her own *Othello.*

In 1944, Cather and Robeson received awards at the same ceremony. Cather was presented with a gold medal for fiction from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in New York. The gold medal from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences for the best diction in the American Theater went to Robeson for his New York Othello; Robeson was only the tenth person to receive this award in its twenty-year history. Theodore Dreiser, another recipient that evening, testified to Robeson's powerful presence. He wrote in a letter to H. L. Mencken that the ceremony was "a really dreary demonstration; the best bit of the whole show was Paul Robeson — an outstanding personality who in my judgement dwarfed all the others" (Duberman 281).

That night, Robeson was at the height of his career; his battle with the House Un-American Activities Committee and the decline of his reputation with the American public were still some years away. Willa Cather, pictured at the ceremonies with her arm around an aged S. S. McClure, was nearing the end of hers. Her intention had not been to memorialize the greatest black actor in American history in her novel of her family's history, but Cather, always sensitive to the creative impressions around her, had made the connection between Shakespeare's tale of jealousy and revenge and her own. Paul Robeson and his Moor left their long shadow upon Back Creek, Virginia.

WORKS CITED

Cather, Willa. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl.* New York: Vintage Books, 1975.

-----. Letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, 14 October 1940, Guy Bailey Memorial Library, University of Vermont.

Curtin, William M., ed. *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews 1893-1902, Vol. I.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1970.

(Continued on page 36)

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY
(Continued)

Duberman, Martin Bauml. *Paul Robeson.* New York: Knopf, 1989.

Funkhouser, Ruth. "Gore Fire." *The Story of Frederick County.* Sam Lehman, 1989.

Greeb, Rebecca. Personal Interview. 20 November 1997.

"Interview with G. W. Bishop on Performance of Othello." *New York Times.* 18 May 1930: 31.

Lewis, Edith. *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record.* New York: Knopf, 1953.

Marshall, Herbert, and Mildred Stock. *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian.* 1958. Washington, D.C.: Howard UP, 1993.

Mencken, H. L. *My Life as Author and Editor.* Ed. Jonathan Yardley. New York: Knopf, 1993.

Menuhin, Lord Yehudi. Letter to the author. 18 Aug. 1997.

Neill, Michael. "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello.*" *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's Othello.* Ed. Anthony Gerard Barthelemy. New York: G. K. Hall, 1994.

Noble, Shell. "Seventy Years of Trimming Hair, Race Lines." *Winchester Star* 5 April 1997: B2+.

"A Note in Passing." *Shenandoah Herald.* 16 December 1938: 3.

"Official Song of the State of Virginia." http://www.50states.com/songs/virginia.htm. 7 April 1999.

Paul Robeson: Tribute to an Artist. Dir. Saul J. Turrell. Narrated by Sidney Poitier. Home Vision, Chicago, Illinois. 1993. Original release 1979. 29 min.

"Robeson Acclaimed in Othello Role." *New York Times.* 20 May 1930: 33.

Robeson, Eslanda Goode. *Paul Robeson, Negro.* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930.

"Robeson Hopes to Act Othello Here in Fall." *New York Times.* 9 June 1930: 23.

Robeson, Paul, Jr. Telephone Interview. 19 June 1997.

Robeson, Paul, Jr. Personal Interview. 24 March 1999.

Robeson, Susan. *The Whole World in His Hands: A Pictorial Biography of Paul Robeson.* Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1981.

Shakespeare, William. *Othello.* Yale University Press, 1956.

Slote, Bernice, ed. *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1966.

Slote, Bernice, ed. "Introduction" to *Uncle Valentine and Other Stories: Willa Cather's Uncollected Short Fiction 1915-1929.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1973.

Southwick, Helen Cather. Letter to Susan Rosowski. 24 July 1997.

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. "Time and Memory in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl:* Sex, Abuse, and Art." *Cather Studies, Volume 3.* Ed. Susan Rosowski. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1996.

Woodress, James. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life.* Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987.

American Scholars: Cather, Mencken, and Godfrey St. Peter

Robert K. Miller
University of St. Thomas

Of the sixteen letters by Cather in the Mencken collection of the New York Public Library, the longest by far was prompted by Mencken's essay "Our National Letters." Dated February 6, 1922, this letter of 649 words includes reflections on *Alexander's Bridge*, *O Pioneers!*, and "The Bohemian Girl," as well as a long paragraph on *One of Ours* in which Cather explains what she was hoping to accomplish in her new book, asks permission to send Mencken an advance copy, and invites a manly response to material about which she is clearly both committed and defensive. Claiming that she might deserve an attack from Mencken and that such an attack could save her soul, Cather seems to echo aspects of Mencken's distinctive voice in her wish to please him.[1] Although she had published six books by 1922 — the year the world broke in two for her — and raises in her letter the possibility that she has become a sickly old maid, Cather is still positioning herself as the young writer who is eager to please an important critic.

Cather had good reason to value Mencken's response to her work. Ten years earlier, Mencken had praised her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, as "a very promising piece of writing" (*Smart* 263), and his respect for her work grew with each new volume. Surveying her career as of 1919, he declared that it gave him "increasing joy" to praise her work and observed that she "has shown a steady and rapid improvement, in both matter and manner. She has arrived at last at such a command of the mere devices of writing that the uses she makes of them are all concealed. . . . And she has got such a grip upon her materials — upon the people she sets before us and the background she displays behind them — that both take on an extraordinary reality" (*Smart* 266). In a 1920 letter to Louise Pound, Mencken comments that Cather is "a much finer artist than she knows" (*Letters* 183). And his public praise for her that year could not be higher, pronouncing *My Ántonia* "the finest thing of its sort ever done in America" (*Smart* 267).

So when Cather wrote to Mencken praising "The National Letters" early in 1922, relations between them were cordial. They would later sour, as was probably inevitable between two people of such strong will and temperament. They quarreled after Cather felt slighted by Mencken's review of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in 1927 and used Alfred Knopf to communicate her displeasure. On the grounds that he could not legitimately consider her wishes when reviewing her work — and irritated by what he considered her transformation into "a 100% American . . . who had succumbed to Catholicism" (Diary 33) — Mencken responded by ceasing to review Cather in the *Amer-*

ican Mercury.[2] Be this as it may, we can trace between Mencken and Cather a relationship informed by mutual respect that spans fifteen years during which they were both at the height of their creative power.

Cather's response to "Our National Letters" provides a path through which the Cather/Mencken relationship can be explored. When she wrote Mencken that his ideas gave her intense pleasure and that he had accurately diagnosed the state of American culture, she had already completed *One of Ours* and begun *A Lost Lady* (1923), the idea for which had occurred to her in March 1921 (Woodress 340) and the composition of which began during the same winter in which she wrote to Mencken. To understand Cather's response to "Our National Letters," we need to re-examine that essay and then look to the novel Cather began as soon as she finished *A Lost Lady*. I refer, of course, to *The Professor's House* (1925), the novel in which Cather engages most fully with the subject of the life of the mind in America.

In the version published in *Prejudices: Second Series*, "The National Letters" runs 101 pages and includes detailed discussion of American and European fiction, a critique of American higher education, reflections on social class, and an attack upon the American professoriate. Reviewing some of Mencken's key points can help us to read *The Professor's House* as an academic novel grounded in the culture wars of the early twenties.

Surveying nineteenth and early twentieth century American culture leads Mencken to conclude "that American thinking . . . evades the genuinely serious problems of life and art" ("National" 18). American fiction is one of the reasons why our nation suffers from "a dearth of intellectual and of aesthetic passion" ("National" 20), as well as "banality . . . too exquisite to be borne" (25). With a few notable exceptions — such as Willa Cather and Edith Wharton — both of whom are praised in this piece — American writers fail because they do not understand that "[c]haracter in decay" is one of the fundamental themes of great literature. "In all great novels," Mencken writes, "the hero is defeated. In perhaps a majority he is completely destroyed" ("National" 41). He calls for fiction focussed on "a man of delicate organization in revolt against the inexplicable tragedy of existence" (39).

Mencken also emphasizes another underlying cause for the "active hostility to ideas" he finds within the United States — and that is the American professoriate, and here I feel I must quote him at length: Professors

> dominate the weeklies of opinions; they are to the fore in every review; they write nine-tenths of the serious books of the country; they begin to invade the newspapers; they instruct and exhort the yokelry from the stump; they have even begun to penetrate into the government. One cannot turn in the United States without encountering a professor. There is one on every bureau of the federal government. There is one at the head of every intellectual movement. There is one to explain every new mystery. Professors appraise all works of art . . . Professors supply the brain power of agriculture, diplomacy, the control of dependencies and the distribution of commodities.

And, alluding to Woodrow Wilson, he concludes, "A professor was until lately sovereign of the country, and pope of the state church" ("National" 80-81).

At this point in his essay, Mencken assures readers that "[a]ll of my instincts are on the side of the professors. I esteem a man who devotes himself to a subject with hard diligence; I esteem even more a man who puts poverty and a shelf of books above profiteering and evenings of jazz. . . ." ("National" 82). Nevertheless, when Mencken asks himself why there exists in our country "an active hostility to ideas" and declares that "never in modern history has there been another civilization showing so vast a body of prohibitions and repressions" ("National" 47), he decides that much of the answer can be found by studying how higher education is organized and practiced in the United States. He observes that hostility to serious research afflicts many campuses, and that even Johns Hopkins, which had been founded as a research university, had suffered from attempts "to Americanize it, with the result that it is now sunk to the level of Princeton, Amherst and other such glorified high-schools, and is dominated by native savants who would be laughed at in any Continental university" ("National" 48)[3].

Mencken is especially critical of how the American professoriate behaved during the Great War, "when," as he puts it, "all of the national defects were enormously accentuated" ("National" 52). It was a time when "The whole thinking of the world was thrown into confusion; all the worst fears and prejudices of ignorant and emotional men came to the front; it was a time, beyond all others in modern history, when intellectual integrity was subjected to a cruel strain" ("National" 83) — a position to which Cather alludes in her letter when discussing *One of Ours* immediately after praising Mencken's view of American literature. "What," Mencken asks, "was the reaction of our learned men to the challenge of organized hysteria, mob fear, incitement to excess, downright insanity?" ("National" 83). Contrasting the behavior of the American professoriate with the conduct of professors in Germany and France, he finds a sorry record, full of what he calls "hymns of hate in the learned . . . journals" as well as "childish harangues to student-bodies, public demands that the study of the enemy language and literature be prohibited by law [and] violent denunciations of all enemy science as negligible and fraudulent . . ." ("National" 84). There were, he concedes, a "small minority" of "self-respecting men who in the midst of all the uproar, kept counsel and their dignity" ("National" 86). But the average professor succumbed to war-fever and betrayed the professoriate's mission to foster "free inquiry . . . intellectual independence and integrity" ("National" 87).

