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A Serious Pleasure: The Friendship of Willa Cather and Stephen Tennant

Philip Hoare, London

Introduction by John Anders, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Last summer I had the pleasure meeting Phillip Hoare when he visited the Cather Colloquium at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Now it gives me added pleasure to introduce his new essay written for the WCPM Newsletter.

*In his biography of Stephen Tennant, **Serious Pleasures** (London: Hamilton, 1990), Hoare memorably reclaims a once celebrated figure who had become either forgotten or else assigned a footnote notoriety in British social history. **Serious Pleasures** makes Tennant notorious once again but no longer obscure, and those of us interested in Willa Cather are indebted to the author's interest in his fellow countryman. Building on the work of Patricia Lee Yongue and Lucia Woods Lindley, Philip Hoare develops the relationship between Willa Cather and Stephen Tennant as a creative force in both their lives and in his current essay gives new attention to these seemingly unlikely friends.*

In the late 1920s Stephen Tennant was the brightest of England's "Bright Young People" and was acclaimed by all who saw him as the most beautiful man of his day. Such awe and excessive praise surrounded him in as much mystery as fame and created a human drama as complex as it was self-indulgent. Hoare candidly examines the effects of Tennant's mystique upon those around him and poignantly traces its impact upon Tennant himself as he swerves from a whimsical Peter Pan to a "Miss Haversham gone berserk."

Between these extremes, however, reside the serious pleasures of Tennant's long and decorative life: aristocratic refinements, famous friends, travels abroad and retreat to a baronial country estate. Not least were his artistic endeavors — drawings, fiction and illustrated prose — all stamped with a lavish sense of style. While some of Tennant's admirers saw him as a "gifted amateur" only, others perceived him as a uniquely talented individual just short of being a genius.

Given this colorful background, what was it that attracted Willa Cather to Stephen Tennant? Speculation on this question is endlessly tantalizing. Did his beauty intrigue her, or did his aristocratic amenities draw her to a world she admired? Did she sympathize with his artistic longings, or did she merely find his companionship congenial and clever? And what did Stephen Tennant find in Cather to sustain his near-obsessive admiration of her? Surprisingly, in his much privileged world, Cather held an honored position and surpassed in his esteem the likes of Cecil Beaton, Greta Garbo, Elizabeth Bowen and Barbara Hutton.

In his new essay, as in his biography, Philip Hoare begins to find answers to questions such as these. In doing so he discovers unexpected qualities in both Cather and Tennant which renew interest in their puzzling friendship. From the beginning theirs was a mutual fascination, and now that fascination is generously extended to us all.



Stephen, 1935

In the late 1950s, on hearing that Stephen Tennant was planning to give a lecture on Willa Cather in Red Cloud, Nebraska, Eudora Welty remarked that she "almost wouldn't have batted an eyelid had he come dancing in his auburn camels hair coat with hair to match."¹

Welty might well have accepted the flamboyant aesthete, but it still remains a mystery to some why Willa Cather and Stephen Tennant should have maintained such a close friendship, through correspondence and meetings, for some twenty years. Tennant's upbringing and temperament, and the milieu of Edwardian England, could hardly be further removed from Red Cloud, Nebraska. Yet there are points of

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Willa, circa 1892

coincidence and similarity, even from their respective childhoods, that can be discerned in the lives of Stephen and Willa.

For the amateur psychologist, an obvious early visual and behavioral link was the predilection of each to play an adolescent role, and to reverse that role when necessary. Each had a tendency to cross-dress: Stephen in the feminine garb which was a hangover from the Kate Greenaway dresses in which his mother had kept him since infancy; Willa as 'William Cather,' the crew-cut boyish rebel. "Cather blurred the distinctions between theater and everyday life most flamboyantly in 1884 when she began her extended performance as William Cather," Sharon O'Brien notes in her study of Cather, *The Emerging Voice*.² Cather's assumption of a theatrical masculinity was a histrionic performance to be paralleled across the Atlantic some twenty years later, when Stephen Tennant raided his mother's cosmetic and declared himself to be Sleeping Beauty. In their nascent appreciations of drama, and dramatic gesture, we see a like spirit (one in which sexuality must play an important part). Each inculcated an early love of the craft of the stage: Willa, the fierce drama critic of the *Nebraska State Journal*; Stephen, the amateur critic with no less a strict view from the stalls.

Virginia Woolf said that an artist should aspire to be "man-womanly or woman-manly." Hermione Lee notes in her critical biography of Cather, *A Life Saved Up*, that Cather was "probably the closest any American writer has come to Virginia Woolf's ideal of the androgynous writer."³ For Cather, this blurring of sexual roles was essential to her fiction; for Tennant, it was essential to his life. In the former, it was a predisposition which understood the complexities of both sexes, and, more personally perhaps, her young friend's sexual ambivalence; in the latter, it was specifically the removal of the threat of the "voracious woman." When he came to New York in 1935 to meet his heroine, Stephen first had an encounter with the vampish Tallulah Bankhead, and all but accused the actress of eating him whole. With Willa, there was no such threat. Stephen could chat away to his heart's content, safe in the knowledge that his companion had no untoward designs on him (as indeed, Tennant's lack of masculine "threat" may well have made him all the more acceptable to Cather as a confidante).

