

Willa Cather

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and

Review

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Sigrid Undset, 1882-1949.

Sigrid Undset and Willa Cather: A Friendship

Sherrill Harbison

During the darkest years of Hitler's campaign to conquer the world, two aging writers from different continents met in the concrete canyons of New York and nurtured a warm friendship centered on an ecstatic response to nature. Sigrid Undset (1882-1949), winner of the 1928 Nobel Prize for Literature, had been an outspoken critic of the German Reich, and was forced to flee the Nazi invasion of her native Norway in April of 1940. Traveling with a small party up the winding Gudbrandsdal valley (home of her most famous fictional heroine, Kristin Lavransdatter) the portly 58 year-old woman trudged in her heavy fur coat through woods and snowfields, flung herself into ditches to duck air raids, took shelter with strangers

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Opera Omaha's ERIC HERMANNSSON'S SOUL

On November 11, 13, and 15, 1998, Opera Omaha's world premiere of Libby Larsen's "Eric Hermansson's Soul," an adaptation of Cather's 1900 story originally published in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, played to sold-out houses for its three performances. Numerous critics from this continent and abroad attended, and thoughtful reviews appeared in papers from Omaha, St. Louis, Kansas City, Des Moines, Lincoln, Boulder, Montreal, Toronto, New York, Tokyo, and London. Following are reviews from the *Omaha-World Herald* and from *The Wall Street Journal*, followed by some excerpted comments by WCPM board member and distinguished Cather scholar Susan Rosowski.

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SIGRID UNSET AND CATHER

(Continued)

in steep mountain farms, and sent words of encouragement to her countrymen from tiny rural telegraph offices. However exhausted and fearful about the fate of her two sons left behind with the Resistance, she never failed to take note of the advancement of spring:

There is a good smell from the melting snow, a fragrance of pine needles, it smells of moss and wet earth wherever a stony mound juts up out of the snow. And through the crowns of the trees whispers a sweet, soft murmur — a murmur which became audible each time the drone of the planes' motors receded a little¹

From the bombed and burnt coastal cities of Andalsnes and Molde she and other refugees boarded a trawler headed north. As the boat wove stealthily in and out of fjords and inlets, she again meditated:

Norway is so beautiful; it is past belief that anything so beautiful is real. Stern, wild, with the mountain wall rising straight out of the sea, peaks and crags reaching toward heaven, buried in snow and ice — with few and poor strips of land here and there under the mountain, where there was room for a small farm²

Forced to turn east by a naval blockade, she made a long, sorrowful journey via Sweden — where she learned that her oldest son had been felled by a German bullet — across poverty-stricken Siberia, saber-rattling Japan, and an uneasy Pacific. Finally she crossed the American continent, where she established a home base in the congenial Norwegian neighborhood of Brooklyn Heights for the duration of the war.

For more than a decade before her arrival in New York Undset had been corresponding with Willa Cather, the American novelist eight years her senior. Cather, who had written so much about Scandinavian immigrants in the Midwest, was at that time very popular in the Nordic countries, and Undset's own sister had translated *Lucy Gayheart* in 1936.³ Undset was equally popular here after *Kristin Lavransdatter* appeared in 1921; English editions of a few of her earlier and all subsequent works had followed.⁴

Both writers had quickly recognized a strong similarity in their approaches to the natural world, history, and religion, and began to exchange letters in the 1920s. Now in unexpected proximity, Undset was eager to meet the American writer she so admired. This was arranged by their common publisher and friend Alfred Knopf, who wrote to Cather at Whale Cove, Grand Manan, on September 4, 1940, that "Sigrid Undset and her remaining son reached New York yesterday morning. She seems to have stood up under her troubles very well indeed and is anxious to meet you when you get back. I think you will like each other."⁵ His hunch was right, and over the five years Undset lived in New York the two women spent much

time together, sharing meals, stories, travel itineraries, and a mutual passion for plants and flowers. This was, as Hermione Lee has noted, the only close friendship Cather ever enjoyed with a female writer of her own stature and generation,⁶ and the same was true for Undset.

Undset spent the war years in America working as "soldier of the Resistance" — writing and lecturing across the country in the anti-Nazi cause. In June 1945 she returned to Lillehammer, exhausted, discouraged, and grief-stricken. In addition to her son, she had lost her mother and daughter shortly before the invasion; many friends and relatives had suffered in concentration camps; and Bjerkebæk, her stately timber home with its collections of art and antiques, had been used as a brothel by vindictive SS troops.

On March 17, 1946, Undset wrote to Cather from Bjerkebæk (apologetically in pencil, because "ink runs so on this paper"), describing in considerable detail the wartime fate of many of her friends and neighbors, and the straitened post-war living conditions in Norway. The letter opens with this paragraph:

Very often I think of you and wonder, how are you now? Meeting you was one of the happiest things that happened to me in America, and I cherish the memory of those evenings with you and Miss Lewis so much. When my books returned from that church basement out in the country, where kind friends had hidden my library, and I unpacked your books, it was quite a different thing to handle them (I have not been able to put them up yet, as the German females who lived here during the occupation had used my bookshelves for firewood, and it takes time and a lot of money to get new ones, material being wanted in the first place to rebuild our burn-out [sic] towns and places), thinking of you as a friend I know now. Your picture which Alfred Knopf sent me from you years ago I also unearthed from the attic, where my "roomers" had put away *pele-mele* the things they did not want — which was not much. It is a little broken and soiled, but all the more dear to me.⁷

The main substance of the following article is a tribute to Undset written by Willa Cather after they were once again separated by the Atlantic. It was submitted to the Norwegian journalist Olav Paus Grunt, translated to Norwegian, and published in the magazine *Urd* in 1946, shortly after Undset's return home from her exile years in the United States.

It happened that on the day she was preparing this tribute Cather's secretary was away, so her niece Helen Cather Southwick, who was visiting, typed the text from her aunt's dictation. This segment of Paus Grunt's article has been transcribed, with permission, from Mrs. Southwick's carbon copy. Though it may not have been the final version Cather submitted, it resembles the translation in all important respects, and is, to my knowledge, the only surviving version in Cather's own English prose. Paus Grunt's translation is the only form in which the tribute has been published before.

SIGRID UNDSET IN AMERICA

By Olav Paus Grunt

In the four or five years Sigrud Undset lived in the United States she chose to settle away from the main line of traffic, in one of the small quiet streets of Brooklyn Heights. She had found a little apartment in the outlying "Victorian" Hotel Margaret, a modest but comfortable residence. The parlor — a corner room with several windows looking out over the street — was full of books, flowers, and pictures. Work and domestic life had erased all traces of the impersonal hotel-suite from this room. A book-loving visitor like myself had the special delight of scanning through bookcases jammed to overflowing with books; books also lay around on tables and chairs. One was always welcome to take a journey of discovery through Madame Undset's books, while she herself, true to old-time Norwegian hospitality, went to the kitchen to prepare afternoon coffee for her guest.

That she could find time to give to occasional visitors was something of a miracle, the way she worked over here during these years. Here she completed the three books for Knopf: *Return to the Future*, *Happy Days in Norway*, and *Gunnar and his Brave Companions*.⁸ Here she wrote countless articles for the Norwegian-American press, the *American Scandinavian Review*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Herald Tribune*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Audubon Magazine*, the *Bulletin for the Prevention of World War III*, *Free World*, and many others. The range of subjects covered in these articles is rich and varied. But throughout them one can detect a supporting fundamental idea, a thoroughly thought-through and personally lived philosophy. It is a wise and fearless Norwegian patriot speaking, a broadminded fighter for the cause of democracy, and a personality capable of empathy, warmhearted understanding, and a capacity for righteous anger that would take a long search to match.

The Americans understood all this very well, and valued it beyond measure. I heard countless witnesses from all walks of American life testify how deeply Sigrud Undset had impressed them, both as a personality and as a representative of her country. As is well known here at home, Sigrud Undset — who hated publicity — appeared ceaselessly during the war as a spokesperson, lecturer, committee worker, etc. Wherever she felt she could be useful in the fight for democracy, for the cause of the oppressed, persecuted minorities, refugees, and the needy, she was on call, however much she personally would have preferred to stay at the writing desk in her cosy Brooklyn sitting room. And those to whom she directed her attention understood her worth. It was not her outward abilities that impressed the Americans. There were other

famous writers in exile with greater virtuosity in spoken English, and who were more polished lecturers. But how often I heard, when several of them appeared together, that it was Sigrud Undset's simplicity, sincerity, and freedom from empty rhetoric that had the deepest effect and left the most lasting impression.

During her residence in the U.S.A. the novelist of course became acquainted with a number of America's most prominent authors. One of them, Willa Cather, has sent me the following beautiful tribute to her. Certainly Willa Cather is so well known here that any further introduction would be redundant.⁹ Books such as *A Lost Lady*, *My Mortal Enemy*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* have long since become classic works in American literature. This is what Miss Cather wrote to me about Madame Undset:

"It would be superfluous to make any tribute to



Willa Cather Childhood Home, Christmas 1998
Popcorn garlands festoon attic rafters.

— Photo by Pat Phillips

Madame Undset as a writer, since her books have been translated into every language and read in every literate country. I could say a great deal about her books since I have loved them for many years and reread them many times, but any adequate comment upon her work as a writer should be pro-found and exhaustive. Her commanding personality in this country, her many-sided interests, and her generous appreciation of American life were felt everywhere. I shall attempt to speak of only one of these interests — her warm enjoyment and appreciation of our American trees and flowers. Her vital interest in our vegetation was one of the very real consolations of a long exile and seemed often to refresh her and give her temporary escape from anxiety and sorrow.

"There are many disadvantages about living in a 'big' country — bigness is greatly over-rated. But the mere stretch of land and variety of climate do give the United States a richness botanically, an almost countless variety of flowers and trees. On the North we

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SIGRID UNSET AND CATHER

(Continued)

have climate very like that of Poland and North Germany, and on the South, in Florida and on the Mexican border, the native trees and flowers are very similar to those of Algeria and Morocco.

"In the three years¹⁰ that Sigrid Undset spent in this country, she travelled extensively. I have never known a foreign visitor who enjoyed our native vegetation so much. 'Enjoyed' is the word — she enjoyed it as epicures enjoy good food. She got an actual physical pleasure out of the almost countless varieties of our trees: the pines (*Pinaceae*), the beeches (*Fagaceae*), the maples (*Aceraceae*), the olives (*Oleaceae*), the roses (*Rosaceae*), and the magnolias (*Magnoliaceae*).

"I am sure that in years to come, at home, she will often remember certain trees and flowers as one remembers people whom one has met — people who have stimulated or charmed one. When I thought to surprise Madame Undset by telling her that, now that spring had come, she ought to go down to Virginia to see the beautiful tulip trees (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), thousands of them in bloom, she laughed and said that she had seen that splendid tree at home in the North.

"'But where? In this country they grow only in the South.'

"Madame Undset said she had seen two tulip trees; one was in the King's garden in Copenhagen, and the other was in a public park.

"That is the way in which people remember trees when trees mean something to them. It was pleasant to talk about trees and flowers to Undset because she had personal relations with them, but she was by no means the sentimental 'lady botanist.' She took a keen pleasure in learning all there was to know about these new forms which interested her so much. She carried about with her an excellent field book of American shrubs and trees — the best book of that kind that I know. I thought to introduce her to F. Schuyler Mathews and brought her my copy. She said carelessly, 'Oh, I have that book.'

"'But how did you happen on it?' I asked. 'It is not much advertised.'

"'I looked through a number of books on trees and flowers in a book shop, and this one seemed such a sensible little book,' she replied.

"Madame Undset took things calmly and enjoyed the pleasant things calmly. One who had known such cruel grief and so many hardships before she at last reached this country had learned to bear adversity and not be crushed by it. To me it was wonderful that she found so much to interest her here and carried on so many activities. She made a real life for herself in America, and a large life. While she had a never-faltering faith in the ultimate triumph of the cause of the free peoples, she must have had her dark moments, like the rest of us. But I never saw her when she was not confident of the future of her country. Her religious life was a great and constant

help to her — it was a source of strength which nothing could shake. As the Latin poet said long ago, 'When a wanderer carries his Gods with him into a strange country, it is no longer a strange country to him.'

"Madame Undset found her own church here, immensely strong, active, and sympathetic. Her devotion to her country and her faith were appreciated. The Catholic clergy held out the hand of friendship. She must have known that she was remembered in the prayers of thousands of good people, Catholic or Methodist.¹¹ Even now, after she is at home again, that feeling of warm friendship remains everywhere and will long remain. Few visitors from the old world have left so noble a memory with us."

This from Willa Cather. Her testimony needs no further comment. In conclusion I want only to cite some casual words from Sigrid Undset, expressed in her inimitably unostentatious way and with no thought of publicity. I think they help clarify the human sympathy she won for herself over here, both through her books and by her personal example. We were standing up on the roof terrace of the Norwegian Sailor's Hotel in Brooklyn, looking out over what is, truth to tell, a not very beautiful town. I had in fact made a comment about how unattractive the city was.

"Oh, yes, said Madame Undset, that may be true, but I have become so fond of Brooklyn anyway; *there are so many people living here.*" Life. Life in all its forms — in plants, animals, and humans — Sigrid Undset embraced it all with boundless understanding and love. That is why she adapted so easily to the way of life here in America; that is how she could find the right way to evaluate her own country and its case for the Americans. That is why she became such an invaluable spokesperson for us during the painful war years.



On the day of Cather's death, April 24, 1947, Sigrid Undset wrote her last letter to her American friend. Before it was mailed, she received a telegram from Edith Lewis with the news. She immediately cabled back: "I am sorry thinking how you must feel the loss of Willa Cather. I also loved her so much."¹² Somehow the cable never arrived, so Undset later wrote to Lewis at greater length:

Lillehammer, May 3rd 1947.¹³

My dear Miss Lewis,

I cannot tell you how deeply moved I was when I saw in one of our newspapers — a few hours before your telegram arrived, — that Willa Cather was dead. And I was very moved by your kindness, to send me that telegram. But I am sure you know how very much I had come to love her these years in New York, when I was happy enough to learn to know her personally, — her exquisite work I had known and admired for years already.