(Continued on page 38)

The reason for this betrayal? In Mencken's view, the major flaw of the American professoriate is the habit of yielding to "the prevailing correctness of thought" ("National" 82), a phrase that evokes the most recent battles of our culture war.

Before turning to Cather's novel about a professor and his colleagues, I want to draw attention to one other idea from Mencken's essay. As his contrast of American and European professoriates suggest, Mencken believed that Americans needed to become more multicultural — although, to be sure, his interest in other cultures was decidedly Eurocentric. He credits European influences for much of what he finds successful in American literature. In his words, "Whenever one encounters a novel that rises superior to [the norm] the thing takes on a subtle but unmistakable air of foreignness" ("Letters" 42), and he cites *My Ántonia* as an example of what he means. In this respect, his instincts seem to have served him well, for as Cather points out in her letter to Mencken, she was much influenced by Tolstoy and sometimes felt like an alien within her own country. Mencken's interest in European culture should not be read, however, as a rejection of our own so much as a call for us to learn to be larger, less materialistic, and more internationally minded — themes which can be found in much of Cather's work.

The "professor" of *The Professor's House* is Dr. Godfrey St. Peter, a figure who has been much criticized in recent years, especially by feminist scholars.[4] Coming to this text with Mencken's essay in mind can help us to see St. Peter as a "man of delicate organization" who benefits from European influences and who is in revolt against prevailing norms within his local culture — very much the sort of figure Mencken called for in "The National Letters." Cather emphasizes St. Peter's European background and tastes. He studied in France and found a kind of second family there; he himself has French blood and his great pleasures include not only serious scholarship but cultivating a French garden on property owned by a German landlord and eating carefully prepared food of the best ingredients. Professor of European history at Hamilton, he is an expert on the Spanish exploration of America who has done research in Spain. At Hamilton, he feels isolated because his colleagues "were not his equals in scholarship or in experience of the world" (39), and — I would argue — he is eventually defeated (as Mencken predicted such a man must be) by the economic, political, and cultural forces he tries to challenge — a fate suggested by Napoleon, the middle name which is a guarded family secret.

After almost thirty years on the faculty at Hamilton, St. Peter has been awarded a prestigious prize from Oxford University for his eight-volume history of Spanish exploration of the Americas, confirming that however hard it may be, a dedicated professor can complete serious scholarship while carrying a heavy teaching load. This achievement is the fruit not only of his intelligence and imagination; it springs also from his ability to focus and to make sacrifices in order to meet his goals: "By eliminations and combinations so many and subtle that it now made his head ache to think of them, he had done full justice to his university lectures, and at the same time carried on an engrossing piece of creative work" (19). The award for his achievement brings him little pleasure, however. It inspires hostility among his colleagues and from the school administration — the scheduling committee, for example, assigns him eight o'clock in the morning classes for the first time in many years, and the Dean smugly remarks, "He can afford to take a taxi over now" (114). The prize money — and the new house it builds — also raises for him a series of questions about the importance of money and how it should be used — questions already pressing in upon him by the wealth that has come to his daughter Rosamond through patent rights for the Outland engine. I remember, in this respect, how Mencken praised intellectuals who chose "poverty and a shelf of books" over profiteering — and profiteering is very much an issue in this book. As Mrs. Crane points out when she demands a share of the Outland patent for her husband, St. Peter's economic and social status within the town has risen even if he does not directly receive money from the patent.

In the meantime, Hamilton is sinking deeper into mediocrity. Addressing Dr. Horace Langtry, a colleague with whom he has been at odds for many years, St. Peter asks, "Don't you notice a great difference in the student body as a whole, in the new crop that comes along every year now — how different they are from the ones of our early years? . . . We have hosts of students, but they're a common sort" (42). This attempt at conversation fails. The two men, we are told, "had always been directly opposed in matters of university policy, until it had almost become a part of their professional duties to outwit and cramp each other" (43).

As they separate, irritated by each other once again, St. Peter reflects upon how Langtry had managed to become successful at Hamilton despite being a poor teacher and a weak scholar. Langtry had "introduced a very popular fraternity into the university, and its members looked after his interests, as did its affiliated sorority" (44). He dresses well and assumes an anglophilic manner that impresses "the football-playing farmer boy" as the image of what a man of culture should be. And, most tellingly, his career has been advanced by institutional complicity. In Cather's words,

> Every inducement was offered to make his courses popular. Liberal credits were given for collateral reading. A student could read almost anything written in the United States and get credit for it in American history. He could charge up the time

WILLA CATHER PIONEER MEMORIAL

2000

326 North Webster • Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970 • (402) 746-2653

Prices Subject to Change Without Notice

*NE Residents, Please Add 6% Sales Tax

PRICE LIST

	Hardback	Paperback
BOOKS BY WILLA CATHER:		
(In Alphabetical Order)		
A Lost Lady		$9.00
Scholarly Edition (Historical Essay by Susan J. Rosowski; Notes by Kari Ronning)	$55.00	
Alexander's Bridge		
Intro by Slote		8.00
Simon & Schuters, Inc.	22.00	
World's Classics		7.95
April Twilights (1903) (Ed. and Intro by Slote)	40.00	
Cather — Early Novels	35.00	
— Later Novels	35.00	
Stories, Poems and Other Writings (All Library of America Series — notes and text selected by Sharon O'Brien)	35.00	
Collected Short Fiction (ed. by Faulkner)	50.00	
Collected Stories of Willa Cather, Vintage Classics contains: "The Troll Garden" "Youth and the Bright Medusa" "Obscure Destinies" "The Old Beauty and Others" and "Five Stories"		15.00
Death Comes for the Archbishop	25.00	10.00
Scholarly Edition (Historical Essay and Notes by John J. Murphy)	60.00	
Modern Library (contains Cather's letter to *Commonweal)*	14.95	
Everyman's Library	15.00	
Great Short Works of Willa Cather (Edited with Intro by Robert K. Miller)		13.00
Lucy Gayheart		12.00
My Ántonia	24.95	
Everyman's Library (Historical Timeline)		5.95
Modern Library	15.50	
Vintage Classic		9.00
Penguin Classic (Intro by John Murphy)		9.95
Bantam		4.95
Kathleen Norris Foreward		5.95
Scholarly Edition (Historical Essay and Notes by James Woodress)	65.00	14.95
My Mortal Enemy		8.95
Not Under Forty		10.00
Obscure Destinies Scholarly Edition (Historical Essay and Notes by Kari Ronning)	65.00	
One of Ours		13.00
O Pioneers!		
Doris Grumbach Foreward		4.95
Penguin Classic (Intro by B. Gelfant)		8.95
Scholarly Edition (Historical Essay and Notes by Stouck)	50.00	12.95
Vintage Classics		9.00
Signet		$4.95
Bantam		4.95
Paul's Case and Other Stories, Dover		1.00
Sapphira and the Slave Girl		10.00
Shadows on the Rock		12.00
The Autobiography of S. S. McClure		15.00
The Kingdom of Art (ed. by Slote)	$45.00	
The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy & The History of Christian Science (Cather/Milmine) (Intro by David Stouck)		14.95
The Professor's House		11.00
The Song of the Lark Houghton Mifflin/Mariner		5.95
Signet		5.95
The Troll Garden (Intro by Woodress in hardback edition)	20.00	
Uncle Valentine and Other Stories		11.95
Willa Cather in Europe		9.00
Willa Cather on Writing Foreword by Stephen Tennant		12.00
BOOKS ABOUT WILLA CATHER:		
(Alphabetical by Author)		
Ambrose, Jamie — *Willa Cather, Writing at the Frontier*		17.50
Arnold, Marilyn — with Virgil Albertini, Gary Brienzo and Milton Jones — *Willa Cather: A Reference Guide Update: 1984-1992*	35.00	
Bedard, Michael — *The Divide*	16.95	
Bennett, Mildred — *The World of Willa Cather*		12.00
Bloom, Harold — *Major Literary Characters - My Ántonia*	34.95	
Bloom, Harold — *Modern Critical Interpretations Willa Cather's* My Ántonia	34.95	
Bloom, Harold — *Modern Critical Views Willa Cather*	29.95	
Bohlke, L. Brent — *Willa Cather in Person, Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*	25.00	12.95
Brienzo, Gary — *Willa Cather's Transforming Vision: New France and the American Northwest*	28.50	

BOOKS ABOUT WILLA CATHER: (Continued)

(Alphabetical by Author)

	Hardback	Paperback
Byrne, Kathleen and Snyder, Richard — *Chrysalis: Willa Cather in Pittsburgh, 1896-1906*	$15.00	
Carlin, Deborah — *Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading*	27.50	
Chabot, C. Barry — *Writers for the Nation*	34.95	
Fryer, Judith — *Felicitous Space, The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather*		$14.95
Gerber, Philip — *Willa Cather* (revised)	24.95	
Harvey, Sally Peltier — *Redefining the American Dream (The Novels of Willa Cather)*	34.50	
Kaye, Frances W. — *Isolation and Masquerade Willa Cather's Women*	43.95	
Keene, Ann — *Willa Cather* (biog. for young adults)	19.95	
Lee, Hermione — *Double Lives*		15.00
Levy, Helen Fiddyment — *Fiction of the Home Place: Jewett, Cather, Glasgow, Porter, Welty, and Naylor*		17.95
Lindemann, Marilee — *Willa Cather — Queering America*		16.50
McDonald, Joyce — *The Stuff of Our Forebears*	29.95	
Meyering, Sheryl L. — *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Willa Cather*	65.00	
Middleton, JoAnn — *Willa Cather's Modernism — A Study of Style and Technique*	36.50	
Murphy, John — *My Ántonia: The Road Home*	23.95	13.95
Murphy, John (edited by) — *Critical Essays on Willa Cather*	47.00	
Murphy, John (edited by) — *Willa Cather: Family, Community and History* (The B.Y.U. Symposium)		7.95
Nettels, Elsa — *Language and Gender in American Fiction (Howells, James, Wharton and Cather)*	29.50	
O'Brien, Sharon — *The Emerging Voice*	30.00	
O'Brien, Sharon — *Willa Cather*		9.95
Peck, Demaree C. — *The Imaginative Claims of the Artist in Willa Cather's Fiction*	48.50	
Pers, Mona — *Willa Cather's Children*		10.00
Reynolds, Guy — *Willa Cather in Context*		18.95
Romines, Ann — *The Home Plot*		17.95
Rosowski, Susan (edited by) — *Cather Studies*, Vol. 1	45.00	
Cather Studies, Vol. 2	45.00	
Cather Studies, Vol. 3	45.00	
Cather Studies, Vol. 4		25.00
Rosowski, Susan (edited by) — *Approaches to Teaching My Ántonia*	34.00	19.95
Skaggs, Merrill — *After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Willa Cather*	$32.50	
Slote, Bernice and Faulkner, Virginia — *The Art of Willa Cather*	25.00	
Stout, Janis P. — *Strategies of Reticence: Silence and Meaning in the Works of Jane Austin, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and Joan Didion*	32.50	
Stout, Janis P. — *Through the Window, Out the Door*	39.95	
Streissguth, Tom — *Writer of the Plains*	13.95	$5.95
Thurin, Erik Ingvar — *The Humanization of Willa Cather: Classicism in an American Classic*		34.95
Urgo, Joseph R. — *Novel Frames: Literature as Guide to Race, Sex, and History in American Culture*		16.95
Urgo, Joseph R. — *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration*		14.95
Wagenknecht, Edward — *Willa Cather*	19.95	
Welsch, Roger — *Cather's Kitchens*	17.00	
Winters, Laura — *Willa Cather: Landscape and Exile*	27.50	
Woodress, James — *Willa Cather, A Literary Life*		25.00
Woods, Lucia and Slote, Bernice — *Willa Cather, A Pictorial Memoir*	40.00	
Wooten, Sara — *Willa Cather: Writer of the Prairie*	18.95	