Putting aside the question of Cather's lesbianism, still a moot point for many, one must see a certain meeting of sexual nonconformity in both Stephen and Willa. It is certainly too simplistic to reduce them to gay man and lesbian woman — for one thing, Stephen was not so "cut-and-dried" a homosexual as contemporary notions might lead us to believe (social conditioning and historical context make him a much more complex sexual creature). But Cather's positive response to male bonding (as evidenced in *One of Ours* and *The Professor's House*) must be produced as evidence of her sympathy/empathy towards homosexuality. Whether she *understood* Stephen's particular brand of

homosexuality is, as Cather scholar Patricia Lee Yongue points out, not so interesting as that she "detected his narcissism and thus incapability of true love," another question altogether. For Yongue, it is important that Cather "was relieved by the freedom [Stephen] gave her" and was "excited by his magnificence."⁴

A letter written by Cather to Ferris Greenslet in 1938 highlights another layer of complexity to the relationship; that of a motherly elder writer trying to help a younger struggling "son." Stephen had asked Willa to help him find a publisher for his ribald "comic book," *Leaves From A Missionary's Notebook*. Reluctantly, and without precedent, Cather undertook to send it to Greenslet for his opinion. In her letter, it is obvious that Willa's feelings towards Stephen are strongly maternal, speaking of his health, how she had sent him to the Shattuck Inn in the winter of 1936 to recover from a cold and gain weight. Concluding her request to Greenslet (asking him to petition Alfred Knopf too), she notes that Stephen is then twenty-nine, but seems to be ten years younger.⁵

On another, more creative level, perhaps Willa Cather admired the *pace* of Stephen's life, and the measured tread of his creative output, which was much a part of his being as that of any more 'successful' artists. He read and wrote and painted and absorbed himself in a process that, by virtue of the fact that little of his work was made public, became cyclical in nature, an ongoing process in an attempt to "preserve the beauty of transient things," as Stephen wrote in "The Room Beyond," his 1949 introduction to Cather's essays.⁶ This tempo of unfrantic consideration must have struck a sympathetic chord with Cather, whose own work has a similar tempo, although ultimately more concretely productive.

It also appears to be Stephen's very amateurishness — a quality which Stephen Spender much admired in Stephen, as a truly English example of that refusal to become "a professional" — that appealed to Cather. She admired "the French aristocratic way," as A. S. Byatt calls it, "the way of Bishop Latour," a genteel appreciation of "the arts of peace," a "conservative republic."⁷ These were qualities which Willa saw in Stephen as a representative of the Old World. They shared too, of course, a love of France, which emerged as much in Stephen's attempts at fiction — his never-to-be-completed masterpiece, *Lascaz: A Story of the Maritime Boulevards* — as it did in Cather's work. There was something in the old French culture, its people, its places, its spirit, that spoke to both of them, and provoked their respective artistic responses: Cather's, the sublime beauty of novels like *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*, which rely partly on the tension between the Old World and the New; Tennant, in the endless *matelots* of Marseilles that he pursued in fact and fantasy, in paint, and ink.

But beyond notions of a "conservative republic," there was a kindred rebel spirit, too. Stephen's family,

through their association with his step-father, Sir Edward Grey, had close links with the Liberal Party of Great Britain, and if Stephen could be said to have any political ideas, then they were liberal in origin. Stephen was certainly no part of the great Tory Establishment. But he, as much as Cather, was beyond party politics, and declared in later life, "I loathe conventional people To be a Rebel! Conventional asses bray uneasily, of moral redemption — they say what is proper, the right thing, at the right moment — they dread any subversive gleam of sincere passion."⁸ Such sentiments endeared him to Willa, whose own rebellion was so deep-seated — yet so equivocal in its reaction to, and acceptance of, social conventions. [Willa was an anti-New Dealer.] Stephen liked to talk rebellious, but at the same time held onto the old ways of his mother's generation. Not for nothing did Sir Steven Runciman compare Tennant to "an Edwardian society hostess."⁹

Despite their geographical distance, and a thirty-year generation gap, Cather and Tennant could be said to have had a similar introduction to literature. On the bookshelves of Wilsford Manor and Cedar Street were to be found, alongside Dickens and Shakespeare, the romantic novels of Marie Corelli, Ouida, and Charlotte M. Yonge, "the kind of prose, domestic books I love so much," as Stephen admitted to his diary in 1926.¹⁰ From lowbrow to highbrow, the two avid readers were introduced to the Romantic poets, and for Stephen, whose hero was Shelley, as for Willa, who devoured Byron, the notion of poetic romanticism was strong meat. Added to which, Stephen's romantic disease, tuberculosis, made him yet more Shelleyan in Willa's eyes. "In some ways you are so like Shelley," Edith Lewis told Stephen after the death of their mutual friend. "With his angelic nature, he had no prejudices against any human being."¹¹ In this Miss Lewis was perhaps naive, for, like Cather, Stephen had a temper if provoked, and did not, like Cather also, suffer fools gladly.

The cultural distance between the friends might have mattered as little as the physical distance. Unlike her contemporary Edith Wharton, who was brought up in a social milieu much closer to Stephen's than Willa's, Cather did not belong to "a group who thought writing a disreputable profession and reading a possibly subversive activity."¹² Wharton was "a member of New York's anti-intellectual aristocracy," yet Stephen, offspring of true aristocracy, had his mother's generation of the "Souls" to look up to, a rebellious, free-thinking group of younger aristocrats who took William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites as their Gods and placed art and literature above all things. At Wilsford Manor, as at Cedar Street, reading was positively encouraged as part of the intellectual processes of growing up.