I won't try to write a letter of consolation or condolence, no words mean much at such a time. But I am thinking of you a lot, how you must miss her. And, though her health had not been so good for some years, one never quite expects that those dear to us will have to leave us so soon —. It was always lovely to be with you both, one of the best things that happened to me when I was an exile from Norway, though I have a lot of things to be grateful to America for.

Once I wrote about Willa Cather that she was one of the few American authors who made her readers see something of her great and varied land. I did take out some of her novels the other day, to write a memorial notice for one of our leading newspapers, and again it impressed me, how her gift to make one visualize the world her figures moved in, was wonderful. What a treasure her work should be to her native land.

I tried to send you a wire as soon as I had your telegram, but some days afterwards they telephoned me to tell it had not been delivered, — but then, I don't think it mattered much. I am sure you know how deeply I feel the loss of Willa Cather to everybody who knew her.

With sincerest greetings,
ever yours,
Sigrid Undset



The following text is my translation of Undset's memorial note on Cather, which was published in *Verdens Gang* 3 May 1947 — ten days after Cather's death, and the same day Undset dated her condolence letter to Edith Lewis.

WILLA CATHER
By Sigrid Undset

On April 23rd the American writer Willa Cather died in her home in New York. With her we have lost one of America's finest, most discriminating artists. Her work is little known here. To my knowledge only one of her novels, *Lucy Gayheart*, has been translated to Norwegian. In Danish we can at least find *The Professor's House* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and in Swedish a number of others, including *Shadows on the Rock*.

Willa Cather was born in Virginia, but was only ten years old when her family moved to Nebraska. "Not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made" is the way the narrator of *My Ántonia* remembers Nebraska's empty plains from that dark, starry night when he first drove onto it as a child. The pioneer days were not yet over out there; a steady stream of settlers was still arriving from all the countries of Europe. Willa Cather experienced the multitude of different fates of dissimilar people, of newly cultivated and developing land with the open, impres-

sionable mind of a child. She became an American in the best sense of the word: a citizen in a society where people from many different lands lived and worked side by side more or less in peace. She never prettifies. But even though people are, after all, what they are, rather than what they ought to be, one must admit that this great human melting pot between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans has produced not such bad results. Later on, when she was able to travel around in Europe, she showed an exceptional ability to evaluate and understand the cultural traits of different nations — there were none from which her own America had not inherited something, to which it did not owe something.

The West, as it was in her youth, lives again in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, the story of an immigrant family from Bohemia (as the land of the Czechs was called then). The slightly later period of conflict, when reforms and development brought disharmony and unrest there, is the background for her masterpiece, *A Lost Lady* — it is as beautifully and soberly written as its characterizations are penetrating. The Southwest and the pure, stark beauty of the desert, echoes of distant times in abandoned pueblos and in the lives of the Mexicans — so little affected by the restless movement of the white Americans across the land — come to life in *The Professor's House*, *The Song of the Lark* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. But *The Song of the Lark* also deals with what it means to be an artist — a subject Willa Cather has taken up time and time again. In the final analysis, all her novels are about the barriers which at the deepest level set one human being apart from all other human beings — barriers that cannot be broken down, but which can, thank God, be risen above through interpersonal understanding, by human goodness and love, and by dedication to a shared task — there, the wellspring of the eternally solitary soul can overflow and spill over the boundaries that force can never break through.

In her final book, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, which came out in 1940, she returns to the Virginia of her childhood and tells a story from a time shortly before the Civil War. The relation between the moody, serious miller Mr. Colbert and his wife's young mulatto servant awakens violent jealousy in Mrs. Colbert, especially because there is something about it that she simply cannot fathom: that it is a kind of voluntary relationship between the man and the young slave girl. Both are sensitive and shy in nature, and both are at bottom equally controlled by Mrs. Sapphira, a strong and power-hungry woman, violent in both good and evil. Craftily and cruelly, the wife tries to destroy the slave girl. It is Sapphira's daughter, made tolerant and wise by a difficult but happy marriage, who intervenes to help Nancy escape North to freedom. With warm sympathy and complete lack of sentimentality Willa Cather has recreated the countryside in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the unusual community of whites and blacks who once lived there.

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Willa Cather Childhood Home, Christmas 1998. — Photo by Pat Phillips

SIGRID UNSET AND CATHER

(Continued)

I had exchanged some letters with Willa Cather before I went to America — at that time I hardly imagined that I would ever meet in person an artist I so deeply admired. But I had the pleasure of getting to know her there. She was as loving and gracious as she was witty and wise. The misfortunes that one by one befell the European countries she knew and loved affected her profoundly. But nevertheless, what she liked to talk about most was her own America. Every time I visited her she wanted to hear where I had been last. I got to see a great deal of America, because I traveled around giving lectures. But even so, there was so much she wished I had seen — the deserts of Arizona and New Mexico, the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, the forests of Maine and just over the border in Canada, where she had a summer house on an island in the Bay of Fundy. In pictures it looked as though it could just as well have been somewhere in Sørlandet [southern Norway] in our own archipelago. And then there were America's incredible flora — I became quite well acquainted with them, but there was always some flowering tree or plant that Willa Cather exclaimed over — now there's one I ought to have seen!

She wrote about it in the last letter I had from her — just a few weeks ago. I knew the dogwood tree and the shad bush, of course, but had I seen a Judas tree in springtime, when it was thickly covered with bunches of pink-violet blossoms? And the Catalpa tree in summer, with its large, orchid-like flowers? She was not well, but she looked forward to spring, to taking a long drive up the Hudson River, when the dogwoods bloomed high and low on the steep-sloped basalt cliffs over the water. And now she is dead, and the dogwood can't yet be in bloom — that miraculous tree with the unnaturally chalk-white bowknot flowers, thick as snow on the airy outspread branches, which

somewhere she has called the wildest of all wild growing things.

NOTES

¹ Sigrid Undset, *Return to the Future* (New York: Knopf, 1942), 27-8.

² *Return to the Future*, 41.

³ For Cather's reception in Scandinavia, see Mona Pers, *Willa Cather's Swedes* (Västerås: Mälardalen University Press, 1995), pp. 96-105. Only two other Cather novels have been published in Norwegian: *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1940) and *My Ántonia* (1954). Of the Scandinavian countries Norway was the least attentive to Cather, a situation Undset was trying to correct. The first Cather novel translated into any other language was *O Pioneers!*, translated to Swedish in 1919. By 1950 ten others had followed, and in 1938 some Swedish critics were suggesting that Cather deserved the same status in America that Selma Lagerlöf (another Nobel Prize winner, 1909) and Undset held in Sweden and Norway (Pers 102; also see *Willa Cather: A Reference Guide*, ed. Marilyn Arnold [Boston, G. K. Hall, 1986] 1939.4, 1937.42). In Denmark Cather earned six translations, and in Finland four (Pers 97).

⁴ All of Undset's major works of historical fiction are in print. The three-volume *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920-22), is about a woman's life in 14th century Norway from childhood to death. Knopf Vintage continues to print this flawed 1925 Archer translation, while Penguin Classics is issuing a new translation by Tiina Nunnally, Vol. I (1997); Vol. II and III (forthcoming, with my Introductions). One of Cather's favorites, the brief *Gunnar's Daughter* (1909), is the tale of a female avenger set at the end of the Viking era (my annotated edition from Penguin Classics, 1998). The four-volume *Master of Hestviken* (1927), set in the 13th century, is available from Vintage. With the exception of her remarkable autobiographical novel of childhood, *The Longest Years* (1934), Undset's other novels (all set in contemporary times), are either untranslated or suffer from poor and/or dated translations, and none of them are in print. The most important of them is *Jenny* (1911).

⁵ Text courtesy of Helen Cather Southwick. Speaking at a conference many years later, Alfred Knopf reported that his hunch about the two women's compatibility had been right. "Mrs. Undset was very eager to meet Miss Cather, whose work she greatly admired," he told an audience of Cather scholars in 1973, "and I soon brought this about. The two ladies had much in common and became very good friends" (Bernice Slote and Virginia Faulkner, eds. *The Art of Willa Cather*. Willa Cather International Seminar Proceedings, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974, p. ix, 218). Slote and Faulkner reprint Knopf's full address, pp. 205-224.

⁶ Hermione Lee, *Willa Cather: Double Lives* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 334.

⁷ Letter to Willa Cather from Sigrid Undset, dated 17 March 1946 (Item 73c, Newberry Library, Chicago). Cather sent Undset's letter on to Mary Creighton on 26 February 1947, nearly a year after she received it, explaining that she had been sorting through Undset's letters and thought this one would be interesting to Mary. Together with the letter, Creighton had saved two undated Christmas cards from Cather in which Undset is mentioned. One had been enclosed with a book — a gift from Undset herself — which Cather forwarded because Creighton had visited Norway.

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The other, which thanks Creighton for being understanding about an unidentified slight, adds that at such times Sigrid Undset was prone to shake her supple head and observe that "it's so easy to punish us when we're down." Letter, enclosing two undated Christmas cards, from Willa Cather to Mary Miner Creighton, 26 February, 1947 (Item 73b, Newberry Library, Chicago).

I am much indebted to John H. Flannigan, both for bringing this letter and Cather's exchanges with Mary Creighton about Undset to my attention, and for transcribing the texts for me.

⁸ This is an error: the title is *Sigurd and His Brave Companions*. Both this book (drawn from medieval Norwegian history) and *Happy Days in Norway* (a reminiscence of Undset's own family life in Lillehammer) were children's books. The latter was commissioned by Eleanor Roosevelt for a series of children's books by famous exiled writers, describing life and culture in their native countries in better days.

⁹ Paus Grunt's assumptions about Norwegians' familiarity with Cather is an interesting contrast to Undset's own campaign to make Cather better known there.

¹⁰ This is an error. Undset was in the United States for five years, from 26 August 1940 to 21 July 1945. In his translation, Paus Grunt omitted the word "three."

¹¹ Cather's use of the word "Methodist" here may have been haste or carelessness; Norway is Lutheran country. Paus Grunt changed the word to "Protestant" in his translation.

¹² Borghild Krane, *Sigrid Undset, liv og meninger* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1970), 111.

¹³ Letter from Sigrid Undset to Edith Lewis dated 3 May, 1947. University of Nebraska Library Archives and Special Collections, Lincoln, Nebraska.

¹⁴ This date is wrong — Cather died on April 24.

**Western Literature
Association
Annual Meeting**

OCTOBER 13-16, 1999

Sacramento, California

"West of the West:
California and the American West"

OPERA OMAHA (Continued)

FROM THE OMAHA-WORLD HERALD

By Kyle MacMillan

November 12, 1998

From Louis Moreau Gottschalk to Leonard Bernstein, much of the memorable classical music written in the United States has been work that draws on other areas of this country's rich, diverse musical heritage.

This is particularly true in American opera, the most celebrated example being George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess."

Following in this tradition is Libby Larsen's "Eric Hermannson's Soul," an adaptation of a 1900 short story by Willa Cather, which received its world premiere Wednesday night before a sold-out crowd in the 932-seat Rose Blumkin Performing Arts Center.

It is a thrilling and humbling privilege to witness the birth of any new work. This is particularly true for an opera by a major composer that has a substantive, coherent story to tell, with believable characters and music that makes it come vividly to life.

"Eric Hermannson's Soul" is a two-act chamber piece. It focuses on the unlikely, yet transformative meeting of a young Eastern woman — Margaret Elliott — and an immigrant Norwegian fiddler during her brief stay in a tiny town on the Nebraska plains.

Perhaps reflecting the work's Midwestern sensibility, the action and dialogue have been pared down to their essence in Chas Rader-Shieber's brilliantly eloquent and economic libretto.

The exposition might be a bit too long but otherwise the opera works well theatrically, with a sense of continuity and completeness.

Rader-Shieber doubled as stage director, and he makes sure the piece delivers several gripping moments, such as Eric's violent renunciation of the violin.

Like the short story it is drawn from, the opera touches on a range of themes. But at its core is the notion that everyone has a need, or perhaps better put, a longing to discover and then hang onto his soul, that central distinguishing quality that makes him unique.

But more than ideas, the real test of an opera is if it reaches our hearts, puts us in touch with our humanity and somehow changes us, if only subtly. This opera and this production do all of those things, as I found myself crying through much of the powerful second half.

Larsen's masterful score can be surprisingly simple at times, complex at others, but never complex in a way that calls attention to itself. There is a distinct musical language; it is not one that is imposed on the piece, but one that emerges out of Larsen's desire to serve the story.

The music, which is harmonic, tonal and completely approachable, draws from several sources, but it is grounded primarily in seven interwoven fiddle tunes. At times, it can be quite traditional, but at others, Larsen creates unusual, captivating groups of

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OPERA OMAHA (Continued)

sounds, using unexpected instruments such as vibraphone or electronic synthesizer.

Perhaps most important, Larsen is not afraid to write overtly beautiful music, as she does for the quartet, which serves as something of a narrator, and for Hermannson's stirring love aria after the storm.

The cast, composed of little known young singers, was uniformly excellent. They were all compelling actors who sang with obvious commitment to their roles, most notably the sure, strong soprano of Jennifer Casey Cabot as Margaret and the light, almost sweet tenor of Theodore Green as Eric.

The strikingly simple scenery of Judy Gailen consisted of open, largely abstract modular set pieces rolled or dropped in to suggest the opera's locations. Always visible was a simulated wheat field in back and more importantly a handsomely painted sky, which dominated the stage just as the real one does on the open spaces of Nebraska.

Time will be the ultimate judge of this opera's ability to secure a place in the repertory, but its chances appear good. It is work worthy of Cather and one of which Omaha can be proud.