OTHER BOOKS HELPFUL TO CATHER READERS:

Keeping Fires Night and Day: Selected Letters of Dorothy Canfield Fisher Edited and Intro by Mark J. Madigan Forward by Clifton Fadiman	34.95	
The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories Jewett, Sarah Orne Preface by Willa Cather		9.95
Life of Bishop Machebeuf (Howlett)	24.95	
The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction Diane Dufva Quantic	25.00	15.00
Blind Boone Jack Batterson		9.95
Prairie University Robert Knolls	40.00	
Willa Cather's University Days		10.00
Nebraska Lectures: The Place of Literature and the Cultural Phenomenon of Willa Cather Susan Rosowski		5.00

OTHER SPECIALTY JOURNALS:

Cobblestone Magazine, (children's history magazine) December 1980, Cather issue		4.50

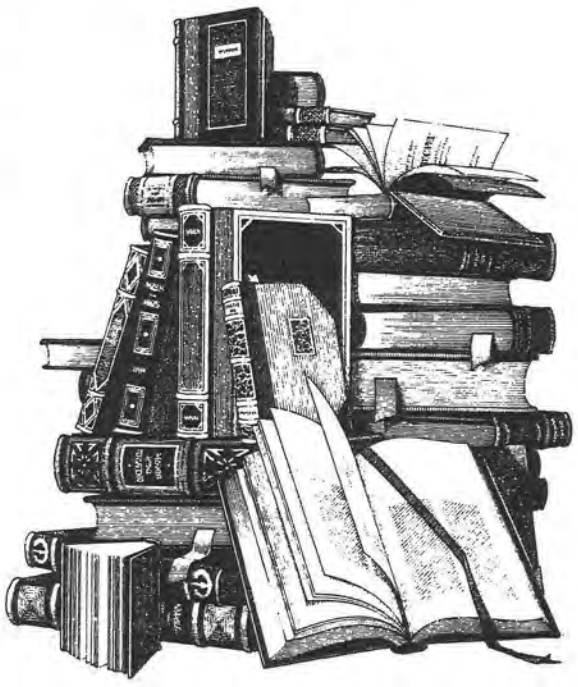
SILENT BOOK AUCTION

CLOSES DECEMBER 31, 1999

The following Cather collection is offered "for sale" from Will Fellows and Bronze Quinton of New Berlin, Wisconsin, to benefit the Opera House Restoration Fund.

At the donors' request, the appraised price will be the lowest accepted bid for these first editions. Your bid can be for individual books or for the collection as a whole.

Please send your bids before December 31 to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Office, 326 North Webster, Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970. Or, you may fax your bid to the WCPM office at (402) 746-2652. Make sure your name and address are enclosed with your bid.



We thank Will, Bronze, and each of you for your support and participation.

SILENT BOOK AUCTION

1. *The Old Beauty and Others.* Knopf. NY. 1948 ..... $30.00
2. *The Professor's House.* Knopf. NY. 1925 ..... $250.00
3. *April Twilights.* Knopf. 1923 ..... $110.00
4. *The Song of the Lark.* Houghton-Mifflin. Boston. 1915 .... $150.00
5. *O Pioneers!.* Houghton-Mifflin. Boston. 1913 ..... $450.00
6. *Not Under Forty.* Knopf. 1936 ..... $40.00
7. *Death Comes for the Archbishop.* Knopf. NY. $75.00
8. *December Night.* Knopf. NY. $125.00
9. *My Ántonia.* Houghton-Mifflin. Boston. 1918 ..... $65.00
10. *Youth and the Bright Medusa.* Knopf. NY. 1920 ..... $75.00
11. *Shadows on the Rock.* Knopf. NY. 1931 ..... $95.00
12. *A Lost Lady.* Knopf. NY. 1923 ..... $150.00
13. *A Lost Lady.* Grosset and Dunlap. NY. $20.00
14. *Obscure Destinies.* Knopf. NY. 1932 ..... $100.00
15. *Lucy Gayheart.* Knopf. NY. 1935 ..... $100.00

SILENT BOOK AUCTION

16. Brown, E. K. *Willa Cather, A Critical Biography.*
Knopf. 1953 ..... $45.00

17. [Bibliography] Crane, Joan. *Willa Cather.*
University of Nebraska Press. Lincoln. 1982 ..... $50.00

18. *Willa Cather in Europe.* Knopf. NY. 1956 ..... $45.00

19. *Willa Cather Living.* Knopf. NY. 1953 ..... $35.00

20. *Willa Cather's Campus Years.*
University of Nebraska Press. 1950 ..... $35.00

21. *Willa Cather on Writing.* Knopf. NY. 1949 ..... $40.00

22. Moorhead, Elizabeth. *These Too Were Here:*
Louise Homer and Willa Cather.
University of Pittsburg Press. 1950 ..... $35.00

23. *Willa Cather: A Biographical Sketch.*
Knopf. NY. No Date $85.00

24. Edel, Leon. *Willa Cather: The Paradox of Success.*
Library of Congress. Washington, D.C. 1960 ..... $20.00

25. Milmine, Georgine. *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy,*
etc. Doubleday and Page, NY, 1909,
1st ed. Published, November, 1909 ..... $500.00

BID FORM

Date Submitted _____

Name _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip _____

Telephone _____

Name of Book	Bid Price

FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE, PLEASE MAIL OR FAX THIS SHEET TO:

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial & Educational Foundation

326 North Webster • Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970

Fax (402) 746-2652

Silent Auction Closes December 31, 1999

	Hardback	Paperback

OTHER SPECIALTY JOURNALS: (Continued)

Five Essays on Willa Cather — 1973 Merrimack Symposium (edited by John Murphy) $1.50

Great Plains Quarterly
Fall 1984 (papers from 1983 Seminar) . 6.00
Spring 1994 ..... 6.00

Literature and Belief, 1988, Willa Cather issue edited by John Murphy .. 4.00

Nebraska English Journal
Cather in the Classroom (Fall 1991) ... 10.00

Prairie Schooner Spring/Summer 1981
Commemorative Issue for Bernice Slote (discounted) 2.00

Western American Literature Quarterly
May 1982, Cather issue ..... (discounted) 2.00

FOR YOUNG READERS:

Bedard, Michael
The Divide
(Illustrations by Emily Arnold McCully) 16.95

Streissguth, Tom
Writer of the Plains
(Illustrations by Karen Ritz) $13.95 5.95

Wooten, Sara
Willa Cather: Writer of the Prairie, 1895 18.95

BOOKS BY OTHER NEBRASKA AUTHORS:

Sandoz
Neihardt
Aldrich
Welsch

AUDIO CASSETTE TAPES:

An Evening at Vineacre
by Dear Friends — "Cather's Pittsburgh"
A Centennial Observance (September 6, 1996) $10.95

Reading Collections from Victoria Magazine 11.95

Willa — Original music by John Kunz 9.95

Alexander's Bridge 20.95
April Twilights 19.95
Chilling Tales of ByGone Days 24.95
Early Stories (6) 20.95
My Ántonia 38.95
One of Ours 53.95
O Pioneers! 26.95
O Pioneers! (Penguin) abridged 16.00
The Song of the Lark 59.95
The Troll Garden 26.95
Youth and the Bright Medusa 24.95

AUDIO VISUALS:

Nebraska Historic Shorts $9.95
Intro. to Cather's Red Cloud
17 minute videotape

Blossoms on the Prairie (27 minutes) 23.95

Love and Loneliness on the Plains
Dramatized short stories of Willa Cather and Mari Sandoz (29 minutes) 21.95

Rebel from Red Cloud 29.95
Filmstrip with cassette tape

The Sentimentality of William Tavener 12.95
12 minute video

Singing Cather's Song 19.95
Videotape of Mildred Bennett

Color Slides, 5 slides per strip ..... 2.00 each
Subjects: *A Lost Lady*
One of Ours
Willa Cather's Life 1873-1947

★ **$3.50 Postage & Insurance for Tapes & Filmstrips with Tapes** ★

Aids for Teaching *My Ántonia*

BOOKS:

My Ántonia, Introduction by John Murphy
My Ántonia, Scholarly Edition, edited by Charles Mignon and Kari Ronning, historical essay and notes by James Woodress; W. T. Benda, illustrations
"*My Ántonia*: The Road Home," Murphy
"Approaches to Teaching Cather's *My Ántonia*," ed. by S. Rosowski
(For prices, see listing elsewhere.)
Cliff's Notes — My Ántonia (Bennett), $3.95
Simply My Ántonia by Barry Turner, $25.00

BEYOND *MY ÁNTONIA*:

"Photographs to Enhance Teaching *My Ántonia*" (packets, $5.00 each)
"The Czech Cookbook," $8.00

ALSO AVAILABLE:

Several Essays in *Nebraska English Journal*, Fall 1991

Collector's Prints and Photographs

Seven prints available. ..... $62.50 (includes shipping)
Signed and numbered by artist, John Blake Bergers.
Brochure sent on request.

Berger's "The Wind Forever Stirred" Photograph
Matted 37.50
Unmatted 32.50

Berger's "On the Divide" Photograph
Matted 42.50
Unmatted 37.50

Berger's "The Tall House with the Lighted Windows" Photograph
Framed 80.00
Matted 42.50
Unmatted 37.50

Linda Stych Prints
Willa Cather's Attic Bedroom 46.00
(Different Color Matting Available)
Mini-Matted Prints of Cather Childhood Home 18.00
Mini-Matted Prints of 4 Different Interiors in Cather Home ..... (Each) 16.00

Unless indicated, prices do NOT include shipping.