Willa Cather's exaltation of "romance over realism" in her first journalistic work "resembled the literature the adolescent girl loved," comments O'Brien.¹³ Stephen and Willa were profoundly affected by their

childhood reading, and both took Emerson to heart: Cather in her journalism, Stephen in his life. During his relationship with Siegfried Sassoon, Stephen quoted from that writer in his diary: "Emerson says 'Today is a King in disguise.' When I'm with Sieg there is no disguise."¹⁴ To Stephen, literature was a rule by which to live. Such dedication found favour with his American friend.

In their love of nature and natural phenomenon, Stephen and Willa were as one, even though Stephen as a child would more likely to be drawing toads than slicing them, as was Willa's wont. (Another, perhaps more minor similarity between Tennant and Cather was Willa's later "strange abhorrence for physical defect," which coincided with Stephen's.¹⁵ Eileen Hose, Cecil Beaton's secretary, noted of Stephen's reaction to Beaton's stroke: "He couldn't stomach Cecil's disability. Cecil would've reacted in the same way — neither of them liked any imperfection — everything was so visual to them."¹⁶) In Stephen's journal entries, we see a response to the landscape most definitely drawn from his reading of Cather: precise observations on the way huge maritime chains bound the rocks on the Hawaii shore, or the rural idiosyncrasies of West Country farm-labourers. In Cather's fiction Stephen found the sort of lyrical reverence for the land that Hardy expressed in his tales of Wessex — for Stephen, the West Country of England was his home, and he boasted of a certain atavistic predisposition — a spiritual oneness with the country, inculcated by his mother — which appreciated this sensibility.

The spirit of place — the ghosts of the landscape — and "the melancholy reflection that, in the lives of mortals, the best days are the first to flee" joined in Stephen's nostalgic immersion in his own past.¹⁷ The simple boy with simple pleasures, whom Cecil Beaton saw even in Stephen's old age, was, in his own mind, Antonia Shimerda, or many another Cather character. But perhaps Willa would have been more likely to compare Stephen to Gaston Cleric, whom Jim Burden believes to have "narrowly missed being a great poet, and I have sometimes thought that his bursts of imaginative talk were fatal to his poetic gift. He squandered too much in the heat of personal communication."¹⁸

In Stephen, who grew up to be a great talker, rather than a doer, Cather the disciplinarian saw the frustration of talent, a lack of ambition. She reprimanded him for his dilation over *Lascar*, saying no masterpiece had ever been written by mere resolve to do so, yet unlike some of Stephen's other literary friends, she kept her patience (perhaps because she wasn't subject to the would-be writer's continual recitations of his work-in-progress, as were Elizabeth Bowen and E. M. Forster, among others).

Both Stephen and Willa were essentially private people — for all of Stephen's social dalliance in youth (itself as much a theatrical expression as Cather's own involvement in theatre — always at one remove). In "The Room Beyond," Stephen writes of "the burden of

unspent feeling one remembers" from her works: "something gathered up, inviolably, delicately, almost denied one."¹⁹ It was his own credo, an intent never to be less than his own expectations, expectations which in Stephen's case, were sadly never to bear fruition.

But above all, what Stephen and Willa had in common was a love of words, and what Tennant saw in Cather — and what she may or may not have seen as a potential in him — was the ability to write beautiful books. To Cyril Connolly, Stephen was "an interesting phenomenon — a great writer who cannot write"; whilst Cather achieved all that, and more.²⁰ Willa appreciated Stephen's eye and ear, and was flattered, perhaps, by the attentions of this handsome young aristocrat. He was someone to whom she could boast of reading Proust daily, just as her grandmother read her Bible. With Stephen, she felt liberated, just as E. M. Forster felt free to indulge in his exotic flights of fancy when with Tennant. Ultimately, regarding the converging lives of these so separated, yet conjoined artists, the aspirations of the one and the achievements of the other meet in some other country, some "beautiful past" which each of them loved.

NOTES

1. Quoted in an undated letter from Ruth Crone to Stephen Tennant included in Philip Hoare, *Serious Pleasures*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1990, p. 304.
2. *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, Oxford University Press, London, 1987, p. 78.
3. Noted in Maureen Freely's review in *The Observer*, Review Section, p. 6, October 8, 1989.
4. Letter from Patricia Lee Yongue to the author, July 1, 1991.
5. Letter from Willa Cather to Ferris Greenslet, January 24, 1938.
6. Quoted in *Serious Pleasures*, p. 303.
7. Introduction to *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, n.p., Virago, London, 1987.
8. Stephen Tennant marginalia, quoted *Serious Pleasures*, p. 371.
9. Conversation with the author, June 1, 1987.
10. John Culme, Introduction to *Wilsford Catalogue*, South-by's, London, 1987, p. 9.
11. Edith Lewis to Stephen Tennant, April 14, 1958, quoted in *Serious Pleasures*, p. 336.
12. O'Brien, p. 81.
13. O'Brien, p. 82.
14. Siegfried Sassoon, letter to Dr. Henry Head, June 21, 1931, quoted in *Serious Pleasures*, p. 163.
15. O'Brien, p. 89.
16. Conversation with the author, February 18, 1988, quoted in *Serious Pleasures*, p. 381.
17. *My Antonia*, Virago Edition, London, 1983, p. 263.
18. *My Antonia*, p. 260.
19. *Serious Pleasures*, p. 304.
20. Cyril Connolly, private essay, quoted in *Serious Pleasures*, p. 263.