FROM THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Heidi Waleson

November 30, 1998

The great Nebraska novelist Willa Cather was one of the foremost chroniclers of the American West's immigrant soul. Her complex, passionate, and often artistic characters were rooted in the harsh pioneer life of their prairie homes, but at odds with it as well. Opera Omaha thus celebrated its 40th anniversary by commissioning an opera from composer Libby Larsen and librettist Chas Rader-Shieber based on "Eric Hermannson's Soul," an early story by its native daughter.

Published in 1900 in *Cosmopolitan*, the themes of "Eric Hermannson's Soul" prefigure those of "The Song of the Lark" (1915), Cather's famous novel about an opera singer and the tumultuous birth and development of the artistic spirit. Eric Hermannson, a laconic Norwegian immigrant farmer living in the plains of Nebraska, was a fiddler with wild ways until his conversion to a strict fundamentalist sect, the Free Gospellers, which forbids music. Margaret Elliot, a New York sophisticate whom Cather describes as "beautiful, talented, critical, unsatisfied, and tired of the world at twenty-four," visited her father's Nebraska ranch for the first time, reawakens Eric's dormant spirit with, astonishingly enough, a parlor organ performance of the "Intermezzo" from Mascagni's "Cavalleria Rusticana." Margaret becomes the embodiment of Eric's lost soul, and he falls in love; she is touched by his deep, untutored feeling, for art and for her, that is so different from the brittle effusions of her art dealer fiancée and her circle back home. Wedding bells are obviously not

an option for this odd couple, but Eric heroically defies damnation and his church by taking back his fiddle and music, and Margaret too goes home changed.

Ms. Larsen and Mr. Rader-Shieber have sound dramatic instincts, and the opera is well-constructed and appealing. An onstage vocal quartet (Anne Devries, Teresa Buchholz, Scott Miller and Jeremy Aye), singing texts from poetry by Cather, acts as a framing device, rather like the trio from Bernstein's "Trouble in Tahiti," if not as lively. It gets some of Ms. Larsen's most arresting music, particularly the haunting hymn-like "Dear Love" that opens Act II. Ms. Larsen also weaves authentic Norwegian fiddle tunes through the score to characterize Eric, and writes some attractive music for offstage chorus. Many of the big scenes are striking. Eric's conversion, done as a flashback, turned into a star moment for Steven Goldstein, whose piercing tenor brought the fundamentalist preacher Asa Skinner to life as his robotic congregation stomped and chanted "Glory to the Bleeding Lamb."

But the adapters misconceived the balance between the two principal characters, and thus lost much of the power of Cather's original. This may have been a practical decision: In adapting a text that relies so heavily on atmosphere and feelings for the stage (the story's dialogue is not its strongest point), it made sense to focus on the articulate character rather than the silent one. Unfortunately, this shift of emphasis had a trivializing effect. The opera became Margaret's story rather than Eric's, and her annexation of this noble savage seemed uncomfortably patronizing.

Eric and Margaret's two best musical encounters were the most unusual: when Margaret plays the Mascagni (on the Victrola in the operatic version) for Eric, and twitters flirtatiously along with it, completely oblivious to the music's wrenching impact on Eric, who weeps silently; and the climactic dance scene, when Eric plays the fiddle (Mr. Green proved able both as a tenor and a violinist, certainly a feat), and the two dance wordlessly together. But Ms. Larsen's orchestral sound world was just too bland and polite to suggest Eric's tumultuous and passionate soul, and her vocal writing, aiming for verismo impact, paled beside that snippet of Mascagni. Cather needs her own musical language.

Set designer Judy Gailen used a scrim with a painted Nebraska grassland and simple, stark set pieces that included a front porch, a few chairs and a Victorian lamp to suggest a parlor, and a giant windmill. David Zinn's costumes emphasized the gulf between the Nebraska farmers and their cosmopolitan visitors. He saved the best for last, giving Margaret a glamorous and revealing gown of ruby taffeta that was absurd at a simple country dance but failed to intimidate Eric, once again in possession of his violin, his soul and his self-respect. Mr. Rader-Shieber, who also directed, did a particularly good job showing the powerful connection between these two unlikely people. Hal France capably led the Omaha Symphony Chamber Orchestra.

BY SUSAN J. ROSOWSKI

Eric Hermansson's Soul was a brilliant choice to celebrate Opera Omaha's 40th anniversary. There are the obvious reasons of compatibility of temperament. Cather's prose is often called musical, and Larsen's music often has literary components; like Cather, Larsen writes out of deep sensitivity to place, and both Cather and Larsen draw upon a democratic spirit to create art that offers broad accessibility as well as great sophistication. As did Cather in writing fiction, so Larsen in composing music draws upon a range of genres, from folk to classical; as did Cather, so Larsen evokes a deep cultural memory combined with sensitivity to contemporary nuances of speech, so that allusions to a time long past provide resonance to dialogue existing in a historical time. Their artistic kinship has something to do also with the rhythm of language and of the musical quality of prose. Cather's story tells of emotions yearning for release in music, and Larsen's opera answers that yearning.

What next? some reviewers have asked. Will the opera travel, which is to say, be performed by other companies? My response is simply to note that these were precisely the hesitations almost a century ago when reviewers praised Cather's art but questioned her Nebraska setting. I expect a long and happy future for this opera.

Cather Studies in the Himalayas

Marilyn Berg Callander
Drew University

For the past seven years, I've been teaching American literature at Tribhuvan University, the national university of Nepal. Presently, I'm expected to arrive in Kathmandu around the end of every January, when I'll present a paper at the Nepal Literary Association's annual meeting, and then attend a teachers' training workshop, location to be announced. I seldom know beforehand what I'm expected to do at these workshops — Nepal is an ad hoc world — a real challenge for someone who's lived her life being over-prepared.

Last February, the workshop was held in Pokhara, a town in the Pokhara Valley in the Annapurnas, the site of one of Tribhuvan University's many campuses throughout the country. One of my assignments was to teach the third chapter of *My Ántonia*, the third chapter, and only the third chapter. Not only was this an unusual assignment for me — paring down years of study into the third chapter of one novel — but my audience was to be comprised of university teachers of English from throughout the Annapurna region in the Himalayas, many of whom had not seen more of the world than Kathmandu. Many of them would never read the entire novel; books are not readily accessible outside Kathmandu, even books in Nepali, the national language.

I took a plane to Pokhara — on Buddha Airlines — a half-hour flight from Kathmandu. Unlike a year or two ago, the planes now run regularly, as Pokhara is becoming the primary tourist destination now that the polluted air in Kathmandu is almost unbreathable. And in a country deservedly reputed to be one of the most beautiful on the earth, Pokhara is often said to be its most beautiful place. The mountain called Machapuchhare, or Fishtail, rises straight up from the Pokhara Valley, and is reflected below in a glacial lake. For a few hundred rupies, you can rent a boat and a kind of gondolier, and spend an afternoon drifting on the lake, watching the light and clouds playing on the Annapurnas above, and the image mirrored below in the water. Had Henry James gotten farther than Italy, he would have been in his element.

The university campus is outside of town, about a half-hour in a taxi. Since I had no idea where I was, or where I was going, a common feeling in Nepal, I made absolutely sure in my pidgin Nepali that the taxi would come back for me. Western-style plans in Nepal are sure to back-fire, but that's part of the country's lure.

It's impossible to imagine one of these campuses in Nepal. The buildings are made of stone, brick, or cement, and are pleasant enough, except no indication of maintenance of any kind is apparent. Since the university is the major forum for Nepal's continuing political strife, political graffiti is everywhere; walls are plastered with paper covered in devanagari script, and crudely painted with party symbols, such as a tree, a cow, a sun, a hammer and sickle. A cow rooting in garbage dumped in a corner, accompanied by a few mange-riddled dogs, is a predictable sight. Broken windows are left unrepaired or boarded up, while inside the rooms are so thick with dust that it's habitual to brush off the seat at a desk before sitting down. If you are a guest, someone will brush off the seat for you, occasionally with a suggestion of ceremony.

But this little campus in Pokhara is embraced by the Annapurnas the way the Sangra de Cristos "curved like two arms" about Santa Fe in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. From each north-facing window you can see Machapuchare, looming starkly white against a Matisse-blue sky. And I believe the light air and blue sky that thrilled Latour, the pine-scented "wind that made him a child again," is easily as light and blue and fragrant in Pokhara as in Latour's Santa Fe. Like Cather's work, Nepal is a land of radical juxtapositions, of paradox, a place where feeling is intensified through the simultaneous experience of extremes, and that's my rationale for loving them both.

The workshop was comprised of about forty-five teachers from throughout the Annapurna region, many of whom had to walk several hours to get to Pokhara, for the terrain doesn't allow roads except in the valleys, where taxis and public buses of the Third World variety are abundant. Most were men; about six were women. Nepali academic women all wear the sari, which, to my

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Willa Cather Childhood Home, Christmas 1998.

— Photo by Pat Phillips

CATHER STUDIES IN THE HIMALAYAS

(Continued)

western eyes, always looks uncomfortably formal, more like an evening dress, and causes me to dress less informally than I might like. Most Nepali men, except in the villages, wear western clothes — perhaps neutral-color slacks and a sweater, and in the winter, always a wool scarf. Some wear the national hat, called a *topi*, and many wear national dress — a kind of cotton jodphur, a Nehru-necked shirt with shirrtails, topped by a western-style jacket. Most of the people are small and lean, and more or less brown-skinned. I once had my picture taken with Nepali friends, and one of them said, “This looks like a picture of a family who has adopted a white giant.”

I’m trying to set the stage for you, for in the mountains of this tiny Himalayan kingdom, with these people, I was going to try to teach the third chapter of Cather’s *Antonia*. How? How do you describe a prairie to someone who’s only known mountains? Jim Burden agrees that “no one who has not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it.”

Likewise, the lives of these English teachers and their students from Himalayan villages is unimaginable. How was I to bring them together? I recalled having to describe a New England village at one of these workshops, with its square, and steeped church at the center. How can you understand Dickinson or Frost without having an image in your mind of the New England landscape?

As I was preparing the night before, I asked myself to try to be a Nepali, someone who had grown up in these mountains, and had never been further than Kathmandu, except perhaps to India. What questions would I have for this woman from Nebraska? Could I even phrase a question? How could I begin to imagine a place, so radically different from my own snow-peaked landscape, where “as far as the eye could reach, there was nothing but rough, shaggy, red grass?” Cather writes, “Surely we all know that the books we read when we were children shaped our lives; at least they shaped our imaginings, and it is with our imaginings that we live” (WP 852). What, then, had shaped the imaginings of these people from the mountains of Nepal?

I began by telling them about Willa Cather, stressing the fact that she was a pioneer herself, in many ways; that like many an American before and after her, she had “gone west”; and that she was writing in *My Antonia*, as in many of her other books, about the pioneer spirit, which is so deeply rooted in the American psyche. I suggested that they ask their own students to think about what is at the heart of the Nepali psyche, as the pioneer spirit is at the heart of the American psyche. In what ways do the people of Nepal differ from the people of Cather’s Nebraska? How are Nepalis different from Americans; and how are we all alike?

I told them that *Antonia* is a book about pioneers — those particular immigrants who came to America from Scandinavia and Central Europe in the early part of the century. I pointed out to them that American immigrants now are primarily Asians, and that their experience in America is no longer a wilderness experience, but an urban one. And no longer are they entirely cut off from the mother country, as desperately isolated as the Shimerdas were in Nebraska. Technology and inexpensive airfares keep immigrants in America from losing touch with those left back in the “old country.” American immigrants at the beginning of a new century have a different set of problems.

All of these people knew someone who had come to America; they had heard *new* stories about *Nepali* immigrants in America. I wanted them to be thinking about similarities and differences between Cather’s immigrants, and the stories they had heard themselves. Their stories will provide the material for a future artist who will write a great immigrant novel of the next century.

I read aloud the first paragraph of Chapter III: “On Sunday morning Otto Fuchs was to drive us over to

make the acquaintance of our new Bohemian neighbors. We were taking them some provisions, as they had come to live on a wild place where there was no garden or chicken-house, and very little broken land. Fuchs brought up a sack of potatoes and a piece of cured pork from the cellar, and grandmother packed some loaves of Saturday's bread, a jar of butter, and several pumpkin pies in the straw of the wagon-box. We clambered up to the front seat and jolted off past the little pond and along the road that climbed to the big cornfield" (MA 19).

Never has Cather's direct style and clear imagery pleased me more than at that moment. The previous year I had tried to teach an essay by Virginia Woolf, and got no further than a baffled silence. Yet another tribute to Cather's seemingly infinite range is her ability to be understood at so many levels, in this case in a culture entirely different from the one about which she wrote.

We dissected this first paragraph, listing everything we learn in this one paragraph: three characters are involved — Otto Fuchs, grandmother, and the narrator; it's Sunday morning; bread is made on Saturday; they are travelling in a wagon to visit their new neighbors, who are Bohemians, taking with them gifts of food — a sack of potatoes, a piece of cured pork, bread, butter, and pumpkin pies. We understand that unlike the Shimerdas, the Burdens had a garden, a chicken-house, a milking cow, and pigs for slaughtering.

Cather's image-packed paragraph contains a wealth of information about life in rural Nebraska at the time. And Cather's world as described in this single paragraph is entirely foreign to these Nepali teachers of English. For example, the sabbath in their world is Saturday, rather than Sunday. They do not eat bread, nor butter, nor pumpkin pie, and rice is more desirable than potatoes in most ethnic groups. And a horse-drawn wagon is useless in a land with so few roads, too poor to have horses.

I read parts of the chapter to them, stopping to explain words and phrases such as "broken land," and "windmill," making sure that they understood the story, falling in around the chapter with the beginning and the end of *My Ántonia*, trying as often as possible to use Cather's own words. I wanted to be sure that, as well as having a clear idea of the narrative line and dominant images, they felt the power of Cather's words, the cadence of her language.