Posters

Cather Country Map Poster $7.95
Library of America Poster of Willa Cather
Black and White (Steichen photograph)
24" x 34" 10.00
Postage — $4.00 for one print
Nebraska Literary Map with Native Flowers (color) 8.00
Windows to Willa's World 35.00
by Beverly Cooper

Note Cards

COLOR (from Bergers' original oils)
On Lovely Creek ..... 10/$8.50 or $1.50 each
Painted Windows ..... 10/$8.50 or $1.50 each

CARDS BY LINDA STYCH
Five Different Scenes from the Childhood Home $12.00
(5" x 7", blank inside)

BROWNTONES
Cather Childhood Home* ..... 15/$3.95
Cather Museum Building* ..... 15/$3.95
Lucy Gayheart Scene ..... 15/$3.95

BARBARA AVERY SKETCHES
Six Different Cather Sites ..... 12/$6.00
Cather House Only ..... 12/$6.00

TREES ..... 10/$15.00
Cather's quote about tree on front side

Postage for Any Set of Notes — $2.25
Each Additional Package — 75¢

Memorabilia

Paperweight, Pewter Plow on Marble $14.95
5" x 7" Photographs of Willa Cather Prairie ..... 5.95 each
(spring, summer, fall, winter)
Embroidered Plow Logo on T-Shirt 19.95
Embroidered Plow Logo on Sweatshirt 25.95
A Cornucopia of Cather Quotations 2.00
Commemorative Plate (Frankoma) 5.00
Great Authors — A Book of Post Cards 8.95
(30 oversized cards, includes one of Willa Cather)
Book Lovers' Post Cards (includes a Cather site) 6.95
Trivet (Frankoma) 4.50
Cather Stamp Pin 3.00
Spoon (gold or silver) (small/large) 5.50/7.50
Letter Opener (sword or train) (gold/silver) 8.75
Key Ring 5.25
Collector's Pewter Thimble 6.50
Collector's Silver and Pewter Bell 10.95
American Authors Knowledge Cards 9.95
Bookmark with Cather's Image 1.50
Deluxe Bookmark with Cather Stamp and Quote
and 14K Gold-plated Charm 4.50
Oblong Magnet of Cather Museum Building 4.75
Placemats with Nebraska Literary Map
(browntone) 12/3.00
Paperweight, Glass with Cather Quote,
Stamp, and Gold-plated Charm 15.00
Great American Author Postcard ..... .99
Great American Author Puzzle 14.95
Great American Authors Poster 6.95
Willa Cather Coffee Cup 7.95
Newssheet — Much Cather Info 1.00
Town Tour Map 1.00
Country Tour Map 1.00
A Resource Guide to Six Nebraska Authors 5.95

Mailing Costs

Prices subject to change.

Paperbacks ..... One Book, $3.50
Each Additional Book, 75¢

Hardback ..... One Book, $4.50
Each Additional Book, $1.00

(All packages are insured.)

WILLA CATHER PIONEER MEMORIAL

326 North Webster • Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970
(402) 746-2653

> spent in pursuing *The Scarlet Letter* to Colonial history, and *Tom Sawyer* to the Missouri Compromise, it was said. St. Peter openly criticized these lax methods, both to the faculty and to the regents." (43)

But his voice remains an unanswered cry within an academy transforming itself into a client-driven industry in which genuine scholarship is of little consequence. Langtry apparently represents the future at Hamilton — a future in which the ill qualified can teach whatever texts they choose so long as they are careful to conform to prevailing social customs.[5] St. Peter, on the other hand, is losing heart — sinking, in fact, into a depression that almost costs him his life. And his principal ally on the faculty, Dr. Robert Crane, "a man you could count on in the shifty game of college politics" (130) has become a pathetic figure in "a grey cotton coat, shrunk to a rag" (125) who is preparing to sue St. Peter's family.

As for St. Peter's reference to "the new crop" of students who seem inferior to those he had taught at the beginning of his career, this observation may reflect a real change in undergraduate population during his tenure at Hamilton. During the first half of this century the size of that population increased by 1,000% (Holt 84), with much of that growth occurring during the teens and twenties. But mediocrity, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder; St. Peter may be misjudging the caliber of his students — a risk all teachers face when students remind us that their values and interests are different from our own. When Cather gives us the chance to sit in on one of his classes, we hear him speak about science in terms that reveal that there are limits to his expertise.[6] Nevertheless, the text as a whole emphasizes that St. Peter takes teaching seriously — his wife, in fact, reproaches him for taking his students *too* seriously (57). In Cather's words:

> St. Peter had managed for years to live two lives, both of them very intense. He would willingly have cut down on his university work, would willingly have given his students chaff and sawdust — many instructors had nothing else to give them and get on very well — but his misfortune was that he loved youth — he was weak to it, it kindled him. If there was one eager eye, one doubting, critical mind, one lively curiosity in the whole lecture-room full of commonplace boys and girls, he was its servant. That ardour could command him. It hadn't worn out with years, this responsiveness, any more than the magnetic currents wear out; it had nothing to do with Time. (19)

One of the saddest things about this book is that this ardour *is* wearing out at last; St. Peter is losing his passion for teaching. By the end of the novel, convinced that he will die soon, "He found . . . that he wasn't willing to take the trouble to learn the names of several hundred new students" (247).

Despite his Oxford prize, St. Peter would also have good reason to question whether the kind of scholarship to which he had devoted so much of his life will be of interest in the future, as suggested by one of the novel's first scenes. When Sir Edgar Spilling, an English scholar specializing in Spanish history, comes to dine with St. Peter and his family, Sir Edgar is dazzled to discover that Louie is responsible for the commercial development of the Outland engine. When assured that this is indeed the case, the historian apparently forgets the scholarly interests that had brought him to visit a colleague. "Sir Edgar was as much interested as he was mystified. He had come here to talk about manuscripts shut up in certain mouldering monasteries in Spain, but he had almost forgotten them in the turn the conversation had taken" (31). I've never quite known what to make of this dinner party — and the prominence Cather gives to it within the book's structure, but I now read it as a signal that St. Peter is unlikely to retain the attention of other scholars for long.

And that, indeed, is how it should be if we read *The Professor's House* as a text informed by the principles Mencken advocated in "The National Letters." Remember that Mencken had called for fiction showing "a man of delicate organization in revolt against the inexplicable tragedy of existence" and declared that in all great novels "the hero is defeated" ("National" 41) . Godfrey St. Peter is precisely that kind of hero. This is not to argue that he is entirely admirable. He certainly has flaws, as many critics have noted. But he also has noble aspirations for which he is willing to make sacrifices, and only the smallest of minds could rejoice in his defeat.

It might also be worth noting that "The National Letters" specifically cites "the University of Chicago and Chicago itself" as part of "the whole, gross, glittering, excessively dynamic, infinitely grotesque, incredibly stupendous drama of American life" (23) that Mencken urged American writers to evoke and that *The Professor's House* includes two trips to Chicago, on one of which St. Peter delivers a lecture at the University of Chicago. Later, when he returns to Chicago to go shopping for furniture, there is certainly something "gross" and "infinitely grotesque" about Rosamond's "orgy of acquisition" (135).

In sketching these connections between Cather and Mencken, I do not mean to imply that Cather deliberately set out to write the kind of novel Mencken called for in "The National Letters." Influence is often hard to track. Once we make ideas our own, we may lose sight of how and where they began. Nor do I wish to imply that "The National Letters" explains *The Professor's House*, a richly complex text inspired by many sources — among them a Dutch painting, Cather's experiences in the Southwest, an early interest in Carlyle (whose rhetoric and ideology can help us to understand Mencken) and probably her own experience with academic politics when teaching at Central and Allegheny High Schools. But I do hope that I have established that the study of Mencken can be of use to Cather scholars, and that there are

(Continued on page 40)

grounds for detecting his influence in *The Professor's House.*[7]

It is, of course, reductive to call a text as rich and complex as *The Professor's House*, "an academic novel" — putting it on the same level as something like *Lucky Jim* or *Moo.* Nevertheless, it remains a novel with a small-minded dean, a faculty divided about the nature and value of scholarship, three professors caught up in personal conflict, a brilliant student, a classroom visitation, and a school operating under the supervision of a state legislature that confuses education with training — all of which are issues that would speak to Mencken, whose favorable review of *The Professor's House* would move Cather to write to him once again.

NOTES

[1] The tone with which Cather expresses this invitation is extraordinarily submissive — and disturbing even when I allow for the possibility of rhetorical play. Cather, of course, got just what she asked for. When Mencken reviewed *One of Ours* several months later for *Smart Set* (October 1922), he gave her fiction his first negative review.

[2] In fairness to Mencken I should note that as late as 1946, almost twenty years after this breach, he recorded in his diary that Cather deserved the Nobel Prize "more than any other, but she has been out of sight and mind so long that the Swedes seem to have forgotten her" (Diary 417).

[3] Perhaps it is only a coincidence, but Cather has Tom Outland reject an offer to study at Johns Hopkins.

[4] For the most thoughtful of these critiques, see Merrill Maguire Skaggs' *After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Willa Cather* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1990), pp. 63-84.

[5] That there are now two professors of European history at Hamilton is significant in terms of what we know of the period in question. If we read *The Professor's House* as set in the historical present of 1925, when the book was published, and consider St. Peter's long tenure at Hamilton, it would then follow that his career began in the late nineteenth century. Departments of history, like departments of English, are relatively modern phenomena. In 1880 there were only eleven professors of history in the United States; by 1900 there were approximately 100, and history had become an established discipline (Holt 86). But even allowing for the large increase in undergraduate population that took place during the early decades of this century, it is unlikely that Hamilton really needed two professors of European history — especially in so much as one has gotten himself declared a professor of European history only after he has failed as a professor of American history.

[6] For anyone familiar with scientific research, especially in physics, during the first quarter of the twentieth century — the period in which we can assume St. Peter has been teaching — the often-quoted claim that "Science hasn't given us any new amazements except the superficial kind we get from witnessing dexterity and sleight of hand" (55) reflects either imprecise language (using "science" as a synonym for "technology") or a major gap in the professor's own learning.

[7] Mencken's low opinion of the American professoriate may also help to account for the contempt for academics that surfaces in Cather's subsequent correspondence — such as the letter of December 13, 1934 on the teaching of creative writing and her correspondence in 1938-1939 with Edward Wagenknecht.

WORKS CITED

Cather, Willa. *The Professor's House.* New York: Vintage, 1990.

Letter to H. L. Mencken. 6 February 1922. The Mencken Papers. New York Public Library, New York.

Holt, W. Stull. "Historical Scholarship." In *American Scholarship in the Twentieth Century.* Ed. Merle Curti. New York: Russell, 1953. pp. 83-110.

Mencken, Henry Louis. *The Diary of H. L. Mencken.* Ed. Charles A. Fetcher. New York: Knopf, 1989.

-----. *Letters.* Ed. Guy J. Forgue. New York: Knopf, 1961.

-----. "The National Letters." In *Prejudices: Second Series.* New York: Knopf, 1924. 9-101.

-----. *Smart Set Criticism.* Ed. William H. Nolte. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1968.

Skaggs, Merrill Maguire. *After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Willa Cather.* Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1990.

Woodress, James. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life.* Lincoln, U of Nebraska P, 1987.