Catheriana at the Bancroft

Dennis Halac

On March 23, 1931, Willa Sibert Cather was awarded a doctor of letters, *honoris causa*, by the University of California at Berkeley at its traditional day of celebration and honorifics known as Charter Day. The occasion, as customary, was held in the outdoor Greek Theater, set into the green Berkeley Hills under cobalt skies with a deeper blue San Francisco Bay beckoning beyond. Cather was so thrilled with the weather, she checked into the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco for a few extra days after leaving Berkeley (Woodress 424).¹ Some years later, she would confess to Zoe Akins that if she had her courage, she would leave New York and move to San Francisco (Woodress 446).

Cather was the only woman of four honorees and the fourth woman to be so honored on the *proskenion* stage. She was not asked to speak, indeed the sole speaker was that grand academic titan, Nicholas Murray Butler, only thirty years into his Columbia presidency of forty-four years. Cather may have been told that she was standing on the exact spot where the fabled dramatic actress Sarah Bernhardt had emoted to a dazed and dazzled audience on another Spring day in April, 1906, when, as the cadences of *Phèdre* looped into the air, smokey tendrils had curled from San Francisco on the third day into the tragic fire resulting from the famous earthquake. The aging Bernhardt recalled it as her finest performance; and, no doubt, the romantic Cather would have concurred.

The *Daily Californian*, the student newspaper, included Cather in a wide-focus photograph of the entire assemblage in full academic regalia and also printed a small inset photo of her in a cloché hat which might have been a publicity release from her publisher. There were no interviews or feature articles on her by the *Daily Californian*.² They were content to quote from the high-flown invocation:

Self-controlled and elevated delineator of life on the western plains and the Spanish southwest, who at a time when literature is prevailingly matter-of-fact has not lost sight of idealism and nobility; writer of novels which are beautiful and true and not merely enlargements on back-door gossip, police reports and treatises on psychiatry; creative artist. (*Daily Californian* 3)

The independent Bancroft Library located on the University of California campus is closely affiliated with the University Archives and so has had a long interest in Willa Cather. As noted in a 1978 article in its house organ *Bancroftiana*, the Bancroft has collected a complete set of Cather's works in first editions. The article also noted that an oral history project conducted in 1961 with the wife of retired President Robert Gordon Sproul has a brief mention of Cather. Ida Sproul was the hostess who managed to be charmed by a houseguest who took all her meals in her room, even tea (*Bancroftiana*, 2-3).

The *Bancroftiana* failed to include, however, some other material it has on Willa Cather: To wit, three letters she wrote to Sidney Howard, to Mrs. Howard, and to Gelett Burgess. This would appear to be the total content of Catheriana at the Bancroft. A second oral history conducted with Ida Sproul in 1981 failed to mention Willa Cather even when the 1931 Charter Day was recalled (cf. Sproul).

The three letters are minor grace notes to the Cather canon, but scholars who might be inclined to visit the Bancroft for the sake of thoroughness can be spared an unnecessary trip. I shall describe the contents of Cather's letters, according to the condition of her will that none of her letters be quoted directly; and I have made transcriptions of the three letters to be placed among the papers at the Willa Cather Historical Center.³

The letter to Sidney Coe Howard is dated simply April 22 and mentions that his letter has followed her from Atlantic City. Sidney Howard was a *wunderkind* dramatist ("The Silver Cord") and screenwriter ("Arrow-smith" and "Gone With The Wind") of the socially-conscious school of the 20s and 30s, as well as a reviewer for *Life*, *National Review*, and *The Bookman*. In the last, he was one of the numerous "yes, but" critics of *One of Ours* who delighted in its style but regretted its structure and/or message (Arnold ref. 1922. 16). In her note, Cather remembers him from an afternoon at-home in which he and his wife were among a group of incompatible types. Cather states that she will be leaving for Virginia and gone until the end of May, after which perhaps they could get together for a Sunday afternoon. She also mentions that Elizabeth Sergeant might join them as well.

Woodress records that Cather went to Atlantic City in 1939, but that she visited Virginia in 1938 (Woodress, 480, 478). It is quite possible she may have visited Atlantic City in 1938 without Woodress mentioning it, but it is unlikely that she would have visited Virginia again in 1939 without him noting it. Reading Howard's diary entries for 1938 and 1939 finds no mention of Cather, but he is frequently in New York in the Spring of 1938 and mostly at his farm in the Berkshires in 1939 (Howard, *passim*). I think, therefore, that 1938 is the likely year for this letter. Sidney Howard died in a freak tractor accident on August 23, 1939.

The letter from the second Mrs. Howard (born Leopoldine "Polly" Damrosch, the daughter of the opera composer and conductor Walter Damrosch) is clearly dated January 31, 1942. The Bancroft collection includes the carbon copy of the letter she wrote to Willa Cather asking if Cather had any letters in her possession which she might copy for a collection she was fashioning for her children. In contrast to the warm note she wrote to Howard just three years before, Cather writes back that she has never corresponded with Howard and barely knew the man, but she is tender hearted and solicitous toward the widow and adds a special note about the value of recollected

correspondence over the period of a man's life. She regrets she has no letters to send. Mrs. Howard sent a follow-up letter thanking Cather for her trouble.