Interestingly, their attention was captured by the scene in which the children make a nest in the grass and curl up in it like rabbits.

We sat down and made a nest in the long red grass. Yulka curled up like a baby rabbit . . . We were so deep in the grass that we could see nothing but the blue sky over us and the gold tree in front of us. It was wonderfully pleasant. (MA 26)

This scene created discussion among people who have been taught to sit quietly and listen — who are by nature quiet and respectful. The Nepali teachers thought it highly inappropriate for a fourteen-year-old

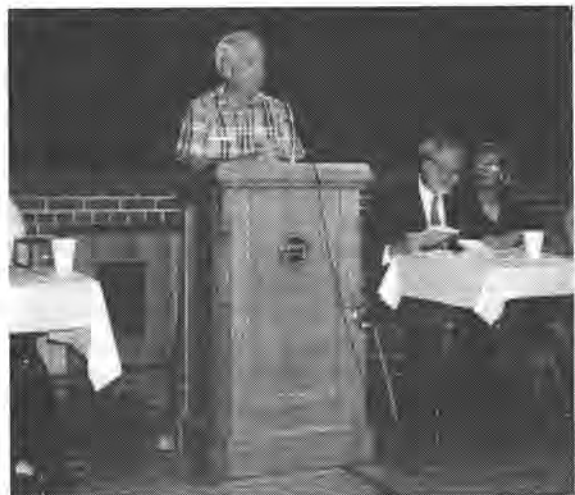
girl to place herself in such a position with a male, other than a small child for whom she is caring. Girls are not alone with boys after puberty, and marriages are still usually arranged by families in this culture. A fourteen-year-old girl in Nepali society is not a child, but a marriageable woman. And why would Ántonia want to give Jim a ring if it didn't imply betrothal? My sense, apart from radically different cultural expectations about gender roles, is that these people detected the sensuousness in this language which was not their own, and read an eroticism here which scholars have sometimes picked up.

And what about the silver ring that Ántonia gives to Jim? If not a token of betrothal, why then does she offer it, and why does he refuse it? A gray-haired man wearing a black *topi*, who had sat towards the back of the room for two days listening intently, saying nothing, spoke quietly: "She wanted to give him the ring in exchange for his words. He did not understand the value to her of these words." Another said, "And that is what we are doing today. We are exchanging cultures."

This is not intended to be a scholarly paper, but rather a familiar essay about Cather in action, the "missionary" aspect to Cather studies. Never have I appreciated Willa Cather's work more than watching *My Ántonia* come alive in this place as far from Nebraska as a place could possibly be. When the session ended, one of the participants came up to me and said, "Madam, today we came to know your language is so beautiful." The language is our common one, but the words are Willa Cather's.

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Don Connors reminisces about Carrie Miner Sherwood at the 1998 Spring Conference.

Willa Cather, Francis Parkman, and The Idea of Progress

John Jacobs
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*What we see in the mind is as real to us
as what we see by the eye.*

— Wallace Stevens "Adagia"

Willa Cather's literary debts to Francis Parkman have long been noticed in discussions of *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). But nowhere in the scholarly literature that I have surveyed is there any discussion of earlier debts that she may owe his writing. While I can find no certain proof, I would like to suggest that Cather's debt to Parkman may precede her use of his history in *Shadows*. Cather's earlier debt may be to Parkman's most popular work, the autobiographic travel book, *The Oregon Trail* (1849). *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) displays many affinities in structure, motif and theme with *Trail*.

Many coincidences first alerted me to the possibilities of Parkman's early and broad influence on Cather. First, it seems to me that a curious young Willa Cather might have wanted to explore the antecedents of her migration from Virginia to Nebraska. Parkman, of course, spends a good deal of his time in Nebraska on the Oregon Trail. But he also travels as far south as Bent's Fort and the Pueblo, closer to the settings of *Death*. Parkman's adventure, like Father Latour's assignment to his diocese, was affected by the Mexican American War. Both Parkman and Latour sense an acceleration of history on the moving frontier; they witness tumultuous frontier life, a life characterized by cultures in conflict, but a life which would soon give way to the organizing power of civilization. Many additional parallels are also suggested between the two books. In each, for example, the author develops theme through parallels among diverse characters and varying episodes. Also, Parkman is a young scholar on research mission to the Far West; Latour is a displaced scholar, who never loses the scholar's sense of refined ideas and the necessity of broad vision to comprehend history in the making. The protagonists' complementary characters in both works show similarities as well. Parkman's parallel, yet opposite, on the frontier is Henry Chattillon. Chattillon is a man a few years older than Parkman, a man, unlike the Harvard-educated Parkman, with no formal education. A life-long inhabitant of the frontier, Chattillon, like Father Vaillant, enjoys physical action; also, much like Vaillant, Chattillon is at home in refined settlements or rough wilderness camps. For all of their differences, however, Parkman (like Latour for Vaillant) shows unabashed affection and admiration for Chattillon. More fully than he is like Vaillant, Chattillon is a literary ancestor of Cather's Kit Carson: both are presented as natural aristocrats. In fact, Parkman even compares Chattillon and Carson as buffalo hunters (296).

But all of these coincidences, and others, only circumstantially suggest affinities between *Trail* and *Death*. More substantively, both narratives are stories of initiation into the seeming chaos of the wilderness. In both, the protagonists face dissolution and death; both protagonists triumph over the wilderness through imagination, intellect and will. *Trail* and *Death* are commentaries on history that foresee the inevitable progress of Western/European civilization and the end of native cultures. Parkman recognizes that inevitable progress during his return trip from the Black Hills, after his deepest initiations into the Indian hunting culture.

Near the end of Parkman's wilderness immersion, as he is heading east with the Ogillallah to Fort Laramie, he is urged by a mysterious force to explore a wild and dangerous passage in the mountains. At first, Parkman's urge to explore appears only to be a youthful impulse for adventure: "All within seemed darkness and mystery. In the mood in which I found myself, something strongly impelled me to enter. Passing over the intervening space, I guided my horse through the rocky portal, and as I did so instinctively drew the covering from my rifle, half expecting that some unknown evil lay in ambush within those dreary recesses" (243). As he moves farther into the passage, however, Parkman is aware of a double consciousness: the awakened savage in him keeps him fully alert to the physical danger he may be in, while his civilized self leads him to contemplate the glories of civilization:

The genius of the place exercised a strange influence upon my mind. Its faculties were stimulated into extraordinary activity, and as I passed along, many half-forgotten incidents, and the images of persons and things far distant, rose rapidly before me, with surprising distinctiveness. In that perilous wilderness, eight hundred miles beyond the faintest vestige of civilization, the scenes of another hemisphere, the seat of ancient refinement passed before me, more like a succession of vivid paintings than any mere dreams of the fancy. I saw the church of St. Peter's illumined on the evening of Easter-day, the whole majestic pile from the cross to the foundation-stone, penciled in fire, and shedding a radiance like the serene light of the moon, on the sea of upturned faces below. (244)

Parkman continues his contemplation, detailing many more remembered scenes from his Grand Tour of the Continent. Unlike his earlier imaginings of civilized scenes, when he was near death in the desert, the details of this contemplation appear like "a succession of vivid paintings rather than any mere dreams of the fancy." Parkman realizes that the integrity of his civilized self does not depend, finally, upon his environment, but upon his acculturated interior associations, from which he retrieves memories of his civilized past. The progress of Western civilization, suggested by the monuments Parkman recalls, is a continuing idea. Progress is not contingent for survival upon accidental

environments but on the ability of civilized men to remain self-disciplined in thought and will, even though part of them is also savage. Yet conscious of his savage education, even in the midst of indulging in contemplations of the civilized world, Parkman heeds the lessons of caution he had learned and leaves the passage, remembering "that it was hardly wise to remain long in such a place" (244).

During his summer's journey, Parkman had penetrated the savage wilderness and discovered the essence of savage life and the extent of his identification with it. The young adventurer Parkman, afflicted with dysentery for most of his journey, became totally dependent upon the Ogillallah for his life. In camping and hunting with them, he learned of their powerful harmony with nature and their childish servitude to nature's whims. A part of himself he recognizes, is indelibly related to the Indians. At the same time, Parkman cannot — will not — surrender himself completely to savagism, cannot and will not pass the threshold of the Indian's mind, which would provide him complete integration with the wilderness. "For the most part, a civilized white man can discover very few points of sympathy between his own nature and that of an Indian. With every disposition to do justice to their good qualities, he must be conscious that an impassable gulf ties between him and his red brethren" (242). In discovering that "impassable gulf," Parkman discovers also justification for accepting — though perhaps with some lingering regrets — the destruction of native American culture, the destruction of humanity's childhood characterized by servitude to nature and the lack of self-possession. In the savage's place, comes the civilized adult, superior to nature and self-possessed.

Where Parkman ends his initiation, Cather begins Latour's story. Parkman's protagonist had to earn his faith in progress through hard experience; Latour's faith in progress is thoroughly matured.

Though it may only be accidental, Latour's mission begins literally where Parkman's metaphorically ends — with Rome a distant vision. From the Sabine hills where the Cardinals meet, the low profile of Rome "barely fretted the skyline — indistinct except for the dome of St. Peter's, bluish grey like the flattened top of a great balloon, just a flash of copper light on its soft metallic surface" (4). The prologue, like the narrative proper, is a compression of history. Indeed, the prologue compresses history even more than the narrative proper, as it alludes backwards to the beginnings of European civilization to focus on the challenges to progress on the American frontier in 1848. Though history may fade to allusion in the legend of Jean Marie Latour, it never disappears and is always at the base of the narrative. Rome is the culmination of Old World civilization. From Rome, the progress of civilization must be launched into the New World, a world of political, cultural and historical chaos, a world wanting the order symbolized by Rome and St. Peter's. As the disciplined order of the Church enables the

Cardinals to transcend their conflicting personalities and nationalities, their emissary to America must carry that historic sense of order with him to transcend the violent conflicts of nations and cultures that contend for the wilderness. "He must be a man to whom order is necessary — as dear as life" (8), because — as Parkman's experience in the savage world proved to him — order is life to the civilized man.

When Cather cuts from the prologue to the story of Latour's trip to Old Mexico ("One afternoon in the autumn of 1851" [17]), the indispensable necessity of that order is immediately illustrated. In danger of dying of thirst and on the verge of delirium, Latour meditates on the Passion of Christ: "Of all our Lord's physical suffering, only one, 'I thirst,' rose to His lips. Empowered by long training, the young priest blotted himself out of his own consciousness and meditated upon the anguish of his Lord. The Passion of Jesus became for him the only reality; the need of his own body was but a part of that conception" (20). What must be noted about this passage is that Latour "blotted himself out of his own consciousness." Through long discipline, imagination and will he is able to transcend his body. This sense of transcendence is unlike that of Jim Burden's in *My Ántonia* (14) because it is an act of will and not an accident of reverie. Neither is Latour's transcendence a total absorption into nature, such as the Indians Jacinto and Eusabio illustrate. Latour is not dissolved through his meditation, but at once is united with Christ's suffering — and its promise of redemption — and yet separate. Though different in genesis, Latour's vision of the Crucifix is like the Indian's vision of his symbolic anima, his "totem." One of the parallels that Parkman implicitly draws in *Trail* is between his initiation experience and those of the Indians. These *Oregon Trail* initiations share similar patterns: young men, encouraged by a quest for mature identity, seek out challenging physical experiences, including deprivation of food and drink, that will put their lives at risk for the sake of a vivifying vision of mature identity. In these visions, a totemic symbol appears that confers mature identity on the initiate. Thus, Parkman's Ogillallah acquaintance, Le Borgne, envisioned an antelope, "the graceful peace-sprit of the Ogillallah," after several days of fasting and praying in a sequestered cavern in the Black Hills. Consequently, Le Borgne devotes his mature life "to the labors of peace" (*Trail* 137-38). Similarly, the disciplines of the civilized world, disciplines that value intellectual initiations through arduous study and contemplation, provide Parkman and Latour with their sustaining visions of Rome and of the Crucifix, respectively.

The most powerful symbolic challenge to Latour's civilized self occurs soon after his mission begins, when he is accompanied by Jacinto to Acoma, after which they are forced to take refuge from a deadly snow storm in the mystic snake cave. That often commented upon descent is foreshadowed early in

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CATHER, PARKMAN, AND THE IDEA OF PROGRESS

(Continued)

the section entitled "The Mass at Acoma." While Latour and Jacinto are in camp at Laguna, they chat, in broken phrases and sentences, about the immediate — the stars overhead, and Jacinto's wife and only child. Then,

The two companions sat, each thinking his own thoughts as night closed in about them; a blue night set with stars, the bulk of the solitary mesas cutting into the firmament. The Bishop seldom questioned Jacinto about his thoughts or beliefs. He didn't think it polite, and he believed it to be useless. There was no way in which he could transfer his own memories of European civilization into the Indian mind, and he was quite willing to believe that behind Jacinto there was a long tradition, a story of experience, which no language could translate to him. A chill came with the darkness. Father Latour put on his old fur-lined cloak, and Jacinto, loosening the blanket tied about his loins, drew it up over his head and shoulders. (92-93)

What Latour — and Cather — acknowledge is Parkman's recognition of the "impassable gulf" between Europeans and Native Americans. In spite of his misgivings, Latour invites Jacinto to join him in evening prayer. "Let us say *Our Father*, and go to sleep, my boy." (Jacinto is 26-years old.)