EDITOR'S NOTE: To commemorate the death of Willa Cather's friend Yehudi Menuhin in March 1999, we asked Cather scholar Polly Duryea, who interviewed Sir Yehudi in the early 1990s, to share some of her memories of him. — *AR*

Who's Yehudi?

Polly Duryea

It seems ironic, somehow, that Yehudi Menuhin (1916-1999) died this March in Berlin, and not where he was born, in New York, or lived, in London. His name — Yehudi — meant simply "The Jew." In 1991, the State of Israel honored him as Humanitarian of the Year. Last summer I had the good fortune to visit Israel myself, and I met several other men named Yehudi, a common name there. Yet when I was a kid, during World War II, the standard eighth-grader greeting was "Hi, Who's Yehudi?" Never did I dream I would meet Yehudi Menuhin in person at his London home some fifty years later.

As nearly everyone knows, Sir Yehudi Menuhin was a child prodigy, a violinist extraordinaire, a conductor, a teacher, a humanitarian. But to Willa Cather scholars, Yehudi Menuhin and his sisters were Cather's young friends, her wished-for family, her beloved "playmates." Isabelle McClung Hambourg brought them together, in Paris, through her husband Jan

Hambourg's association with other exiled artists from Russia. (Russians Leon Bakst and Nicolai Fechin both painted Cather's portraits.)

I don't think Yehudi Menuhin liked Jan Hambourg much, since he quit the violin when he married well, but Yehudi's mother, Marutha, and Isabelle Hambourg had hit it off. Generously, Isabelle knew that gifted young people, like the Menuhin children, had always fascinated her old friend from Pittsburgh.[1]

During my visit with Sir Yehudi, I recorded, with his permission, the following bits of conversation.

YM: At their house, I'm talking about the Hambourgs who were living on the Left Bank [in Paris, near St. Sulpice] — as we were — at the time, she and my mother struck up a very, very close friendship. My mother had a flair, a nose as it were, for people with a real gift, a rare quality . . . .

But there again in Jan Hambourg, who was a violinist, he was a friend only incidentally [through his marriage] to Isabelle. She was also a very — what would you call it . . . uncommercial, unselfseeking, very remote also from the Russian/Jewish world of . . . Jan Hambourg (a student of Ysaye) and my father and me.

Eventually, the entire Menuhin family — the ruling mother, Marusha, the promoting father, Moshe, the talented sisters, Hepzibah and Yalta — grew to adore their "Aunt Willa." (Sir Yehudi still called her that during my interview.) Their mutual friendship crossed the Atlantic to America, and their Aunt Willa entered the New York family circle of privacy that was so fiercely guarded by Mrs. Menuhin. She called Cather "Vassinka."

YM: Well, I think she [Yehudi's mother] was attracted to her [Cather] because of her kind of wonderful — uh, what would you call it — a wonderful intransigence. Ruthlessness of the realm, but uncompromising, which was a great quality in Aunt Willa, as we used to call her. And she would have no truck with anything cheap, or vulgar, or journalistic, or . . . to do with the outward appearances . . . . I mean any kind of praise or advertising, or having publicity. That was absolutely an anathema to Willa Cather. And my mother felt exactly the same way. And there was always this division at home between my mother and father. My father, of course, presented me and the family to the outside world. And it was into this inner world that she recognized that Aunt Willa would make a huge contribution.

I must say that, as we never went to school, my sisters and I, that every teacher that we had in the house, every friend, every help — whether in the kitchen, or any kind of help — was a person of real, real quality, which I owe to my mother.

In Willa Cather, Mrs. Menuhin had found her match in rejecting outside intrusions. Quickly, the friends

— Photo Courtesy of Helen Cather Southwick and James Woodress

Yehudi Menuhin with Willa Cather, Pasadena, California, 1931.

bonded into a tiny eggshell world where they dramatized Shakespeare, tramped around Central Park, exchanged sweets and flowering trees, and enjoyed tiny dinner parties, until they melded into one joyous ensemble. A card to Cather from the Menuhins stated, "Everything must have been just right on the day you were born." Cather found them extremely exciting and was genuinely fond of the family.

YM: It was through my mother or through Isabelle Hambourg, through people totally at one with her in her American, her — who shall I say — her real down-to-earth integrity and robustness. And the kind of rootedness which I mean, rootedness in America. It is a relative term, but it nonetheless is, is the OTHER. She comes marked by the land, an American quality. And her books are very American. . . .

Oh yes, so you know how she became a part of the family. And loved my father, too. When my father and I were on tour alone, as he always traveled with me, we came to Pasadena once, and there she was visiting a relative of hers [her mother] in Pasadena.

PD: I remember the photo of you two.

YM: Yes, that's right, a photo, that's right. And so we, my father was delighted. He also sensed in her

(Continued on page 42)

this other-worldly presence which he valued enormously. He recognized it in my mother, too. And aesthetically, Aunt Willa was very much like my sister, Hepzibah [Hepzibah's name means "the desired one"], in the sense that there was a certain — how should I say it — avoidance of the decorated, of the embellishment in — , whether in dress, or in prose. Every word had to carry its own weight. There wasn't much inclination to spend energy or expression on decorated elements. I mean she didn't dress with flourishes. She didn't have a dramatic, theatrical style. That wasn't her — she was really solid.

Sir Yehudi described Willa Cather as being "solid," a word that denoted integrity and strength of character. But in the 1930s and 1940s, the word "solid" also had a slang meaning, one taken from the world of jazz music. In the age of Benny Goodman and Joe Williams and Count Basie, "solid" also meant "cool, jivey, with it, terrific, really great!" So, without being flippant, I'll answer that silly kid's question from my early school years.

"Who's Yehudi?" Who was Yehudi?

I reply: "Why, he was Solid, man, Solid! Solid forty-eight-carat Gold."

NOTE

[1] For more on the subject, see my "Willa Cather and the Menuhin Connection," *WCPM Newsletter* (Summer 1992), 12-15.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Janis Stout's "Re-Studying Cather" is the second in an occasional series of brief reflections of the state of Cather studies that began with Richard Millington's piece in fall, 1998. We are eager for your responses and contributions to this series. Let us hear from you!

— *AR*

Re-Studying Cather: Historicist and Historical Scholarship

Janis P. Stout
Texas A & M University

In his inaugural "brief reflection on the state of Cather studies" in the Fall 1998 *Newsletter and Review*, Richard Millington set a high standard for those who come after him — a hard act to follow indeed. It is with a certain diffidence, then, that I seek to follow it, especially having rediscovered, in rereading Millington's essay, what strikes me as his really cogently argued polemic against allegorizing in general and allegorizing tendencies in historicist scholarship more specifically. When one expects to emphasize, even extol, historicist scholarship as one of the two points of one's own essay, such a discovery is somewhat daunting. My plan, however, is to proceed with my own mild polemic, partly of endorsement, partly of exhortation, disregarding Millington's argument with respect to allegorical tendencies but acknowledging its astuteness.

Let me first, then, say a little about historicist methods and cultural studies and then about historical methods and materials as more traditionally defined.

At the time Millington wrote, Cather studies had recently seen a powerful triple header: Joseph Urgo's *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* in 1995, Walter Benn Michaels's *Our America* that same year, and Guy Reynolds's *Willa Cather in Context* in 1996. It is safe to say these three books, together, constituted a kind of if-you-build-it-they-will-come call to the community of Cather scholars and perhaps to the even larger community of Americanists interested in the literature and culture of the pre-World War II period who might become Cather scholars. Susan Rosowski's endorsement on the cover of Urgo's book, saying that it "demonstrates the potential of Cather for cultural studies" and "moves Cather studies to a new level," was precisely correct. Whatever the degree of one's agreement or disagreement with this or that specific passage, Urgo, Michaels, and Reynolds fully deserve the attention they have received in subsequent discussions, because they introduced a method that until then had only sporadically and in individual essays, not full monographs, been seen in the field.

Incidentally, the fact that these three books coincided, in various ways, with the Cather International Seminar of 1997, in Winchester, demonstrates once again the shaping role that these seminars have played in the growth and maturation of Cather studies in the past two decades.

Subsequent work has demonstrated the accuracy and astuteness of Rosowski's statement about Cather's potential for cultural studies. I am thinking specifically of Marilee Lindemann's *Willa Cather: Queering America* (1999) — a book with which I often want to quarrel, but which teaches me a great deal — and of certain essays in the volume on Cather's southern connections edited by Ann Romines now in press at the University Press of Virginia. To me, cultural studies of Cather have not proven "already tedious" at all. Nor do I find it necessary to oppose cultural studies to stylistic or aesthetic studies. No one would say, at this date, that really first-rate stylistic criticism is merely impressionistic, but recent readings of Cather that have attempted to take into account the subtle and elaborate ways in which her writing demonstrates her embeddedness in her cultural context have shown us afresh how richly style participates in ideas and impulses larger than itself. They have moved stylistic criticism to another, and a more informed, level than it has sometimes occupied in the past. It is hard for me to understand how a more informed criticism can be anything other than a better criticism — which is not to say that in advancing into the new we do not need to remember and relearn the riches of traditional scholarly perspectives.

Modernism itself was, after all, far more than a "merely" aesthetic movement. Its stylistic features emerged from and expressed huge and often elusive historical, social, and intellectual disruptions. Cather really is, to borrow a phrase Millington rejects, a "priestess of modernism," no less because she participated in a widespread recoil from the spectacle of World War I than because she wrote in a cryptic minimalist style broken by what Jo Ann Middleton calls "vacuoles."

Besides the historicist studies that I have mentioned (and certainly there are others; I think, as Professor Millington does, of the genuinely front-running work glimpsed in dissertations and shorter papers by today's graduate students — for example, the fine but so-far unpublished work on cultural appropriation done by Nancy Chinn's student at Baylor, Gay Barton), I want to mention historical and cultural studies not *focused* on Cather that offer rich resources for the kind of informed readings of Cather that I am advocating. Let me mention just two that have proven especially useful to me in recent months: Bailey Van Hook, *Angels of Art: Women and Art in American Society, 1876-1914* (1996) and Chris Wilson, *The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition* (1997). Both of these books might have been described as tangential only a few years ago, or even completely off the radar screen of Cather studies. Yet for me they have been like lightbulbs being switched on, illuminating, in each case, a special dimension of Cather's involvement in patterns that were at work in her time: the pool in which she swam. There are others, of course. I can't by any means claim to know what all of the potential lightbulbs are in the range of broad cultural studies. But they are there (studies of women's employment patterns come to mind), and they enable scholars whose interests are both intensive and extensive to return to the texts in newly awakened ways. And if the interest of such scholarship is sometimes "located outside or 'beneath' the experience of reading," who is to say that cultural studies may not sometimes be the end and Cather studies the means?