The most curious Cather letter in the Bancroft is a short, curt rejection dated January 7 of a request for some article or articles to Gelett Burgess. He was the rapsallion bohemian odist and artist who is most famous for having written "The Purple Cow" in the short-lived *Lark* published in *fin de siècle* San Francisco. Somehow Burgess had transformed himself from literary imp into Grand Old Man of Letters by the 20s; he had long since left the cool grey city of love (first described as such in the *Lark* by George Sterling) for New York and Europe. Cather excuses herself because her recent return from France leaves her too little time for other obligations.

The dating of this note causes some consternation. After his experience on the *Lark*, there is no other time that Burgess is engaged as an editor, when he might be soliciting articles from authors. According to Woodress, the only time that Cather returned from Europe in December was 1935 (Woodress 457). But at this date, Burgess himself had just returned from an eleven year residence in France. However, there were two times when Cather returned from France in November: 1920 and 1923 (Woodress 311, 339). In November 1923, Cather returned to New York for the holidays. She did not go to Red Cloud that Christmas because she was busy with the early stages of *The Professor's House* and the edition of Sarah Orne Jewett's stories as well as numerous requests for speeches and reviews.

An extraordinary literary scandal that involved Burgess in 1923 might provide a clue to the Cather letter. For nearly ten years he had been married unhappily to Estelle Loomis, an actress with literary pretensions. In March, 1923 she managed to place her first short story, "Eleanor," in *McClure's* magazine. Her husband took it upon himself to contact as many of the prominent writers of the period to write reviews of the story, not failing to mention her neurasthenia, which more or less begged the reviewer to be kind. This bold maneuver actually produced responses from F. Scott Fitzgerald, Booth Tarkington, and Owen Wister. It also came out that Theodore Dreiser was solicited, because two months later, perhaps in pique that Dreiser had not responded, Burgess launched a savage attack on the man's writing. Dreiser then used the *New York Times* to unleash a vitriolic retaliation on Burgess and his wife (Backus, ch. 12, *passim*).

It would seem reasonable that Willa Cather was solicited among so many others and, because she was traveling from April to late November, may not have answered Burgess's request until January 7, 1924. By that time she may well have wanted to sidestep the literary imbroglio the past season had exhibited and used her "recent" return from France as an excuse.

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1. The authoritative Woodress biography is used as the source for all my dating assumptions.
2. She did consent to a long interview with the San Francisco Chronicle which appeared in two parts on March 23 and March 29, 1931 (cf. Bohlke).
3. The transcriptions and copies of the letters include the Bancroft catalog numbers and full citations.

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Willa Cather and the Menuhin Connection

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International awards testify that Yehudi Menuhin is one of the most renowned violinists, conductors, and humanitarians of the twentieth century. On January 11, 1991, my long-standing appointment to meet with Sir Yehudi took place at his London home. After being admitted into rooms of Belgravian elegance, I found a kind and charming septuagenarian who remembered his friendship with Willa Cather as if it were only yesterday. Sir Yehudi recalled that when he, his sisters, and Willa were together, their older friend curiously was like a *playmate* to the Menuhin children. "We had a few friends, but only one like Willa Cather" (Menuhin Discussion).

Cather met young Yehudi Menuhin and his two sisters, Hephzibah and Yaltah, in 1930 in Paris while visiting her closest friend, Isabelle McClung Hambourg (Menuhin, *UJ* 128-131; Lewis 168-172; Woodress 437). Thus began for Cather another of her important life-long friendships — friendships that were stamped not only by a remarkable degree of loyalty, a steadfast affection, but by a continuing correspondence.

Willa Cather's connection with the prodigious Menuhin children seemed foretold in her early writings. Consequently I wish to concentrate on her early fascination with genius, and then to discuss her connection with the Menuhin family. Finally, I shall describe in detail my unique visit to Sir Yehudi's London home.



Cather and Yehudi Menuhin,
Pasadena, 1931.

PRODIGES

In July 1897 Cather published a short story, "The Prodiges" in her last issue as editor of Pittsburgh's *The Home Monthly* (Byrne 8). Although it was not the first time that Cather had written about prodiges, the story shows at once both the author's sympathy for such phenomenal children and her skepticism of pressure from their parents. Implicitly she argues for a happier childhood similar to her own in rural Red Cloud, Nebraska. While collecting Cather's early stories in 1957, Mildred Bennett perceived that "The Prodiges" "reflects Willa Cather's understanding of the problem . . . of gifted children. It was written thirty-three years before Willa Cather met the Menuhin children, yet it parallels many — certainly not all — of their problems" (*Early Stories* 169).

The story line in "The Prodiges" concerns a family with two teenagers, Hermann and Adrienne Massey, who were trained abroad by musical masters. The Masseys' old family friends, Harriet and Nelson Mackenzie, are invited to hear the young prodiges sing, and as parents themselves, they are soon green with envy of such exceptional talent. However their attitudes quickly change. During the recital at the Massey home the Mackenzies witness the physical and mental collapse that young Adrienne Massey suffers because of her mother's extreme demands.

Cather puts more than a little of herself into this story as she identifies with the Mackenzies' average children; they have significant names, such as: Billy — a name some university classmates called Cather herself (Madigan, "Rift" 10), and Elsie — her younger sister's name. Harriet Mackenzie bemoans, "it's extremely unlikely that Billy or Elsie will ever startle the world" (170). Possibly Cather measured herself negatively against other gifted children, yet at the same time identified and empathized with them throughout her lifetime.