The Bishop went to sleep thinking with satisfaction that he was beginning to have some sort of human companionship with his Indian boy. One called the young Indians "boys," perhaps because there was something youthful and elastic in their bodies. Certainly about their behavior there was nothing boyish in the American sense, nor even in the European sense. Jacinto was never by any chance, naïf; he was never taken by surprise. One felt that his training, what ever it had been, had prepared him to meet any situation which might confront him. He was as much at home in the Bishop's study as in his own pueblo — and he was never too much at home anywhere. (93)

What the Bishop, and perhaps Cather, betrays in this passage is the civilized prejudice that the Indians — like their alter egos, African-Americans — will never be fully human, fully mature intellectually, morally and spiritually. Not only is Jacinto "never too much at home anywhere," he is displaced in time, no longer "at home" in the quickly fading savage world, nor ever capable of finding a place in the ever-moving civilized world. Jacinto's story is the story of the Indian in general, a story that becomes oppressively clear to the Bishop on Acoma as he celebrates Mass.

He felt as if he were celebrating Mass at the bottom of the sea, for antediluvian creatures; for types of life so old, so hardened, so shut within their shells, that the sacrifice on Calvary could hardly reach back so far. Those shell-like backs might be saved by baptism and divine grace, *as undeveloped infants are* (my italics), but hardly through any experience of their own, he thought. When he

blessed them and sent them away, it was with a sense of inadequacy and spiritual defeat. (100)

The Indians' powerful, perhaps indomitable, inability to accept civilization fully, to become something other than children — "boys" — is symbolized by the snake cave episode. When Latour causes Jacinto to explain the "dizzy noise" and vibration he senses in the cavern, Jacinto opens a fissure that allows the Bishop to hear "the sound of a great underground river." "He told himself he was listening to one of the oldest voices of the earth . . . 'It is terrible,' he said at last, as he rose" (129-30). Having been touched profoundly by the spirit that infuses the Indian way of life, the Bishop buries the secret of the cavern, as Jacinto so implored him. But the cave "flashed into his mind from time to time, and always with a shudder of repugnance quite unjustified by anything he had experienced there. It had been a hospitable shelter to him in his extremity. Yet afterward he remembered the storm itself, even his exhaustion, with a tingling sense of pleasure. But the cave, which had probably saved his life, he remembered with horror. No tales of wonder, he told himself, would ever tempt him into a cavern hereafter" (133). Like Parkman in the dreary mountain pass, Latour senses a powerful connection to the primordial power of the dark cavern; and like Parkman, he represses that power since it belongs to aboriginal man, human kind in its infancy.

The old man — the aboriginal, perpetual infant — must die so the new man — the conscious, ever progressing adult — may prosper. That lesson is suggested in the story of Eusabio, Latour's Navajo friend. Eusabio's story is occasioned by the death of his only son. He invites the Bishop to share his mourning, at his village. There, Latour — an honored guest — is provided his own hogan; yet, like Jacinto, he seems not quite at home, not quite a part of the Eusabio's clan, all of whom congregate in one large hogan. Though the shelter provides Latour a place "favourable for reflection," "This house was so frail a shelter that one seemed to be sitting in the heart of a world made of dusty earth and moving air" (230). On the return trip to Santa Fe with Eusabio, the Bishop concludes that the persistence of the Indian in the land is as precarious as the hogans they build: "They seemed to have none of the European's desire to 'master' nature, to arrange and recreate. They spent their ingenuity in the other direction; in accommodating themselves to the scene in which they found themselves" (234). But accommodation does not guarantee harmony with "the scene in which they found themselves." For the Navajo, accommodation means dissolution.

Near the end of his life, the Bishop reflects on his admiration for the spirit of the Navajo. He is pleased that they have recovered their homeland from the United States. He tells his spiritual successor, Bernard, "I do not believe, as I once did, that the Indian will perish. I believe that God will preserve him" (297). In this final commentary, the Bishop displays more than a little cultural arrogance. The Navajo that are

"preserved" are civilized remnants of nomadic hunters. Bearing Spanish names and now surviving as shepherds, roles cast for them by the Spanish, they are confirmation of the manifest destiny of civilized progress, a laboratory example. Had *their* gods preserved them, the Navajo might yet be the nomadic hunters and bandits the Spanish found them.

The final assertion of the dominance of progress is the promise of continuity that Bernard represents. Unlike the degenerate Trinidad, the hedonistic Padre Martinez's earthy heir apparent, Bernard masters his human nature through study, prayer and reflection. Finally, Bernard and the way of life he represents, elementally contrasts with Eusabio's lost only son. A missionary for progress, as well as the Church, Archbishop Latour can die at peace with himself, knowing that he realized the vision of Rome, sacred and secular, in the American Desert.



Willa Cather Childhood Home, Christmas 1998.

— Photo by Pat Phillips

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The Walls of Uruk: Cather's *The Professor's House*, the Universal Hero, and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

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Throughout the bastions of culture, whether the cinema, the epics of antiquity, or in the pages of our literary greats, the hero archetype rears his head and demands our attention. "Over and over again, one hears a tale describing a hero's miraculous but humble birth, his early proof of superhuman strength, his rapid rise to prominence or power, his triumphant struggle with the forces of evil, his fallibility to the sin of pride (*hybris*), and his fall through betrayal or a 'heroic' sacrifice that ends in his death" (Henderson 110). This archetypal hero elevates a cross-cultural struggle toward individual significance. Oftentimes his striving manifests as a patriarchal, even misogynist, assertion of maleness that successfully wards off threats of matriarch/maternal ego-dissolution; he valorizes the Sky God at the expense of the Mother Goddess

whose absorptive communal realm precludes opportunities for the "transcendent" individual identity maintained by separation. "The hero's main feat is to overcome the monster of darkness: the long-hoped-for and expected triumph of consciousness over unconsciousness" (Jung 118-9). The unconscious realm is allied with femininity, fatality, and ignorance, and consciousness with masculinity, immortality, and enlightenment; the hero thus embodies the patriarchal fantasy of transcending (feminine) limitations of the body and achieving a cosmic immortality. The completed, successful heroic journey is thus mythic rather than realistic, for the practical realities of existence exclude the likelihood of immortal accomplishment.

The Epic of Gilgamesh of ancient Mesopotamia introduces a variation on the heroic cycle that merges the heroic ideal with human reality. Written and set in the third millennium before the common era, it depicts the exploits of Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, the city of Ishtar, who exploits his subjects and thus is given a

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WALLS OF URUK

(Continued)

suitable companion to divert him. This companion, Enkidu, is fashioned by the gods from a rock and lives amongst the animals in the wilderness before he is taught civilization by a priestess of Ishtar. Led to Uruk, he forms a deep relationship with Gilgamesh. The heroic exploits of Gilgamesh and Enkidu invite the attentions of the city goddess, who is ruthlessly rejected and threatened by the pair, and whom she curses. The responsive gods sentence Enkidu to death; Gilgamesh mourns him in tormented despair, and initiates a quest to find Utnapishtim and his wife, the only mortals to attain immortality, and acquire that boon for himself. Gilgamesh fails to attain immortality upon reaching Utnapishtim because he cannot transcend his own bodily limitations. Instead, he loses the blossom of eternal youth to a serpent. Forced to face failure and the reality of his own eventual demise, Gilgamesh ends the epic by extolling the permanence of the walled city of Uruk.

Probably not coincidentally, Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* engages themes existent in the Sumerian epic of the disillusioned hero. The initial discovery and deciphering of the Mesopotamian texts occurred in the years immediately prior to Cather's birth; such texts and ongoing archeological work would have remained intriguing and newsworthy during her lifetime. Recapitulating the heroic cycle, "*The Professor's House* becomes her [Cather's] vehicle for a search for origins, for the recovery of a world untainted by materialism and dedicated to the struggle to create something lasting" (Ryder 222). Professor Godfrey St. Peter, obsessed with memories of his mythic companion Tom Outland, enacts the myth of disillusionment and grief in accord with the ancient epic. The myth of the successful, nature-identified, yet perishing hero of the Enkidu type reappears in the figure of Tom Outland. The protagonist's spouse, Lillian St. Peter, represents Ishtar and functions as avatar of the force of civilization and communal fertility who is angered, rejected, and denigrated by the patriarchal heroic mode. Cather's manipulation and elaboration upon this ancient mythic paradigm engages timeless themes of heroic (self) identity and struggle in tension with the values of ego-dissolution/insignificance extant not merely in the modern era but also in domestic experience itself.

Tom Outland is identified from the outset as a mythic hero; as Gilgamesh presages the arrival of Enkidu in dreams, St. Peter foretells Outland's arrival and achievement (*House* 20) in the initial chapter. He recognizes Outland's heroic potential upon their initial encounter through the inspection of the latter's hand: "the muscular, many-lined palm, the long, strong fingers with soft ends, the straight little finger, the flexible, beautifully shaped thumb that curved back from the rest of his hand as if it were its own master" (*House* 103); Outland's heroic destiny is thus mapped

in his body, an omen read by his intended companion. Like Enkidu, Outland has no parents and no collected birthday; he is raised in the Southwestern wilds and displays none of the social niceties associated with civilized existence, demonstrated through his "railroad lunch-counter ways" and ineptitude at the consumption of salad (*House* 64). His lapses in dining with the St. Peter family mirror descriptions of Enkidu in the epic: "Milk of the cattle/he drank./Food they placed before him./He broke bread/gazing and looking./But Enkidu understood not./Bread to eat,/beer to drink,/he had not been taught" (Langdon 214).

Although Outland functions as Enkidu to St. Peter, he also plays Gilgamesh in his adventures with Rodney Blake. In their first great adventure, Gilgamesh and Enkidu journey through the desert with the intent to slay the monstrous nature deity Humbaba, overseer of the cedar forest. Gilgamesh experiences three premonitory dreams whilst amongst the cedars. The first dream depicts

the home of the gods, the paradise of Ishtar's other self, called Imini-most-attractive.
All beauty true is ever there
where gods do dwell, where there is
cool shade and harmony and
sweet-odored food to match their mood. (V:i:5-10)

The second dream involves the defeat of Humbaba via hurling his "form from/towering cliffs through sky to/earth, making his shape/as flat and wide as it is round and high" (V:iii:21-4). The final vision contains dire images of screaming sky, moaning Mother Earth, and the evaporation of light; Gilgamesh adds to this catastrophic description a dire prediction: "[w]hen we leave the mountain, this is what we will remember" (V:iv:48).

These visions are enacted through Outland's and Blake's conquering of the mesa, forbidden exploration by the cattle company that dreads the loss and harm such an effort would exact. Like Humbaba, the mesa appears impenetrable and tantalizing terrain for the aspiring hero:

No wonder the thing bothered us and tempted us;
it was always before us, and was always changing.
Black thunder-storms used to roll up from behind it
and pounce on us like a panther without warning.
The lightning would play around it and jab into it so
that we were always expecting it would fire the
brush. I've never heard thunder so loud as it was
there. The cliffs threw it back at us, and we thought
the mesa itself, though it seemed so solid, must be
full of deep canyons and caverns, to account for the
prolonged growl and rumble that followed every
crash of thunder. After the burst in the sky was
over, the mesa went on sounding like a drum, and
seemed itself to be muttering and making noises.
(*House* 171-2)

Like Humbaba, the mesa functions as a sentry, discouraging humans from utilizing its safety or beauty. Cather compares its envisaged summit to "the hanging gardens of Babylon" (*House* 171) that, akin to the mythic terrain of the Mesopotamian epic, contains

cedars. Outland extols the cliff city as a permanent, ideal civilization; he refers to it as a "sky village," uniting it with the vision of Ishtar's paradise in Gilgamesh's first dream. The second dream further links Humbaba with the mesa; hurled from the cliffs, the creature's broken corpse reminds us of Mother Eve's final plunge. The last vision, however, presages not only Outland/Enkidu's decreed dissolution, but the betrayal of the cliff city's utopian realm; at the base of the cliff, Mother Eve's cadaverous visage forever screams or moans as the Earth-Mother mourning the dispersal of her sacred milieu. Blake, the Enkidu of Outland's personal tale, vanishes into the "V-shaped break of the rim rock" (*House* 223), the vulval passage to the underworld, forever sought and never to be seen again.

While Outland may play Gilgamesh in his own story, his relations to participants of the frame tale mark him insistently as Enkidu, the fulfilled and ideal hero. Outland no longer exists within the human realm and the doubt lingers if he, as avatar of the universal hero, had ever truly occupied it: "[s]ometimes I think he was just a — a glittering idea" (*House* 94). Outland's youthful death catapults him into the idea(l)istic sphere by sparing him debilitating domestic trials: "[t]he young man himself seems to remain untainted by the corruption of the modern world through his early death in World War I, which elevates him to a seemingly mythical status" (Schubnell 104). Cather's text itself reveals why the hero's death is necessary to the preservation of his mythic station:

What change would have come in his blue eye, in his fine long hand with the backspringing thumb, which had never handled things that were not the symbols of ideas? A hand like that, had he lived, must have been put to other uses. His fellow scientists, his wife, the town and State, would have required many duties of it. It would have had to write thousands of useless letters, frame thousands of false excuses. It would have had to "manage" a great deal of money, to be the instrument of a woman who would grow always more exacting. He had escaped all that. He had made something new in the world — and the rewards, the meaningless conventional gestures, he had left to others. (*House* 236-7)

Outland thus circumvents the fate of Gilgamesh/St. Peter and the threat which the communal, matriarchal poses for a heroic masculine ego; his identity gains immortal status, paradoxically transcending, the limitations of culture and the body through an "uncorrupt" military demise. "As the image of death becomes increasingly terrifying and without redemption, the need to achieve immortality while living becomes more urgent. Heroism — the extraordinary act that elevates the idea of human nature — was one response to the power of death, which was thereby vanquished by immortal fame" (Baring 174). Outland's heroic ego-identity escapes death's maw through bodily annihilation, in contrast to his counterpart, whose ego-identity perishes while his body remains.