It is sometimes hard to say where historicism ends and historical methods and resources, as traditionally defined, begin. I will not attempt to draw that line with any great clarity. To historicize is to locate a writer or artist within the brew of contemporary experience and thought that would have constituted her world and to attempt to see how she responded, whether consciously or not, to that brew. To entertain historical issues is often to identify the overt references of a work — to explain, for instance, why it seems inadequate (to me) for Cather to say, whether in the consciousness of Vaillant or not, that "the Spaniards had treated [the Acomas] very badly long ago" (*DCA* 53). One has to know at least a little of the history of Acoma during conquest to understand the dissonance. The reasons for the dissonance are in part cultural — that is, part of a historicist reading. The two, historical information and historicist method, are connected.

The historical resources for Cather studies are enormously richer than they were even a few years ago. The Scholarly Editions alone have advanced our opportunities for informed reading by light years. Charles Mignon said in his presentation at the 1999 American Literature Association meeting that he and the other participating editors see their notes and historical essays and textual essays as jumping-off places for future criticism. And they are. In two respects, however, we Cather scholars are still handicapped by the lack or at any rate the inadequacy of historical resources needed for our work. I want to spend the rest of my essay talking about these two great needs in the field.

First, the need for published, quotable letters. We all know the prohibition in Cather's will against publication, in whole or in part, or any writings which remained unpublished at her death. The most notable result of that prohibition, of course, is that her letters remain unpublished and thus unavailable for common and authoritative reference. Indeed, since there is no single central archive (because, after all, Cather didn't want them saved in the first place), we lack comprehensive knowledge of how many letters still exist and where they are.

Until fall 1998, with congressional passage and presidential signing of the so-called Copyright Exten-

(Continued on page 44)

sion Act, this situation might have been expected to be rectified in 2003, when the letters would have entered public domain. Under the new law, however, copyright protection of unpublished materials of a known producer is extended to seventy years beyond death. This means that the letters will not escape legal restriction until 2017. There will still remain, of course, the ethical (as opposed to legal) question of whether the will should be broken. In my own view, the interests of informed scholarship outweigh the interests of personal desire after so long a period. Others may well disagree. But it is a moot point. Until 2017 the letters are restricted from publication.

What has been the result of this prohibition? It has not kept enterprising scholars from studying and referring to the letters, at any rate to the extent that they are able to locate them and obtain access to them. Some libraries whose legal counsel is especially cautious define Xeroxing for scholarly examination as publication and thus restrict the number of those who have access to those able to afford travel to their locations. Others do not. But without full and definitive publication, the uses that are made of the letters are not conveniently subject to verification. We all know that even with the purest intentions paraphrases can distort. Moreover, the temptation to incorporate Cather's own language — for after all, no paraphrase, however skilled, can ever convey the meaning of the letters as well as her own words — has at times proven too great for researchers to bear, with the result that passages from the letters have been incorporated verbatim into published books and essays without quotation marks or with only nominal alteration. How much better for us to have been able to place quotation marks around what was quoted, as we should, to mark it off from what was not.

How many letters are there? More than most of us have thought. My own current book manuscript cites forty-five separate libraries and one private collection, and I entertain no illusion that this is a complete list. Indeed, I know of at least one stash of letters that I have not cited. They're out there — I just don't know where!

I should explain at this point, lest it seem later that I have not been candid about this, that I am presently working on a calendar of letters and am talking with two actively interested publishers to bring this out. I hope it will not seem to any of you, my colleagues, that in saying so I am trying to use the Newsletter for publicity. I merely let you know that I am trying to ameliorate our shared need for published letters with this stopgap measure until one of you now reading this, or a graduate student of one of us, is able to produce a scholarly edition of the letters seventeen years hence. I was hoping to do so myself had it not been for Congress and President Clinton.

Second, we need a complete, chronological collection of the journalism. This is not by any chance to denigrate Bernice Slote's *The Kingdom of Art* or William Curtin's *The World and the Parish*, which have so splendidly informed and enriched the work of all Cather scholars. But not only are those editions far from complete, even within their stated parameters, they disregard the integrity of individual texts. This is because they reflect one of the prevailing critical approaches of their own day, which sought to establish a holistic sense of a writer's views of this or that. And so we have Cather on "The Star System," "Books and Authors," "The Musical World," but not Cather as she appeared in the pages of a specific newspaper or magazine on a specific day.

Here is how I learned the real dimensions of the handicap under which we work when we try to utilize Cather's newspaper and magazine writing. As I was trying to understand how Cather used her theatrical reviews to explore and define gender roles, and began to realize vaguely what I was up against, I asked my department, and it graciously agreed, to Xerox *The Kingdom of Art* in its entirety (not having the nerve to ask for *The World and the Parish*). I then spent days literally cutting it apart with scissors and reshuffling the pieces in chronological order. What I found was that pieces of individual columns were scattered here and there through the volume. When I taped the pieces together, I found that some made up quite lengthy essays while others might be only four or five lines long. Obviously, there were major parts of some essays that hadn't been included at all. Moreover, even after I had assembled all the pieces of a particular day's column (that is, all that were there), I couldn't tell what order to put them in, so I couldn't tell a thing about Cather's structuring of her nonfiction pieces.

If we are to pursue properly informed scholarship going behind the fiction to the sorts of documentary materials that are customary in literary studies, we need a reliable edition of the complete letters — but that can't happen for another two decades, almost — and we need an edition of Cather's collected journalism, arranged chronologically and with full editorial apparatus. (Again, this is not to denigrate Curtin and Slote. Slote's essays in *The Kingdom of Art*, in particular, are invaluable.) It is impossible to gain more than the slightest sense of her growth as a writer of nonfiction until we have such a resource.

The field is ripe for Cather scholars in the future who are willing to do the hard and often thankless work of compilation and editing to provide these materials. In the meantime, I encourage and celebrate the production of such historical — and historicist — scholarship as can be done with what we now have available.

Cather in the Mainstream, #5

Loretta Wasserman
Grand Valley State University

When I assembled the first "Cather in the Mainstream" piece, now some five years ago (*Newsletter*, Winter 1995) I noted that Cather's name seemed to be appearing with increasing frequency in writing aimed at the general public, testifying to a gradual reassessment of her place in the pantheon of American writers. Further, that her name seemed to stand for simple living on the plains, much as Fitzgerald's name conjures up a martini glass, or Faulkner's the tangle of a decayed Southern family. Many citations later, I would say that her place is indeed ascendant, but that the matter of what her name represents is more complicated. Cather is being read in many different ways, as the references to follow will show.

Well, maybe not always literally "read," or not read recently. I found the following summation of *My Ántonia* in a one-page ad titled "Penguin celebrates a Century of Great Literature" (*The New Yorker*, June 6 1999): "*My Ántonia* tells the story of a woman whose strength and passion epitomize the pioneer spirit. Ántonia Shimerda returns to Nebraska to make a fresh start after the tragic death of her father. . . ." Hmm. But I forgive the ad writer, who was probably rushed, because he places Cather right up there with Proust, Joyce, Wharton, Conrad, Bellow, Marquez — other authors featured in the ad as representing the best of twentieth century literature.

Or consider these one-sentence capsules from "The Book Lover's Calendar" for January 25, 1999 (sent in by Ann Romines): *O Pioneers!* "A young woman runs a prosperous farm in Nebraska, but lacks love and companionship." *Death Comes for the Archbishop* "The mystical sometimes sentimental episodes in the life of a pioneer archbishop."

But to return to the question of what Cather's name evokes. Most often, certainly, it is Nebraska and the plains; however, the question of tone remains. For James T. Yenckel, the long-time travel writer for *The Washington Post*, it is appreciative. Writing about the books that have most influenced him — that is, showed him "how to see and understand the destinations we visit" — he lists *O Pioneers!* and adds, "I'm a Nebraskan by birth, and as much as anyone Cather showed me the quiet beauty of the prairie. So many people tell me they have found the long drive across my home state dull. 'Ah, but you haven't read Willa Cather,' I reply. *O Pioneers!* . . . taught me that no place is really dull if you observe it as carefully as she did" (*Washington Post Book World*, 6 June, 1999). Again, Cather is in very good literary company, here world-wide company. Yenckel includes in his discussion Goethe's *Italian Journey*, Twain's *Innocents Abroad*, and a number of distinguished naturalists and historians. I can't help thinking how much Cather would have enjoyed seeing her name is these ranks!

In contrast are readers who emphatically fail to perceive "quiet beauty" in Cather's prairie writing. A reviewer of Tom McNeal's novel *Goodnight, Nebraska* begins by mentioning Wright Morris's "withered towns," and goes on, "This predicament — in which the landscape's sheer vastness overwhelms its residents — has always captivated American writers. In the hands of authors as varied as Willa Cather and Jane Smiley, the region's endless skies and vistas can seem as oppressive as the shadowy confines of a jail cell" (*The New York Times Book Review*, 3 May, 1998).

Similarly, but with greater complexity of perception, Christopher Benfy, reviewing *The Collected Poems of Amy Clampitt*, writes that Clampitt, in her later work, looked more and more "Westward," the title of her fourth book. Clampitt, who grew up in Iowa, ". . . never idealized her midwestern roots, describing instead a gloomy prairie Gothic, with lines that could come from one of the grimmer stories of Willa Cather or Hamlin Garland." But then Benfy goes on to praise Clampitt's ability to see the harshness of plains life through the lens of the literary past: "Like Cather, Clampitt retained a profound attachment for the traditional cultural touchstones: Greek myth and statuary, Mediterranean light, Beethoven" (*The New York Times Book Review*, 9 Nov., 1997). It was satisfying to see the richness of Cather's writing so cogently observed.

Again, Cather is found in very good company in these next two citations: the first is from Leo Marx, reviewing two books about Thoreau and nature writing (*The New York Times Review of Books*, 15 July 1999). He writes that Lawrence Buell, in *The Environmental Imagination*, prizes those works that make nature an "active presence," not merely a scenic backdrop, offering the Marabar cave scene of *Passage to India* as an example. Marx suggests other authors who would meet Buell's test — "Cooper, Hardy, Tolstoy, Lawrence, Cather and Faulkner." The second is from a column by Michael Dirda in the *Washington Post Book World* (27 June, 1999). Using his own experience, Dirda tells graduating high school seniors that some of the "byways of his reading" have offered him the best "ground rules for better living." He then offers twelve quotations, with comments, and ends with a strong plea — "Read the Classics . . . . Work your way through Plato; be touched by Cather's *A Lost Lady* and shocked by Rousseau's *Confessions*; feel the burning fever of *Death in Venice*; listen in on Samuel Johnson's repartee . . ." .

A very brief characterization of Cather appears in a discussion of a biography of the New York writer, Dawn Powell. The reviewer, Lisa Zeidner, asserts that Powell ". . . is wittier than Dorothy Parker, dissects the rich better than F. Scott Fitzgerald, is more plaintive than Willa Cather in her evocation of the heartland . . ." (*The New York Times Book Review*, 15 Nov., 1998).