After leaving *The Home Monthly*, her Pittsburgh newspaper job required that Cather interview distinguished artists who came to the Carnegie Institute, the magnificent, marble complex built by Andrew Carnegie the previous year. The Institute includes a library, an

art gallery, a music hall, and a natural history museum. There she met a great number of artists of all disciplines who came to satisfy the cultural appetites of wealthy Pittsburgh patrons (Byrne 68). Her friend Elizabeth Moorhead speculated:

Why she chose Pittsburgh I never heard her say, but I have been told that she was attracted by the art exhibitions and concerts to be found in this city even then. She succeeded in getting a good position as literary and dramatic critic on one of our evening papers and her writing attracted the attention of Judge McClung's daughter, Isabelle At once [in 1899] strong liking sprang up between them which ripened into friendship and resulted in Isabelle's offering the lonely young writer a temporary home under her father's roof. To be a member of a comfortable household with congenial and stimulating companionship was a happy change for Willa Cather. (Moorhead 48-49)

Shortly after she wrote "The Prodigies" Cather interviewed two professional musicians, Ethelbert Nevin and Mark Hambourg, both prodigies themselves. Thirty-two year old Nevin was a singer, composer, and a pianist, and youngest son of a newspaper dynasty. He had showed promise even at eleven. Although Cather described him as boyish-looking, "the moment he touched the keys one of those swift changes swept over his face and he was another being" (*W & P* 534).

The other Carnegie Music Hall artist proved equally important in Cather's future, but in a completely different way. Mark Hambourg, a brilliant twenty-year-old pianist, played his first Pittsburgh concert in 1900. Cather found Hambourg "a youth with gifts miraculous, a boy with the technique of a master," yet with a curiously unpoetic interpretation (*W & P* 651, 653). He was from a musical family of Russian Jews, located in Toronto, Canada, that included his father, Michael, a pianist; his brothers Boris, a violincellist, and Jan, a violinist (Southwick). The Hambourgs proved a disruptive thread in the musical web that led Cather to the Menuhin family.

On November 15, 1915 Boris and Jan Hambourg and Ethel Litchfield (Cather's friend) played together in trio at Pittsburgh's Twentieth Century Club. Coincidentally, Judge McClung had died three days before, and the fifteenth was the date of his burial, which Cather attended (Byrne 51). Soon after the McClungs decided that the family home must be sold, and at Christmas-time Isabelle surprised friends by announcing her forthcoming marriage to Jan Hambourg and plans to leave Pittsburgh (Woodress 276-77; Byrne speculates that the marriage plans were set during November, 51-53).

Surely Cather was crushed. Even though she and Edith Lewis were living in New York, the 1180 Murrayhill Avenue house meant more to her than precious memories. She began her professional writing career there and returned often to work in the tiny third-floor space, a space so like her slant-roofed bedroom in Red Cloud (Murrayhill). The Hambourgs married, moved on to Toronto, London, Paris (Byrne 52).

Undoubtedly Cather mourned for the lost comforts of the McClung mansion, yet it was through them and Jan Hambourg's profession that she would meet the Menuhin family in 1930, three years after young Yehudi's brilliant debut in Paris (Menuhin, M., *MS* 103, 108).

THE MENUHINS

Sir Yehudi recalled during the interview that the Hambourgs were "on the Left Bank as we were at the time, and she [Isabelle] and my mother struck up a very, very close friendship." In his book he describes Isabelle as being "as rich as she was beautiful," commenting that Jan Hambourg no longer needed to work after his marriage to the American heiress. The couple found their Paris place near the Menuhins' rue de Sèvres apartment, which was perfect for enjoying the pleasures of good music, books, and gourmet food. With no children of their own the Hambourgs rather adopted the Menuhin children, thereby opening a luxurious and sophisticated new world to them (*UJ* 77-78).

Sir Yehudi said, "My parents came to approve of Isabelle and Jan, and thus we saw a great deal of them at that time in Paris. And it was Isabelle who then thought that we must meet Willa Cather" (Menuhin Discussion). Marutha Menuhin and Cather, or "Vassin-ka" as Marutha called her, quickly became close friends (*MS* 103, 108). Sir Yehudi told me:

As we never went to school, my sisters and I, every teacher that we had in the house, every friend, every help . . . was a person of real, real quality, which I owe to my mother. It was into this inner-world that she recognized that Aunt Willa would make a huge contribution and . . . herself [find] great satisfaction.

After the Menuhin meeting, Cather's New York friend Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant saw a changed woman when she visited the writer at her fashionable Park Avenue apartment. Willa showed Sergeant an "angelic" photograph of young Yehudi, declaring "rapturous admiration" for him. Sergeant concluded that Cather indeed had "made a story of this prodigy and his fascinating and gifted little sisters, and of his parents, as if she had at last, by proxy, a family exactly to her taste" (253).

Cather wished to dedicate *Shadows on the Rock* to the Menuhin children, although a family friend cautioned her against it because the parents were strictly protective of their children's privacy (Magidoff 138-9). Thereafter, through consideration for each artist's private life, the bonds of friendship grew stronger. The Cather and Menuhin friendship took root primarily in New York. Yaltah Menuhin Ryce described in a letter to me the Shakespeare readings Cather planned for the children when they were in New York:

I am reminded that Willa was passionate about Americans not rushing off to Europe to be enlightened, neglecting their own heritage. That was a great belief of hers — and for that reason she worried that we might forget to speak English as we were studying

many new European languages and insisted that we read Shakespeare plays with her, whenever possible when we were in New York.