Godfrey St. Peter performs the role of sovereign Gilgamesh, the failed hero who must confront his own spiritual/physical/ego dissolution upon the loss of his heroic other self. His initial depiction, assisted by his daughter Kitty's water-color paintings, is that of king, whose best attribute rests in the crown:

"The thing that really makes Papa handsome is the modelling of his head between the top of his ear and the crown; it is quite the best thing about him. That part of his head was high, polished, hard as bronze, and the close-growing black hair threw off a streak of light along the rounded ridge where the skull was fullest. The mould of his head on the side was so individual and definite, so far from casual, that it was more like a statue's head than a man's. (*House* 5)

Cather also compares St. Peter's head iconographically to that of warriors on the Parthenon frieze "in their tight, archaic helmets" (*House* 57), further emphasizing heroic nature. Throughout "The Family," Gilgamesh/St. Peter reminisces about his heroic exploits with Enkidu/Outland prior to his permanent establishment as domestic regent with the ensuing responsibilities of the office. As Gilgamesh's dreams reveal his ordained heroic destiny, the Professor's great adventure, the research and writing of his Spanish history volumes, coheres as idea initially in a dream-like sequence while he gazes upon peaks of the Sierra Nevadas during his travels abroad:

St. Peter lay looking up at them from a little boat riding low in the purple water, and the design of his book unfolded in the air above him, just as definitely as the mountain ranges themselves. And the design was sound. He had accepted it as inevitable, had never meddled with it, and it had seen him through. (*House* 89)

The books in question do not merely record the historical feats of conquistadores, but also present the struggles of the record-making hero, of Gilgamesh; the "cosmic" or unwritten text of the gods unfolding in the air thus reveals St. Peter's own future success, initiatory struggles, and his participation in the mythic cycles of antiquity. His initial heroic status serves as a catalyst for his later dissatisfaction with mundane domestic existence, the sphere of the feminine: "[t]he first problem of the returning hero is to accept as real, after an experience of the soul-satisfying union of fulfillment, the passing joys and sorrows, banalities and noisy obscenities of life" (Campbell 218).

Enkidu's death impels Gilgamesh toward passionate grief and a fearful pondering of his own doom:

He wandered
over barren hills, mumbling to his own spirit:
"Will you too die as Enkidu did?
Will grief become your food? Will we both
fear the lonely hills, so vacant?
I now race from place to place,
dissatisfied with wherever I am . . . (IX:i:2-8)

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Death Comes for the Archbishop

By Willa Cather

Historical Essay and Explanatory Notes by John J. Murphy

Textual Essay by Charles Mignon with Frederick Link and Kari A. Ronning

Death Comes for the Archbishop sprang from Willa Cather's love for the land and cultures of the American Southwest. Published in 1927 to both praise and perplexity, it has since claimed for itself a major place in twentieth-century literature.

When Cather first visited the American Southwest in 1912, she found a new world to imagine and soon came to feel that "the story of the Catholic Church in [the Southwest] was the most interesting of all its stories." The narrative follows Bishop Jean Latour and Father Joseph Vaillant, friends since their childhood in France, as they organize the new Roman Catholic diocese of Santa Fe subsequent to the Mexican War. While seeking to revive the church and build a cathedral in the desert, the clerics, like their historical prototypes, Bishop Jean Lamy and Father Joseph Machebeuf, face religious corruption, natural adversity, and the loneliness of living in a strange and unforgiving land.

The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition presents groundbreaking research, establishing a new text that reflects Cather's long and deep involvement with her story. The historical essay

traces the artistic and spiritual development that led to its writing. The broad-ranging explanatory notes illuminate the elements of French, Mexican, Hispanic, and Native American cultures that meet in the course of the narrative; they also explain the part played by the land and its people — their history, religion, art, and languages. The textual essay and apparatus reveal Cather's creative process and enable the reader to follow the complex history of the text.

Volume editor John J. Murphy is a professor of English at Brigham Young University. Textual editor Charles Mignon is a professor of English at the University of Nebraska. Frederick M. Link is a professor emeritus of English at the University of Nebraska. Kari A. Ronning is assistant editor for the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition.

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WALLS OF URUK (Continued)

St. Peter reflects such dire sentiment:

The university, his new house, his old house, everything around him, seemed insupportable as the boat on which he is imprisoned seems to a seasick man. Yes, it was possible that the little world, on its voyage among all the stars, might become like that; a boat on which one could travel no longer, from which one could no longer look up and confront those bright rings of revolution. (*House* 131)

Although the realization of mortality which the death of the hero-companion thrusts onto the survivor threatens his sense of self and identity, the very threat helps to constitute a self that bridges the heroic/mythic realm and the human. The threat provides an initiatory sojourn in internal darkness. "The actual process of individuation — the conscious coming-to-terms with one's own inner center (psychic nucleus) or self — generally begins with a wounding of the personality and the suffering that accompanies it" (von Franz 166). The crisis that Enkidu/Outland evades through early death must be faced by a male identity which can no longer maintain the superhuman expectations of heroism at the expense of human concerns — the key to the Gilgamesh epic itself. "This saga, which begins with the erotic excesses of a hero who is at the same time a tyrant, reveals, in the last analysis, the inability of purely 'heroic' values to radically transcend the human condition" (Eliade 77).

St. Peter's attempt in the last chapter to regain his own heroic youth can be seen in the light of Gilgamesh's journey to Utnapishtim as a search for immortality in order to avoid age and death. As the grieving Gilgamesh exhibits the "savagery" or naturalistic characteristics of Enkidu (the avoidance of human civilization, a primitive existence among animals in mountains and forest), St. Peter envisions his youthful self as a type of Outland-within:

The Kansas boy who had come back to St. Peter was not a scholar. He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water. Wherever sun sunned and rain rained and snow snowed, wherever life sprouted and decayed, places were alike to him. . . . He seemed to be at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths. He seemed to know, among other things, that he was solitary and must always be so; he had never married, never been a father. He was earth and would return to earth. (*House* 241)

This return to Enkidu/Outland-within is merely a final, primal fantasy of the ego outlasting the travesties of age and time before capitulating to the (symbolic) death of the self. Gilgamesh cannot transcend his finite embodiment and succumbs to a deathlike sleep while attempting to gain immortality; St. Peter similarly cannot maintain the vision of eternal youth, and succumbs to his own symbolic, and nearly actual, death. "This type of spiritual death has its analog in

the feeling of being cut off from the world — life goes on, but we do not want to go with it, clinging instead to a lost world where death is not real" (van Nortwick 27).

St. Peter's return to life and Gilgamesh's return to Uruk demonstrate the confrontation and realization of personal mortality, the ultimate deflation of individualistic heroic identity in the face of community continuity. The final tablet of the epic witnesses Gilgamesh's loss of the plant bearing eternal youth, and the pain incumbent upon realizing the insignificance of his heroic achievements: "Why do I bother working for nothing?/Who even notices what I do?" . . . "In minutes,/swift currents will lose forever/that special sign that god left for me" (Jackson XI:vi:288-9, 292-4). The unforeseen loss of St. Peter's "delight," "joy," and "passionate griefs," similarly entails the end of heroic, ecstatic, egoistic youth. "His temporary release from consciousness seemed to have been beneficial. He had let something go — and it was gone: something very precious, that he could not have consciously relinquished, probably" (*House* 258). The last two lines of *The Professor's House* locate St. Peter within the limited context of actual, embodied existence: ". . . he felt the ground under his feet. He thought he knew where he was, and that he could face with fortitude the *Berengaria* and the future" (*House* 258). Similarly, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* concludes with the protagonist examining Uruk's walls and extolling their durability, situating himself in concrete circumstance and actual, as opposed to mythic, time. "Study the base, the brick,/the old design. Is it as permanent as can be?/Does it look like wisdom designed it?/The house of Ishtar in/Uruk is divided into three parts:/the town itself, the palm grove, and the prairie" (Jackson, XI:vi:302-7). St. Peter's house, like Uruk, has three parts: the attic, the living quarters, and the basement, and the university town in which he resides is divided similarly in three: the town itself, the beach strip with its seven shaggy pines, and the outlying prairie land. Cather appears to have framed St. Peter's experience according to the plan of Uruk; the tale espouses mythic themes or the "old design," and the trinity of chapters exploring town/domestic existence, Outland's desert, and the Kansas prairie of Godfrey's vanished youth offers a variation upon the divisions in Ishtar's city.

The figure of the city-goddess and the heroic disaffection from her pervades both *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Professor's House*. Ishtar-Inanna, divine patroness of Uruk, resides in the figure of Lillian, uncontested empowering force of St. Peter's domestic domain. Uruk's goddess, symbolized by Venus or the morning/evening star, enacts various functions; her spheres of influence include fertility, love, and justice, as well as the darker aspects of storm and war often attributed to her Semitic incarnation as Lilith. "Inanna was identified with the unpredictable, chaotic and destructive powers of nature as well as with the nurturing and life-bringing powers (Baring 201). Cather's depiction of Lillian St. Peter — whose

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WALLS OF URUK

(Continued)

name, incidentally, resembles that of Lilith — contains the dual attributes of the goddess; she has “a richly endowed nature that responded strongly to life and art, and very vehement likes and dislikes” and “her divinations about people and art” are “always instinctive and unexplained, but nearly always right” (*House 38*). The concluding image of Lillian is that of a religious idol or cultural symbol:

Her nature was intense and positive; it was like a chiselled surface, a die, a stamp upon which he could not be beaten out any longer. If her character were reduced to an heraldic device, it would be a hand (a beautiful hand) holding flaming arrows — the shafts of her violent loves and hates, her clear-cut ambitions. (*House 250*)

The forms residing in St. Peter's study, denote both Ishtar's dual nature and her subsequent denigration. As “the bust,” her ample breasts connote maternal fertility through their appearance while possessing “the most unsympathetic surface imaginable” (*House 9*). The second dress form, a woman's waistline and skirt, assumes the demeanor of temptress, “a woman of light behavior” (*House 10*). Denigration of the Great Mother/Lover occurs in overt symbolic form; reassignment as a fetish contains and designates her as “bad mother” or wanton, divesting her of dignity and authority, rendering her a grotesque, inanimate ornament for the hero. Another instance of her vilification resides in the figure of Mother Eve. Ishtar, who descends into the netherworld and returns at the expense of her consort Dumuzi's life, is permanently reduced to a corpse in a posture of screaming. Once again depicted as temptress, she is sold and ultimately destroyed by the hero.

As city goddess, Ishtar bestows her blessing of fertility upon the accomplished and sovereign hero through the *hieros gamos* or sacred marriage; she woos the successful Gilgamesh with promises of wealth, majesty, and power. Gilgamesh's crude rejection of the goddess's nuptial call dissolves the threat that her love and involvement pose to the masculine/heroic ego: “But how could I repay you as a wife/and still avoid the bitterness and strife that follow you?” (Jackson, VI:i:27-8). He recounts tales of her former lovers and their inevitable destinies of death or impotence. “As the old consort wanes and new fertility is needed, the Mother Goddess needs a new consort. But as the fate of her consorts becomes part of her reputation, her selection of a consort degenerates to and becomes reanalyzed as the act of a negative, destructive temptress . . .” (Miller 90, author's emphasis). Lillian's affections shift from her husband to her sons-in-law, the new kings on which the sacred marriage is bestowed for the fertile continuance of the city: “[s]he was intensely interested in the success and happiness of these two young men, lived in their careers as she had once done in his” (*House 65*). St.

Peter, whose occupation as gardener connects him with the ceremonial king of the *hieros gamos* (Baring 199), denies his spouse, the city goddess, in order to maintain his homosocial friendship with Outland/Enkidu. Betrayal of the fertility goddess entails drastic consequences; Ishtar curses Gilgamesh and the tribunal of gods condemns Enkidu to death. St. Peter's lack of vitality and creative endeavor can also be viewed in light of his rejection of Lillian; “[b]y distancing himself from any notion of family and reproduction, he affirms his essential sterility” (Schubnell 101). The heroic temperament may reject and even seek to dominate the goddess in hopes of ego-preservation, of evading her transient, sensual cycle of fertility, death, and replacement, but the endeavor must always remain fruitless in the face of her power. St. Peter/Gilgamesh may insult and defy Lillian/Ishtar, but he cannot flee her ultimate power.

The heroic age founds itself upon the revelation of personal identity that transcends the strictures of human history, communal needs for continuance represented by the city goddess, and the realization of mortality; “. . . that's what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own little individual lives” (*House 55*). But the primacy of domestic community at the expense of individual achievement can be denied neither in ancient epic nor modern literature; Gilgamesh's lament, “Why do I bother working for nothing?/ Who even notices what I do?” (Jackson XI:vi:288-9), is echoed millennia later through St. Peter: “Nobody saw that he was trying to do something quite different — they merely thought he was trying to do the usual thing, and had not succeeded very well” (*House 22*). The conflict between individual self-definition and the limitations imposed by an unsympathetic community does not originate in the modern age, but with the heroic archetype itself and the separation from the Mother Goddess.

The epics of the modern era diverge from ancient precedent through the internalization of heroic and mythic cycles; the half-divine sovereign protagonist and the god/dess-identified antagonists battle within the small, intense arena of human psyche, the mind of the commonplace (wo)man:

Modern literature is devoted, in great measure, to a courageous, open-eyed observation of the sickeningly broken figurations that abound before us, around us, and within. Where the natural impulse to complain against the holocaust has been suppressed — to cry out blame, or to announce panaceas — the magnitude of an art or tragedy more potent (for us) than the Greek finds realization: the realistic, intimate, and variously interesting tragedy of democracy, where the god is beheld crucified in the catastrophes not of great houses only but of every common home, every scourged and lacerated face. And there is no make-believe about heaven, future bliss, and compensation to alleviate the bitter majesty, but only utter darkness, the void of unfulfillment, to receive and eat back the lives that have been tossed forth from the womb only to fail. (Campbell 27)

The apotheosized youth remains beyond the hand's grasp save through an abbreviated span of existence precluding opportunities for individuation and self-development. Outland and Enkidu must remain primarily static figures in order to maintain mythic station. "His [Outland's] later inventing a 'vacuum' which enriches others suggests the emptiness of his idealism and is the key symbol in the romantic-scientific or artistic-materialistic polarity of the narrative structure" (Shaw 114). Although the mythic hero slays the forbidding monster of darkness or ignorance, its death creates an absence demanding introspection and (self ful)filling. The heroic archetype forces confrontations with the inherent insignificance of romanticized individual existence in the face of materialistic continuation of the family or community. It is thus only within the vacuum created by the hero's death that the domestic domain of Ishtar with its concerns of materialistic survival can unite with the needs of the heroic individual ego-identity. "Sacrifice is necessary — of an earlier part of life, of normal living, of part of the self — in order to save one's soul" (Hively 130).