"Plaintive" is a little hard to pin down. The reviewer would seem to be using it as a compliment,

(Continued on page 46)

whereas more usually it suggests a weak or complaining melancholy — my dictionary gives a derivation from OF "plaintif," aggrieved. But there is no doubt that this next excerpt, also sent by Ann Romines, is, as Ann says, "a slam" on the Cather tone. An interview with William Finn about his new play, "A New Brain," describes the playwright, known for the sardonic humor of his first success, "Falsettoes," as worried that the happy ending of his new play will disappoint audiences. " 'I feel I'm turning into Willa Cather,' he says anxiously. He sighs, bewildered. 'Every "and," "the," and "but" full of this Midwestern longing and love and moistness. I used to be a sarcastic, funny writer' " (Ellen Pall, "The Long-Running Musical of William Finn's Life," *The New York Times Magazine*, 14 June 1998).

We must grant, I suppose, that Cather will never be noted for her sarcastic humor, but "moistness"? As though to counter this characterization, Bill Buford, in *The New Yorker's* "The Talk of the Town" (21 and 28 June 1999), introduces the twenty young fiction writers featured in this issue by trying to list the writers who would have been seen as promising one hundred years ago: "It's unlikely, for instance, that Willa Cather would have found a place in it; she was twenty-six, and an acerbic critic with a wicked temper and an intolerance of mediocrity, but she wouldn't publish her first novel for thirteen more years." Buford goes on to consider other coming authors — Wharton, Dreiser, London, Crane (again, Cather is in very decent company) —, but in no other case does he offer such a character sketch. Indeed, it's a little hard to fathom just why Buford zeroes in on Cather here, but he does make her into a strong personality in her own right.

Of course students of the Cather life have long known that she could be tough — even, in her younger days, ruthless with facts in the interests of good copy. An awareness of this trait might have helped Jonathan Yardley in composing his review of a new biography of Stephen Crane (*Washington Post Book World*, 16 Aug. 1998). Noting that Crane chafed under the necessity of doing "hack work," Yardley quotes "a young and unknown Willa Cather: 'He gave me to understand that he led a double literary life; writing in the first place the matter that pleased him and doing it very slowly; in the second place any sort of stuff that would sell.' " Yardley is here taking lines from "When I Knew Stephen Crane," which Cather wrote some five years after encountering Crane, and which, Bernice Slote asserts ". . . cannot be used as proof as or biographical fact. It is fictional in a number of details" (*The Kingdom of Art*, p. 20). Cather describes Crane as dark haired, carrying a volume of Poe, whereas Crane was light haired and, Woodress observes, it was Cather who was reading Poe (p. 99). Yardley quite naturally is just following the lead of the work he is reviewing (Linda H. Davis, *Badge of Courage: The Life of Stephen Crane*). I have checked the references to Cather in Davis's book, and it is clear that she relies on the veracity of Cather's essay and quotes extensively from it, calling it "psychologically perceptive" (p. 103). Yardley notes in some puzzlement that when Crane was speaking so disparagingly of his newspaper work, it was actually "journalism of a very high order." Cather created a lot of trouble for later scholars with her fanciful picture.

In a eulogy of Alfred Kazin written shortly after Kazin's death last year, Sean Wilentz rehearses Kazin's life-long love of American history and literature, "Always he returned to his love of the past . . . as the enduring touchstone of his critical imagination" (*The New York Times Book Review*, 19 July 1998). Wilentz then cites a passage from Kazin's journal, written as he was working on *An American Procession*: "I keep seeing Willa Cather on that train doing the long homeward trek to Nebraska." This is an especially moving image, I think, in that it is not about any particular work or event, but a blend of impressions left by both the work, where so many train journeys appear, and the life, punctuated with Cather's many trips west to the prairies. The 1912 trip memorably opens Woodress's monumental biography. Kazin's mental picture is pleasing to Cather admirers, too, because in his early very influential *On Native Grounds* Kazin had linked Cather and Ellen Glasgow in a chapter called "Elegy and Satire," where, although he carefully considers the works of the two "middle aged women," he terms them "serenely good" (p. 182) and not linked to early modernism.

Finally, and self-indulgently, I want to report a discovery — probably known to most of you — of Cather recycled: I am not a careful follower of contemporary poetry, but I have a friend who is, with whom I meet to read and discuss a selected poet. Recently we chose Robert Pinsky, Poet Laureate, and now well known through his frequent readings on public television's "News Hour." His long discursive poem "An Explanation of America," first published in a single volume in 1979 (reprinted in *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems, 1966-1996*), is divided into three parts. The second, titled "Its Great Emptiness," begins, "Imagine a child from Virginia or New Hampshire / Alone on the prairie eighty years ago . . .". A dozen lines later: "Or, imagine the child in a draw that holds a garden / Cupped from the limitless motion of the prairie, / Head resting against a pumpkin . . ." . Then . . . "the quiet of that air and earth becomes . . . a kind of space / Where one dissolves to become a part of something / Entire . . .". Now there could be no question of coincidence, and Pinsky's "Notes" made all clear: "Much of the prairie material, including the incident of the stranger who leaps into the thresher, is paraphrased from *My Ántonia*, by Willa Cather." The poet is here using the tramp's jump into the thresher, the dominant image in this section, to link death and the prairie, "Where immigrants, in the obliterating strangeness, / Thirst for the wide contagion of the shadow . . ." .

The 44th Annual Willa Cather Spring Conference April 30-May 1, 1999

Amy Ahearn
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Throngs of visitors descended upon Red Cloud for the 44th Annual Willa Cather Spring Conference, held April 30 and May 1, 1999. This year's conference took its theme from Cather's 1919 *Red Cross Magazine* article "The Education You Have to Fight For." In her essay, Cather describes the prairie school house of the 1880s as the center of community life, with education the most valuable investment in the community. Speaking of the sacrifices the pioneers made to go to school, Cather writes, "Because [obtaining an education] was so difficult then, it seemed infinitely desirable." At the end of her essay, she questions whether students in 1919 still have the same longing for and devotion to scholarship. Cather's reflections are highly appropriate for current discussions of education. This year, the tragedy in Littleton, Colorado, sparked a national examination of conscience regarding our public schools. With the spring conference coming just one week after the incident at Columbine High School, the theme of the conference suddenly took on much more weight. Participants came ready to share their own school experiences and to consider the role of Cather's writing for today's young readers.

Before delving into discussions of education, participants eased into the conference with a leisurely Friday schedule. Friday was a "Do-It-Yourself" afternoon, with generous time allotted for visiting sites of interest. With sunshine and balmy weather present for the entire conference, participants enjoyed tours throughout Cather's childhood town, taking in the Burlington depot, the Opera House, and the Cather family home. Later, Virgil Albertini chaired a session at Sacred Heart Parish Hall that included papers by Amy Ahearn, Madeline Roebke, and Sandra Bennett. Ahearn spoke about Cather's duties at *McClure's Magazine*, specifically her work on "The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy and The History of Christian Science." Roebke examined Cather's writing in terms of the Protestant Revivalist Movement, noting that religion remains an important facet throughout Cather's writing, despite the author's less-than-sympathetic depictions of overly pious people. Using the theme of opposites, Bennett traced the magnetic poles throughout *A Lost Lady*, observing the attraction Marian Forrester has to the sexual Frank Ellinger, to the opportunistic Ivy Peters, and to the stolid Captain Forrester. The day ended with a showing of *Paul's Case*, a film adaptation of Cather's work from the American Short Stories Series. Merrill M. Skaggs provided background information about the film and then facilitated a discussion regarding the adaptation. While most viewers appreciated the artistry of the film, they at the same time lamented the loss of Cather's language. The video, with its powerful depiction of Paul's dissonance with public school education introduced the theme for the conference.

Saturday began with what has become a tradition at Spring Conferences, kolaches in the morning followed by a service at Grace Episcopal Church. The St. Juliana Choir welcomed the conferees with its angelic singing, and Reverend Charles Peek officiated at the worship service. Afterward, participants converged for "The Passing Show" at the First United Methodist Church. Using "The Education You Have to Fight For" as a starting point for discussion, the panel focused on Cather's affinity for education in her life as well as in her writing. Moderated by Nancy Chinn, the session featured Mellanee Kvasnicka's presentation "Education in the Parish: Preparation for the World." Kvasnicka noted the formative influence Cather's teachers wielded over the developing writer. Cather, in fact, pays homage to her teachers in her fiction, in such characters as Aunt Georgiana, Harvey Merrick, Tom Outland, and Gaston Cleric. Using a key line from "Old Mrs. Harris," "The end is nothing; the road is all," Kvasnicka identified the author's attitude toward learning. She concluded that Cather, as a writer, occupies the roles both of student and teacher. Following the presentation, panelists Betty Kort, Steve Shively, and Sarah Payne offered reflective comments on issues of education. The audience was highly responsive to the topic, with many expressing a sense of urgency in addressing current needs in schooling. The discussion inevitably turned to the tragedy at Columbine High School and the life-and-death aspect of education. By way of ending the discussion, one audience member said that Cather's works, particularly *My Ántonia*, offer hope to young readers.

The afternoon offered a country tour to school sites and the Opera House. Following the tour, participants gathered for a road dedication ceremony approximately five miles south of Red Cloud on Highway 281. The ceremony featured educator Betty Kort, State Highway Engineer Randy Peters, and Senator Bob Kerrey. Kort noted the significance in naming Highway 281 for Willa Cather. Writing took Cather away from Red Cloud, said Kort; yet through her writing, Cather brought Red Cloud to her readers. Hence, Kort found it highly fitting that the road to Red Cloud be named for the writer who placed the town within the literary imagination. Reflecting on the impact that Cather's writing had on him while growing up in a small Nebraskan community, Peters described the comfort he found in reading her books. Within her writing, Peters discovered descriptions of his own family and his own town. In response to Peters's remarks, Senator Bob Kerrey observed that the state's roads were in the hands of someone with respect for Nebraska's history and culture. The Senator, given the honor of unveiling the new sign, thereby declared the road the "Willa Cather Roadway."

(Continued on page 50)

WILLA CATHER PIONEER MEMORIAL

Opera House Restoration Project

Commemorative Giving Opportunities

THE OPERA HOUSE BUILDING	$500,000
SECOND FLOOR	
Auditorium	$250,000
Stage	100,000
Lobby	50,000
Meeting Room	50,000
Wheelchair Lift	25,000
Ticket Office	25,000
MAIN FLOOR	
Board Room	$100,000
Art Gallery	100,000
Bookstore	100,000
Lobby	75,000
Elevator	50,000
Lounge/Reception Area	50,000
Directors' Offices (2)	35,000
Welcome Desk	25,000
Administration Office	25,000
Operations Room	25,000
Kitchen	25,000
LOWER LEVEL	
Archives	$100,000
Classroom	55,000
Archives Work Room	50,000
Dress Archives	50,000
Lower Lobby	30,000

For more information, please contact:
Pat Phillips, Director of Development, 326 North Webster, Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970
Phone (402) 746-2653 • E-mail: patpwcpm@gpcom.net

WILLA CATHER PIONEER MEMORIAL

Ways to Give

Gifts of Cash or Securities: A gift of cash or stock offers you an income tax deduction and the immediate pleasure of seeing your gift benefit the **Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial**. Gifts of highly appreciated stock can be especially attractive as you may avoid some capital gains taxes. We are happy to discuss a pledge which might be paid over time in a schedule that is most convenient for you.