On December 7, 1973, a Nebraska audience was greatly moved when Sir Yehudi played the Beethoven Violin Concerto, and his sisters played the Mozart Double Piano Concerto in E flat for the "Willa Cather Centennial Birthday Concert" in Lincoln. In the pre-concert discussion with Professor Robert Knoll, the Menuhins described how "jolly" Cather was. Hephzibah noted that ". . . it comes as a surprise now to read in many books about her, how depressed she was at that period and toward the end of her life. She was never crabby with us. Never." In fact, Yaltah wrote to me, Cather was always pleasant and willing to discuss her work with them:

She would spend her mornings writing and we ours practicing. Then she fetched us in a taxi and we would all four [Yaltah, Hephzibah, Yehudi, and Willa] walk around the Reservoir at Central Park. She especially discussed with us her book *Lucy Gayheart*, which she was working on in the thirties.

Sir Yehudi remembered the walks in Central Park:

Walks I will never forget are the stumps around the Reservoir. She always referred to it as the one walk in New York on which you could tread on earth, because every other path in the park was asphalted [W]e'd walk around this great body of water in the middle of New York, and she loved it because at least her shoes, her feet, would touch the earth . . . [.] I would be able to tell her many things that were in my heart. She was the great confidant. (Menuhin Discussion)

Cather displayed the intimacy of equals when she related to the prodigious but unspoiled Menuhin children. In return, the family spoiled this special friend by sending her gifts, such as a gardenia bush, or a miniature orange tree. At the Newberry Library in Chicago, there is a warm, touching card from the Menuhins that accompanied such a tree. Cather sent the card to her Red Cloud friend, Mary Miner Creighton, who fortunately failed to destroy it. In her letter Cather wrote of her fondness for the family (Letter 59a).

Cather knew that these children were different, especially Yehudi, as Yaltah explains:

The beauty of a concert would so absorb her that she was especially sensitive after the experience. I remember her commenting on the transformation of Yehudi's face as the artist would change the boy and face beyond his years and reveal an ageless wisdom. (Letter)

THE VISIT

Today Sir Yehudi — whose name means simply "The Jew" — lives in London in an elegant cream-colored Regency home of Thomas Cubitt design. The only outside decorations are neat, black-iron railings, and a window box of hot-pink cyclamens. My little taxi arrived at his door exactly at the appointed time. After opening the huge black door the secretary admitted me

to the ground floor foyer, which opened into the dining room and kitchen.

I followed the brisk secretary up grey, stone stairs to a long hall where an elderly Spanish woman was brandishing a huge feather duster over nineteenth-century woodwork. At nine-thirty in the morning the sunny house was astir. I was led into a blue, double parlor trimmed with swirling, white moldings that decorated and defined the rounded blue ceilings. It was like being inside a Wedgwood blue-egg.

Elegant but comfortable chairs, some covered in silk, some in Bargello-stitched velvet, some in old leather, showed recent use by human-kind. What should I expect in these lofty surroundings? Where should I sit? — no, that may be *his* chair. Nervously I chose a pale yellow, watered-silk settee with rose-colored trim. Behind it a paned window overlooked a green common. Huge oil-painted portraits of various ancestors peered down from the walls. A beautiful, inlaid casket of ebony and ivory, its patterns exotic oriental, lay nearby other precious memorabilia. In front of the settee, a round table covered with a bottle-green velvet cloth held a forest of photographs. Sir Yehudi gazed at me from a curving, silver, art-nouveau frame. Seeing his image I felt more comfortable.

While etching this grandeur into my memory, a sprightly Sir Yehudi bounded into the room after first greeting the dusting dowager. At once, I remembered that the violinist "has a fondness for yoga and standing on his head" (Daniels 186 for photo). I said something inane like "Oh, it's you!" and, thankfully, because of his bright demeanor, all formality flew out the paned window and into the common. He sat directly beside me on the settee immediately putting me at ease with his melodious, flowing conversation. He was the most unaffected, charming man I'd ever met.

As our interview centered around Cather I felt deep regard for her from this man. To a young Yehudi, "Aunt Willa" represented the values that we continue to think of as *good* in America — sincerity, a genuineness, a dedication to task. He described Cather as having a "real down-to-earth integrity and robustness and rootedness in America — an American quality. And her books are very American. Whether they were the Southwest or the Quebec . . . they belonged to the American continent."

Still, Sir Yehudi — a Londoner born in New York and raised in California — spoke freely about Cather advising him not to marry an American girl:

The pioneer mentality could not, as it were, cope with the — what shall I say — the involutions, convolutions, sophistications, subtleties perhaps . . . [She] spoke of the pioneer mentality, with all the respect that she had for [pioneers], and yet with a feeling that there was something about the pioneer mentality that was incompatible with the music I was interpreting and with the vocation I'd chosen.