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WCPM Hires a Second Director

When Steven Ryan was 19 or 20 years old, he read his first Willa Cather book. Now he works as director of education and outreach programs for WCPM.

O Pioneers! was the first novel by the Pulitzer Prize winning author that Ryan read. "After that, I was hooked," he said.

Ryan grew up in Omaha. He did his undergraduate work in philosophy at St. Louis University. He earned his masters degree in English at Loyola University in Los Angeles and his doctorate in English/American Literature at the University of Texas at Austin.



— Photo Courtesy of Red Cloud Chief

A Catholic priest who was ordained in 1982, Dr. Ryan comes to Red Cloud after stints as campus minister at the University of Texas at Austin and as associate pastor of parishes in Austin and Temple in Texas. He studied theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

Dr. Ryan learned of the newly created position last summer while attending a Cather conference at Drew University, near New York City. He visited with others at the conference about the position and applied for it. This Cather fan assumed his duties Monday, January 18.

He is no stranger to Red Cloud. "I've been here four or five times," he said, "I enjoy the town and the people very much."

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WCPM SECOND DIRECTOR (Continued)

Two elements of Cather's writings appeal to him. The first is her treatment of pioneers. He relates the experiences of the pioneers in Cather's novels to the experiences of his great grandparents when they arrived in South Dakota.

Dr. Ryan also appreciates the spiritual dimension of Cather's writings. "I'm very much attracted to that element of her writing," he said.

He named the spirituality as a driving force in his two favorite books by Cather, *Death Comes to the Archbishop* and *O Pioneers!*

The characters see this world as a sacred world. They see it as a window to the world beyond, according to Dr. Ryan.

He also likes *O Pioneers!* because, "As you read it, one gets the sense of a writer who had found her gift, found the subject matter she was born to write about."

Assuming the duties as Cather scholar, Dr. Ryan has his work cut out for him. One of his major tasks is to manage the Cather archives of the Nebraska State Historical Society, but before he can do that he has to catalog them and put them in order.

He also will make the archives available to other scholars doing research on Cather. He explained that he can help scholars from around the world find their way through the archives. He can also help them look for sources for their research.

He will also be attending a lot of literary conferences. He will attend primarily to educate people about the foundation and what is available through the foundation.

Responding to requests for information on Cather and about the foundation and Red Cloud will also keep him busy. And since the archival material cannot be removed from the museum, Dr. Ryan has to be there when research is being done.

Dr. Ryan becomes managing editor of the *WCPM Newsletter and Review*, replacing John Murphy who held the position since 1990. Dr. Ryan will be working closely with Pat Phillips, WCPM director of management, development, and historic sites.

One thing he hopes to work on is contacting area high schools and colleges so the English departments know what the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and the foundation can offer them.

"I want to get people to come to Red Cloud," he smiled.

Red Cloud appeals to many people who have read Cather's works. According to Dr. Ryan, Cather appeals to people around the globe. Many of those people are willing to make a pilgrimage to Red Cloud because it is a place significant to them because of her work. "There's a magnetic appeal to her writing that makes people want to come to see the region," he explained.

Dr. Ryan has explored Cather's birthplace in Virginia as well as most of the places in her fiction.

Dr. Ryan is excited to be in Red Cloud and is looking forward to the challenges offered by his new position. "I was delighted when the committee hired me," he said.

The enthusiasm isn't focused solely on the town of Red Cloud. "I'm looking forward to living here and getting to know the people here," he smiled.

His work hours are 8-5 daily. His office is on the third floor of the museum in the former Farmers and Merchants Bank building. He expects to have his head buried deep in the archives until they are cataloged.

— Edited and reprinted with permission
from The Red Cloud Chief

The Spring Conference, 1998

Elizabeth A. Turner
William Rainey Harper College

The 43rd annual Cather Spring Conference was held on May 1st and 2nd in Red Cloud. The focus of this year was *A Lost Lady*, and approximately two hundred and fifty people attended. The keynote speaker for the weekend was Lew Hunter, Chair and Professor of Screenwriting at UCLA.

Friday afternoon was billed as a "Do-It-Yourself" affair, beginning with registration at the Willa Cather Bookstore and Art Gallery and open houses at the Willa Cather Childhood Home, the Willa Cather Museum, and the restored Burlington Depot. The new Sacred Heart Parish Hall was the site of two paper sessions. "Nebraska Connections" was the theme of the first session, chaired by Steve Shively of Oakland University; Becky Faber spoke about "Reworking the Ending: Willa Cather and World War II." Matt Hokom presented his paper, "Limitations and Loss in Emerson's 'Experience' and Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*," and May Ahearn discussed "The Promotional Art of Magazine Publishing." The second paper session, chaired by Nancy Chinn of Baylor University was called "Baylor Connections"; Joyce Spivey delivered her essay, "Transgressing the Boundaries: An Attempt to Locate *A Lost Lady*." Mona Chouchair discussed "A Handsome Achievement: The Pattern of Artistic Sensibility in Willa Cather's Works." Gay Barton presented her paper, "'Thoughtful, Critical, and Respectful' — A Reading of Willa Cather's Appropriation of Native American Culture," and Kirsten Escobar read her work, "Neither the Wife nor the Mother: The Spinster in Willa Cather."

The evening offered conference participants two memorable events. The first, held in the new Sacred Heart Parish Hall, was "A Visit with the Pavelkas," hosted by Don Connors. The gathering provided an opportunity to hear stories and memories from 31 members of Annie Sadilek Pavelka's family; samples of her handwork and other family heirlooms were displayed. Barry Turner, Anna Pavelka's great-

grandson, was present to autograph his book, *Simply My Antonia*. The concluding event of the day was a candlelight mass at St. Juliana Falconieri Catholic Church presided over by Rev. Dr. Steve Ryan.

Saturday opened with coffee and kolaches at the Willa Cather Bookstore. Rev. Dr. Charles Peek was the officiant and Steve Shively was the acolyte at a church service held at the Grace Episcopal Church, and a special musical performance was presented by John English and the St. Juliana Choir. After the service, conference participants reconvened at the First United Methodist Church for "The Passing Show," a discussion of Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* organized and moderated by John Swift. Susan J. Rosowski delivered her paper and slide presentation, "Behind the Curtain: *A Lost Lady* as Performance," and Lonnie Pierson Dunbier, Lew Hunter, and Mellanee Kvasnicka sat on the panel that followed.

A generous lunch at the Lincoln Elementary School was next on the agenda after which participants took tour buses to the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie, where they listened to Josh Daziel's original music before touring the prairie under the guidance of staff members of The Nature Conservancy. Later in the afternoon a showing of the 1934 movie *A Lost Lady*, starring Barbara Stanwyck and Frank Morgan, was held at Lincoln Elementary School. The conference and the evening concluded with a banquet prepared by the Red Cloud Women's Chamber of Commerce and held at the Red Cloud High School Gymnasium. Joel Geyer, Nebraska Educational Television Network producer and director, emceed the evening. The Rev. Dr. Charles Peek provided the invocation, Pat Phillips welcomed all before presenting recognition awards to Barbara Sprague for her skill as an organist and John English for his talent as a choir director. Beth Bohling announced the Norma Ross Walter Scholarship winner, Rose Mellion, a senior at Omaha Burke High School. Don Connors told stories about Carrie Miner Sherwood, and he opened a silent auction for a Riverside Literature Series edition of *My Antonia* autographed by Sherwood with proceeds going to the Red Cloud Opera House Restoration Fund. The conference ended with Lew Hunter's keynote speech, "A Lost Lady Isn't."

**CALL FOR PAPERS
for the
1999 SPRING CONFERENCE**

Send papers by April 10 to:

VIRGIL ALBERTINI

R. R. 3, Box 21

Maryville, Missouri 64468

**Mark Your Calendar
Senator Kerrey Will Speak**

This year's Spring Conference will be held Friday, April 30, and Saturday, May 1. The theme of this year's conference is "The Education You have to Fight For," from a 1919 article Cather wrote for *Red Cross Magazine* (reprinted in this issue of the *Newsletter and Review*). Friday afternoon will include two paper sessions, one featuring the winners of the Norma Ross Walters essay contest and the second offering papers from graduate students. "The Passing Show" panel will feature a discussion of Cather's views and treatment of education. Texts discussed will include "Old Mrs. Harris," *The Professor's House*, *One of Ours*, and *My Antonia*. The tour will focus on the school sites and the Opera House. Saturday evening's keynote speaker will be Nebraska senator Bob Kerrey, whose interest in education is well known.

The theme for this year's Spring Conference, April 30 and May 1, in Red Cloud, is "The Education You Have to Fight For." It is drawn from this article by Cather which appeared in Red Cross Magazine in October 1919.

**The Education You Have
to Fight For**

A personal sketch of the Prairie School House
which grew into the great State University
By Willa Sibert Cather

The prairie schoolhouse was there before the buffalo had gone. In its first form it was made from the prairie, built of tough layers of the original sod that had never been pierced by a plowshare. The pioneers did not wait until they were making a living to begin to think about schools. In Kansas and Nebraska almost every community had a "frame" schoolhouse, while the settlers themselves were still living in sod houses and dugouts. Before there were any churches the building that was a schoolhouse all week became a church on Sunday and the congregation sat on the low seats behind the inkwells. The schoolhouses were used for political meetings and voting places, for funerals and Sunday school entertainments. They were the centers of community life from the time there was any community life at all.

Teaching was not a profession then: it was a kind of missionary work; a solemn duty, like caring for the sick. In every district there was sure to be at least one farmer's wife who had taught before her marriage, and she was called upon to take charge of the school for the short winter and spring terms. If she had young

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THE EDUCATION . . . FIGHT FOR

(Continued)

children she bundled them into the lumber wagon and took them to school with her every day. The teachers were not always women; sometimes a homesteader taught during the winter months when there was not much to be done on his land.

I remember one farmer schoolmaster who used to get up early in the morning, drive about the neighborhood collecting his pupils in his wagon and haul them to the schoolhouse. If the weather was bad he took them home again at night. He was then a mature-looking man, with a bushy beard, and he had children of his own. He used to tell his "scholars" that the thing he had most wanted was a college education, and that he had not yet given up hope of getting it. As his family grew he stopped teaching and devoted himself to his land. Twenty years went by. He developed two farms, brought up his children and married them off. Then he amazed his neighbors by quietly going away to study at a college in a distant State. A farmer cannot do so unusual a thing as that without causing a wagging of heads in a country community, and it was surprising, even to the summer visitor, who asked about the health of an old settler, to be told that he was "away at college." It takes courage, of course, to do what one wants to in this world, and the smaller the community the harder it is to defy public opinion. But our old neighbor did just that. He went to college, and stayed until he got his degree.

One hot summer day I was driving across the country with a clumsy livery plug when I noticed an open buckboard with two horses approaching rapidly from the opposite direction. As the cart came nearer I saw a man in white flannel clothes and a Panama hat, who sat holding on his knees something that looked like a large picture in a flashing gilt frame. The brisk team was driven by a girl who sat at his right. They passed me at a quick trot, but in that moment I recognized the bushy white beard and blue eyes of the pioneer school teacher, just returning home from college. On his knee he carried his diploma, which had that morning been framed in town. I hope he felt as much pleased at his triumph as I did.

The country schoolhouses were lonely looking buildings, nearly always rectangular, three windows on each side, with a little entry-hall and a door at one end. They sat out on the bare prairie, without a bush or tree or fence. A gray spot, where the grass was worn short, indicated the playground. There was no bell, but every morning at the same hour the children came hurrying on foot or creeping along three-deep on a horse that was too old to work; and in the afternoon they ran away flashing their empty dinner pails in the sun. They were rather reserved children, bashful and uncommunicative even with each other, too frightened to make a sound when the county superintendent came to inspect their school. They saw very few strangers, and the farms were too far apart for children

to visit each other often. The very little ones were so shy that their first days at school were a dreaded ordeal and sometimes they cried bitterly. Their clothes were much clumsier than those that country children wear today. The girls wore severe gingham aprons, buttoned up the back, and sunbonnets, and the boys usually had to appear in their father's clothes, cut down by a mother who was too busy to become an expert tailoress. The boys grew more lively and seemed more at ease when warm weather came and they could run free in two garments, a shirt and blue overalls. Summer brought lazy, pleasant days in the schoolroom and interesting distractions for the noon hour, such as drowning out gophers and bullsnakes, and discussing what was the best thing to do if a rattler bit you.

The children were always trying to find wild flowers that would puzzle the teacher. That was not hard to do, for the old, unrevised Gray's Botany, which was the text-book then, though it was supposed to cover all the flora to the 100th meridian, touched the flowers of western Nebraska and Kansas very lightly, and the gorgeous flora of the Rocky Mountains was largely unnamed and undiscovered. We were living in a world of mysterious flowers that had never been put into books, and the best we could do was to hitch them up with some family to which they apparently belonged and invent names of our own for them.

During my own schooldays a young Swede came over from Stockholm to study under Dr. Charles E. Bessey, the botanist at the University of Nebraska, and he and some of his fellow students used to go on camping trips in Colorado and Wyoming during the summer vacations. They reported and named hundreds of flowers that had never been noticed before. Every thing was so new in those days that a party of students — all very exceptional young men, to be sure — could actually strike off into the hills with a pack-mule and a tent and christen the flowers of their country.

In writing about the prairie schoolhouse one keeps getting away from it; and that is just what the pupils and the teachers did. It was a way station, where one took the train for something bigger.