Deferred Gifts: A deferred gift is a gift you decide to make today, but which will actually be available to serve the **Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial** at some point in the future.

Bequest: This is the simplest way to establish a deferred gift. Additional language in your will or trust might direct a certain amount or a remainder of your estate to the **Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial**.

Annuity or Trust: An income producing gift is an annuity or trust which produces an annual income for you or your spouse, then distributes the principal to the **Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial** as your beneficiary. This type of gift offers an immediate income tax benefit as well as possible estate tax benefits, and a portion of your income might also be tax-free.

You should consult your tax advisor if you are considering a deferred gift. The staff of the **Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial** is available to discuss gift planning options with you and your advisor.

44TH SPRING CONFERENCE (Continued)

Participants gathered again at the High School Gymtorium for the annual banquet and keynote address. Pat Phillips welcomed the conferees before recognizing numerous supporters of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation. Mellanee Kvasnicka announced this year's Norma Ross Walter Scholarship recipient, Erin Mann of Wayne, Nebraska. Mann, who will study English at Rice University in Houston, spoke of her love of the English language and her desire to learn the stories the language tells. Following the presentation of the scholarship, participants enjoyed a re-enactment of Cather's 1890 high school commencement. Members of Hastings High School faculty, represented by Carla Hedstrom, Bob Henrichs, Louis Pratters, and Janelle Masters, led the audience back to the Red Cloud of 1890, when the three graduates of the high school delivered orations. Masters, with her uncanny resemblance to a young Cather, captured the writer's command of language in her impassioned delivery of "Superstition vs. Investigation."

After the re-enactment of the graduation ceremony, Senator Bob Kerrey delivered the keynote address. Drawing from Cather's article by the same title, Kerrey spoke on "The Education You Have to Fight For." Taking Cather's career as a model, Kerrey emphasized how we today must fight for education. First, said Senator Kerrey, we must have the hunger and courage to use our talents. Second, we must be open to changing our prejudices. The Senator explained the need to know the stories of the people around us, saying that we learn more about ourselves when we learn about others. He himself had spent part of the afternoon visiting with Red Cloud grade school students and listening to their stories. The Senator summarized the process of education by describing it as "an act of courage followed by an act of kindness." Drawing his address to a conclusion, Senator Kerrey referred to Cather's life, noting her courage in having a writing career and her kindness in telling the stories of those around her.

The night ended with a silent auction to benefit the Opera House Restoration. Conference organizers left participants with the promise of "wonderful things" for the year 2000 Annual Spring Willa Cather Conference. In light of the success of this year's event, organizers will have high expectations to fulfill.

Alison Elliott as Thea Kronborg. (See article at right.)

— Photo by Sr. Adele Edwards, CSJ

The Song of the Lark on Masterpiece Theatre

Sister Adele Edwards
Mount St. Mary's College, Los Angeles

Having a production company come to film scenes at Mount St. Mary's College has happened repeatedly over the past thirty years. Both our hilltop Chalon Campus opposite the Getty Museum in Brentwood and our Doheny Campus in downtown Los Angeles have appeared often on the big and small screens.

I was, therefore, not too surprised last June when news of more filming at the Doheny Campus, where I am based, reached me. The surprise and delight occurred when I heard what was to be filmed — *The Song of the Lark* for *Mobil Masterpiece Theatre's American Collection* on PBS. The producer, Dorothea Petrie, told me later that it is scheduled for showing during January or February in 2000.

After we were introduced and she heard about my special interest in Willa Cather, Ms. Petrie warmly welcomed me onto the set, agreed to my writing this article, and to my taking pictures. She also introduced me to the scriptwriter, Joseph Maurer, who mentioned that not all of the novel will appear in this production. He felt this exclusion was more in keeping with Cather's opinion that the completed novel was too long. Also, the film will be only one two-hour segment without commercials.

The most impressive building on campus is the Doheny Mansion, built in 1891 and the former home of Mr. and Mrs. Edward L. Doheny. With its ornate Victorian architecture and ambience, it provided a perfect setting for the Chicago home of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Nathanmeyer and Thea's singing debut. The filming of her concert took place in the Pompeian Room, the Dohenys' ballroom with marble pillars resting on a marble floor.

Alison Elliott, the dark-haired Percy in the 1996 feature film, *Spitfire Grill*, is playing a very blond Thea. When I asked her how she liked being Thea, Miss Elliott replied, "It's wonderful."

While I was checking other cast names, a crew member informed me that Maximilian Schell appears as Herr Wunsch, but, unfortunately, he was not on the set that day. His scenes had already been filmed.

I was curious about the Panther Canyon scenes and asked if they were shot on location in Arizona. Mr. Maurer said, "No, we found some caves in the high desert, north of Los Angeles, and we will build around and simulate those without showing any actual cliff dwelling." An original Civil War home was discovered in a suburb of Los Angeles and will be used during scenes in the earlier part of the novel.

I was especially impressed by the reverent tone the producer and scriptwriter had toward this production of Cather's novel. Seeing the results of their and the entire company's work on *Masterpiece Theater* next year should be an event worth anticipating and seeing.

OBJECT LESSONS

Katy Cardinal and Ann Romines

EDITOR'S NOTE: With this issue, the *Newsletter and Review* introduces a new feature highlighting pieces from the WCPM&EF collection. The feature is the brainchild of Ann Romines, WCPM&EF board member and editor of this issue. Ann collaborates with Katy Cardinal, veteran WCPM&EF guide, on this first installment. We hope you enjoy. — *SR*

Visitors touring Red Cloud have many questions about the history and origin of the beautiful antiques at the Cather Childhood Home. An artifact guide identifies the pieces from the original Cather family collection. Other items, however, are not covered by the guide. They include pieces from other sources which reflect descriptions in Cather's writing or life in Red Cloud at the turn of the century.

This Rogers Group sits in the parlor of Cather's Childhood Home in Red Cloud. — Photo by Harriett DeLay

One such interesting object is the John Rogers group (1885) that stands on top of the piano in the front parlor of the Childhood Home. It is a large statuary scene based on Longfellow's 1858 poem, "the Courtship of Miles Standish." The woman at the spinning wheel depicts Priscilla. The man standing to her right is John Alden, hat in hand, caught in the moment of hiding his own love for her has he pleads the suit of his friend. The title of the piece runs along the base, "Why Don't You Speak For Yourself, John?" Across the room from the statuary is the Cather family's well-worn volume of Longfellow.

This artifact, donated by Helen and Harry Obitz of Red Cloud, is a special period piece known as a "Rogers group," and one reproduction appears in Cather's "The Sculptor's Funeral":

> The bearers carried the coffin along the narrow boards, while the undertaker ran ahead with the coffin rests. They bore it into a large, unheated room that smelled of dampness and disuse and furniture polish, and set it down under a hanging lamp ornamented with jingling glass prisms and before a "Rogers group" of John Alden and Priscilla, wreathed with smilax (Cather, "Funeral" 254).

Such statuary scenes were popular wedding and anniversary gifts during the mid to late 1800s. The pieces were made of clay and were very fragile. Because of this, few remain in existence today. There were a total of eighty Rogers group sculpture scenes, each portraying some aspect of American life.

The statue is one of many pieces produced from the original design completed by John Rogers at his studio in New Canaan, Connecticut. This particular piece dates from 1885. John Rogers' work reached its greatest popularity from 1860 to 1890. He became known as the "Father of American Sculpture" and as the demand for his work increased, he found it necessary to hire additional artisans to meet the crush of requests. Rogers died in 1904 at the age of 75. His studio has been designated a national landmark.

A Rogers group based on a Longfellow poem is an extremely appropriate choice for the Cather parlor. Longfellow was perhaps the most popular American poet of the nineteenth century. When the Cathers were still living in Virginia, young Willa began to perform a dramatic recitation of Longfellow's "Hiawatha" (complete with bow and arrow). Longfellow references are frequent in Cather's fiction; John March's *Reader's Companion* cites three pages of them. In her early years, at least, "Willa Cather's opinion of Longfellow was not high," as William Curtin has noted (Cather, *World* 1: 160). In an 1894 *Nebraska State Journal* article, she commented on an opera based on "The Courtship of Miles Standish," saying, "there seems to be a peculiar fatality about the story of Miles Standish. He doesn't seem to work up well in prose or verse. Probably Mr. Longfellow killed him thoroughly some years ago, along with English hexameter" (160). One can't help wondering what Willa Cather would have thought of the attempt to "work up" the Miles Standish story in clay, in the Rogers group that now stands in her childhood home.

WORKS CITED

Cather, Willa. "The Sculptor's Funeral." *Youth and the Bright Medusa.* New York: Knopf, 1920. 248-272.

------. *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902.* Ed. William Curtin. 2 vols. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1970.

March, John. *A Reader's Companion to the Fiction of Willa Cather.* Ed. Marilyn Arnold. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood P, 1993.

Wallace, David H. *John Rogers: The People's Sculptor.* Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 1967.

WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER

Issue Editor: Ann Romines, George Washington University
Managing Editor: Steven P. Ryan
News Editor: Bruce Baker, 11419 Castelar Circle, Omaha, Nebraska 68144

The Newsletter and Review welcomes articles, notes and letters to the editor. Address submissions to Ann Romines, Merrill Skaggs, or John Swift. News items should be sent to Bruce Baker. Essays and notes are currently listed in the annual MLA Bibliography.

YOU CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE LIFE AND GROWTH OF THE WILLA CATHER PIONEER MEMORIAL

- By being a Cather Memorial Member and financial contributor:

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIPS

Benefactor	$1000.00
Patron	500.00
Friend	100.00
Sustaining	50.00
Family	30.00
Basic	25.00
Student	15.00

(Foreign Subscription: add $5.00 to membership category; if air mail, add $10.00)

WCPM members receive: • Newsletter subscription
• Free guided tour to restored buildings

- By contributing your Willa Cather artifacts, letters, papers, and publications to the Museum.
- By contributing ideas and suggestions to the Board of Governors.

ALL MEMBERSHIPS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND BEQUESTS ARE TAX DEDUCTIBLE
Under Section 170 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1965

AIMS OF THE WCPM

- To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with the Nebraska State Historical Society.
- To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial
326 North Webster
Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970

Nonprofit Organ.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Red Cloud, NE
Permit No. 10