After the days when the farmers and farmers' wives took turns keeping school, our country teachers were usually very young people, high school graduates, who were trying to make enough money to go away to college or to prepare for some profession. Perhaps they did not have all the qualifications of trained teachers, but they had an energy and enthusiasm that was very effective in stirring up country children. To my mind a teacher is never the worse for having personal ambitions; anything that gives him direction and intensity is all to the good of his pupils. In the West we have many men of affairs, doctors and lawyers, bankers and railroad officials, who spent a few of the most vigorous years of their youth teaching school. The best teachers I ever had were those who were on their way to some-

thing else. Their momentum carried us on a little way.

I remember one young teacher who used to spend the noon hour with his elbows on his desk and his head bent over a Latin book. From the arrangement of the lines on the page we knew that it was poetry. His face was sometimes very stern while he read, and he would compress his lips and fly at his lexicon in a way that made us feel that what he read must be very exciting. I used to long to know what it was about, but I never got up courage to ask him. The mere sight of that boy at his desk was worth as much as anything that can be taught in courses in pedagogy. Children can't be fooled; they know when learning is priceless to a man and when he is merely making his living out of it.

To many young men and women in those new States learning was priceless. The country was full of boys walking up and down the long corn rows on the farms, or sweeping out the grocery store in the little towns, who were night and day planning and contriving how they could go to college. Because it was so difficult then, it seemed infinitely desirable.

The case of Dr. Samuel Williston, Professor of Paleontology at the University of Chicago, who died last summer, is very typical. When he was a baby his parents left Boston and went West, traveling overland in a prairie schooner. They took up a homestead near Manhattan, Kan., on a grant of land made by President Lincoln. When Samuel was sixteen years old his father sent him to the Kansas Agricultural School. But young Williston did not want to be a farmer. He wanted to become a scholar of some kind, though he had no notion how to set about it, and he wanted to see the world. He ran away from school, joined a construction gang, and for three years worked as a railroad hand, surveying and grading the first line from Kansas down into Arkansas. While he was working in gravel beds and cutting down chalk hills full of fossils he found that he wanted to be a scientist. At nineteen he went back to the school he had left, finished his course, and afterward worked his way to Yale. During his life Dr. Williston wrote a great many scientific books of the highest importance and at his death he left a collection of flies and fossil reptiles which contained over a million specimens which had not previously been identified, and discovered the oldest known reptile in the carboniferous period, a monster with three eyes. The universities of Russia, Germany, France and England repeatedly sent representatives to study with him and to work with his wonderful collection.

The prairie schoolhouse often started boys off on careers like this. Other countries have had their peasant scholars, but they were so rare that they became proverbial, while in our country they are so usual that they are not even commented upon.

Twenty-five years ago the Western farmers were poor; forty years ago they were poorer still. The newly founded State universities were poor, and so were the

professors. There were no scholarships. The difficulties that lay between a country boy and a college education were unsurmountable except to fellows with unusual pluck and endurance.

When the University of Nebraska consisted of one red building on a buffalo-grass campus, three farmer boys came up one autumn to go to school. They had almost no money, but each brought certain supplies from home; one brought potatoes and root vegetables, another home-cured hams, another plenty of sorghum molasses. They had not known each other before they came to Lincoln, but their ambitions and their necessities were alike, and they soon became friends. They rented a little house on the outskirts of the town, pooled their provisions and "batched" together. They tended furnaces, worked in the printing office, took care of office buildings, got work enough to meet their expenses and give them a little spending money. They must have "ground," of course, but they were not grinds. The record they left behind them for mischief was almost as often quoted afterwards as that they left for scholarship. They worked their way through the four years of the course, and then went abroad to study. Years later, when I went to school at that university, these three men were all professors in older and larger institutions, and their names were held out to encourage freshmen who had a hard road before them. Yet these three men were not markedly exceptional, except, perhaps, in their success.

Though conditions had become a little easier when I was a student at the university, one never knew what a hard time one's classmates might be having. I remember we had a grown man in our freshman class who was very popular in spite of the fact that his mustache made him seem a little awkward in class where some of the boys wore knee trousers. He was always jolly, and nobody suspected what a hard fight he had made to come to school. One spring afternoon he came up to me on the campus and said he wanted to bid me goodbye. His father was very ill and he was going home to take charge of the farm.

"It's the third time I've tried to come to school and been pulled back," he said, "but I won't give up. I think I'll be here to read the Odyssey with the rest of you next year. I'm going to keep up my Greek at home."

His father died, and he did not come back. But next year, when we began the Odyssey, he wrote to the Greek professor and wished us luck. Dr. Lees read me a part of the letter, and, as he said, it would have melted a stony heart — which he was not. But there was nothing to be done about it. Many a boy had to drop out like that one, and some of those who got through did it at a sacrifice of health and died in the beginnings of success.

When education was as hard to get as that it took on the glamour of all unattainable things. Boys and girls thought about it and dreamed about it, believed that if they could only have it, it would satisfy the very hunger of youth. I think that thirst for knowledge

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THE EDUCATION . . . FIGHT FOR (Continued)

must have been partly a homesickness for older things and deeper associations, natural to warm-blooded young people who grow up in a new community, where the fields are naked and the houses small and crowded, and the struggle for existence is very hard. The bleakness all about them made them eager for the beauty of the human story. In those days the country boys wanted to read the Aeneid and the Odyssey; they had no desire to do shop work or to study stock-farming all day. They hadn't left the home pig-pen to go to the college pig-pen, but to find something as different as possible — if it were only, like Professor Williston, to discover a three-eyed reptile of the carboniferous age. Some of them wanted to be scholars, and they were willing to pay everything that youth can give.

Now, of course, everything is much easier for the Western boy who wants an education. Out in the sand-hill country, in the Colorado mining camps, up in the remote Wyoming timber districts, there are boys who are making a hard struggle to go to college. But the struggle is nowhere so hard as it used to be. As the chorus sings in the "Messiah," the crooked ways have been made straight and the rough places plain.

The country schoolhouses on the prairies are now comfortable, modern buildings; they are kept well painted, and have yards and playgrounds. In every country town the best building is the high school. The new ones are built round a court to get plenty of light, and they have as many fire-escapes as a New York tenement. From these schools the wonderful system of State universities has developed. Some day a very interesting book will be written about our State universities. They grow in influence and power every year, and each has developed a very marked character of its own. The Universities of Nebraska and Kansas, both standing in the midst of rich farming country, have more and more specialized in agriculture and in the sciences which touch it. They have done a great deal to enrich the farming and stock industries of the two States. The University of Wisconsin, situated in the beautiful lake and forest country, has become famous for its study of social problems. The University of Colorado is newer than these others, but it lies in the midst of great natural beauties, at the mouth of Boulder canyon, and must look forward to a remarkable future. The University of Wyoming is newer still. It is at Laramie, in the sage-brush plains, with a fine spur of mountains behind it. Four or five years ago, when Walter Damrosch made a tour to the coast with the New York Symphony Orchestra, the students engaged the orchestra to come to Laramie and give a performance, and requested the conductor to put upon his programme Dvorák's symphony, "From the New World," as "the class had been studying it!"

All these State universities are growing and changing as life changes and thought changes; nothing

is fixed, and all their traditions are yet to be made. What they are to be depends on the young men and women who study in them and who teach in them.

I wonder whether they are still turning out such brilliant young men as they turned out when they were struggling and poor; and whether the country boy longs for an education now, as he did when it was hard to get? In this present time, which Bishop Beecher once called "the era of extravagance which came in with the automobile," does that fine seriousness still persist in youth whose paths are made easy? But it was not so much seriousness; it was a kind of fire, a really burning ambition and devotion which enabled the young scholars of thirty years ago to do for their State and community the work of several generations in one short lifetime.

The News from Director Pat Phillips . . .



Pat Phillips

❖ **THE OPERA HOUSE** — I would like to take this opportunity to give you a brief update on the Opera House fundraising effort. From previous notes in the *Newsletter* (see especially Vol. XL, No. 1, Spring 1996) you know about our \$2.1 million plan to renovate the 1885 Opera House, a site important not only to Red Cloud but to

Willa Cather's years in Red Cloud, notably 1884 to 1890. The project continues to move ahead and, now, we have the biggest challenge of all, that is, completing the capital part of the campaign (\$1.1 million) by the end of this year. Last year, we were the recipient of two large and important grants: \$150,000 from the Nebraska Department of Economic Development's Tourism Development Initiative (T.D.I.) Fund and \$200,000 from the Peter Kiewit Foundation. Both are challenge grants in that we must raise the needed funds for the building in order to access these funds. Specifically, the Kiewit Grant requires us to raise another \$508,000 by December 31, 1999. **We need your help.** There are several ways in which you can contribute. Two specific ways are by making cash gifts or pledges yourself and by letting us know of others with whom we should talk. Gifts may come to us in various forms. Some of these are: an outright gift of cash, trusts (Lead and Charitable Remainder Unitrust), annuities, life insurance, real estate, transfers of stock. To discuss any of this, please feel free to contact me at 402-746-2653 or 326 North Webster, Red Cloud, NE 68970.

❖ **OTHER GRANTS . . .** In the last issue, we reported the receipt of two other grants: \$4,850 for development of a brochure with the Neihardt,

Sandoz, and Aldrich societies and \$10,000 from the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum for development of a Cather Garden on the land surrounding the Episcopal Church. Previously, the City of Red Cloud received a grant of \$7,500 for the landscaping at the Auld Public Library which is adjacent to the Episcopal Church. The funding has allowed us to develop the overall landscape plan together so that they are compatible and complementary to one another.

❖ **WILLA CATHER'S 125th BIRTHDAY** — Celebration in Red Cloud of Willa Cather's 125th birthday was simply outstanding. The Republican Valley Arts Council and WCPM sponsored a Tour of Cather Homes on Sunday afternoon, December 6. Homes open for tour were the Harling (Miner) House, Mary Miner Creighton's House, the Second Cather Home, Jessica Cather Auld's home, and Willa Cather's Childhood Home. Each house had been decorated extensively for the special occasion. In the Childhood home, all the ropes were removed so that visitors could roam the decorated rooms. At 5:00 p.m., the St. Juliana Choir presented their specially prepared music at Grace Episcopal Church. The soloists, (pump) organist, and choir engaged the packed church for a half an hour. The Arts Council served birthday cake and coffee at the program's conclusion. On her actual birthday, December 7, the Rev. Charles Peek offered a eucharistic service at Grace Episcopal, followed by lunch.

❖ **OTHER ACTIVITIES** — Marilyn Arnold, former Professor of English at Brigham Young University, spent a week in Nebraska in September speaking to Cather-interested audiences in Red Cloud, Beatrice, Lincoln, and Wayne. She had come specifically to present the Cather session at the Nebraska Literature Festival at Wayne State College. Her topic was "Candid Glimpses Into the Mind of a Writer: Willa Cather's Letters and What They Reveal."

In October, the **Nebraska Press Women's** annual meeting was held in Red Cloud. It was billed as a Willa Cather Weekend and besides their profession-related workshops, the program included a Cather tour; a presentation by Antonette Turner relating stories about her grandmother, Anna Pavelka (Ántonia); a talk by me at the Opera House about the WCPM; and slides of the Cather Prairie by Hal Nagel.

Opera Omaha had a very successful premiere of **Eric Hermansson's Soul** in November. They continue to find ways to help us raise money for the Opera House. Their last effort was a raffle at the premiere of one of the set designs from the production. This netted \$495 for the renovation fund! We appreciate all they do to support us.

❖ **BUILDINGS** — Extensive exterior and interior work has been done at the **depot**. In an effort to stave off continued deterioration of the foundation, all the bricks along the front side of the depot were

taken up, the grade packed and sloped away from the building, and bricks relaid; rotted studs and siding, thresholds and some non-existent foundation were replaced. The upstairs apartment was painted and recarpeted to be ready in time for Steve Ryan's arrival in mid-January. In the spring, we need to finish the brick work at the east end of the depot.

The porch on the south side of the **Cather House** has been rebuilt and a rotted threshold and some siding has been replaced. Two new screen doors will be installed on the kitchen addition. These old buildings require a lot of maintenance and upkeep!!

The exterior of the **Baptist Church** also requires attention. It needs a new roof as well as other repair to correct its leakage problem. The building also needs to be painted. Do you have any ideas for assembling a good volunteer force to accomplish the work needed on this building? This is the church the Cathers attended when they first came to Red Cloud.

❖ **NEW BOOKS IN THE BOOKSTORE**

Obscure Destinies — The scholarly edition from the University of Nebraska Press. Hardbound, \$65.00. Historical essay and explanatory notes by Kari A. Ronning. Textual essay by Frederick M. Link.

Willa Cather: A Reference Guide Update 1984-1992 — An annotated bibliography by Marilyn Arnold, Virgil Albertini, Gary Brienzo, and Milton Jones. This is an update from Marilyn Arnold's *Willa Cather: A Reference Guide* which spanned the years from 1895 to 1984. Paperback, spiral binding. Published by the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial. \$35.00.

**Rave Notices Given
Opera Omaha Following
World Premiere of
Eric Hermansson's Soul**

**Visitors Heap Praise on Opera, Arts Scene,
Omaha and Nebraska**

Opera Omaha continues to receive praise in the print media from Tokyo to London following its November world premiere of Libby Larsen's opera *Eric Hermansson's Soul*, based on the Willa Cather short story.

"An evocative production"
— Heidi Waleson, *Wall Street Journal*

"An enterprising regional company has taught the entire North American opera world a lesson in how to make a venerable artform relevant today."
— William Littler, *Toronto Star*

"*Eric Hermansson's Soul* richly deserves staging by other companies . . . the concern might be regional, but the total achievement is far from provincial. . . . It's an approach to the creative process worthy of emulation elsewhere."

— Wes Blomster, *Opera Now* (London)

WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER

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Willa Cather Newsletter 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	
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(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

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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.

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