Above all, Sir Yehudi insisted that Cather was passionate about music and that she "understood the demands of a musical career perhaps better than

anyone else I've known . . . and she wrote about that." We touched on the struggle and development of a musician's art. As an example, he referred to Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark* (1915), regarded as Cather's most autobiographical novel. Suddenly I was reminded of the amusing scene in which a jealous Thea reacts so bitterly to Lily Fisher — "the Baptist prodigy" — who was selected to sing the best solo in the church program (54), though pages later I heard Cather's inner-voice speaking as a prodigious child when Thea awakens to her own genius:

She knew, of course, that there was something about her that was different. But it was more like a friendly spirit than anything that was a part of herself. She brought everything to it, and it answered her; happiness consisted of that backward and forward movement of herself. The something came and went, she never knew how . . . And when it was there, everything was more interesting and beautiful, even people. (72)

When my time was up, Sir Yehudi graciously accompanied me downstairs, stepping past the dusting woman. He spoke sadly about the futility of the Middle-East war. As he held my new Burberry raincoat for me, he wished me good luck with my dissertation work. Completely charmed I came out into the bright park feeling a need to find the nearest coffee shop, in order to record every detail of the man, the house, and also of Willa Cather, that prodigious *playmate* who seemed ever so near in spirit.

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Willa Cather and Red Cloud: An Interview with Gertrude Schenck

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For over a decade I have taught an introductory course on major women novelists in which Cather's *The Song of the Lark* has been one of the most successful works. However, in 1987 the novel brought me a special boon when one student informed me that



Gertrude Schenck and her family pose for a Christmas photo at the Royal Hotel in 1951. Mrs. Schenck is seated at the far right and pictured in the inset as a housemother at University of Kansas.

the house director at her sorority, Kappa Alpha Theta, had known Cather well in Red Cloud, Nebraska, had vivid memories of the author and her books, and was a lively *raconteur*. These claims proved to be true when I interviewed Gertrude Schenck with the help of Sally Allen McNall, now a faculty member at the University of Akron. Gertrude Schenck proved especially sensitive to the complex relationship between Cather and her mother, Mary Virginia Boak Cather, to both Cather's and her family's anomalousness in Red Cloud, and to the connection between Cather's personal values and her methods of characterization.

Gertrude (Wolfe) Schenck was born in Red Cloud to Corabelle (Marlin) and Ira Franklin Wolfe, both Red Cloud natives, in 1905. In 1923 she married William K. Schenck, and during the next two decades they owned and ran the Royal Hotel, where Cather often ate with them. Schenck knew Cather during the decade from around 1921 to 1931, when Cather visited Red Cloud for the last time. After her husband's death Gertrude Schenck moved to Lawrence, Kansas, and worked at Kappa Alpha Theta from 1970 to 1989. She is now retired and living here in Lawrence.

The following discussion is condensed from two interviews held in February and March 1987. "I" indicates a composite of the two interviewers; "S" indicates Gertrude Schenck.

I am grateful to M. J. McLendon for corroborating several facts.

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I. *Why don't we begin with your own background in Red Cloud, Nebraska, and how you came to know Willa Cather.*

S. I was born in Red Cloud in 1905 and lived there until about a dozen years ago, when I moved to Lawrence; and when Willa Cather came back from New York to Red Cloud every year to visit, especially at Christmastime, we became good friends. She was a lovely, special person. My sister Elizabeth was also Willa's friend. Elizabeth was with Mrs. Cather for a long time, helping with the housework, until [Elizabeth] married and moved to Portland, Oregon, but whenever Willa came back, Mrs. Cather called Elizabeth, and Elizabeth came back from Oregon and lived with Mrs. Cather, to see Willa, to help with the work and to visit. That was until [Willa] quit coming back [Cather's last trip to Red Cloud occurred in December 1931].

I remember Willa and the Cather family very well. Mr. Cather was a charming man, but Mrs. Cather was the matriarch. We would go for rides, and he'd say stop signs were for young people, and go through them. He'd wave at people, and she'd say, "Father, a nod is sufficient." Mr. Cather was a sweet little old man, but Mrs. Cather was a lady. When we had dinner at the Cathers' — at the big house, the second house that the Cathers lived in — Mrs. Cather and I ate in the first dining room, and Mr. Cather and my husband ate in the second dining room. Maybe she wanted girl talk

and boy talk; I don't know. And Mrs. Cather had cream, but Mr. Cather had canned milk. Nothing against it, but she was a proper lady; she was the matriarch.

And they had a lady [Margie Anderson] who lived with them, and a fence around the house, and everybody wondered who this lady was. Lots of people thought the fence meant that the Cathers didn't want anyone to look in and see her, and that maybe she "belonged" to Jack or Douglas. She was old, but people really didn't see her, so how did they know? I had seen her — she was a little lady who lived upstairs in the attic. And then when she passed away everybody wondered whether she was black or white, because, you see, she had funny hair. I had a neighbor lady who went to the funeral home when Margie Anderson died, where she asked, "Could you tell me if she was black or white?" That's small-town talk. Maybe there's not so much of it now, I don't know, but there certainly was then.



Willa gave a party in '31 for these children of the Red Cloud Episcopal Sunday School, grandchildren of old friends. Willa ran upstairs to hide from photographer until assured the man wasn't from a newspaper.

I. *Your sister Elizabeth's married name was . . . ?*

S. Huffman. Have you seen this picture? (photograph of Cather at the 1931 Christmas party she gave for the children of the Red Cloud Episcopal Sunday School [Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather*, Lincoln, Nebraska; U of Nebraska P, rev. ed., 1961, photo section between pp. 222-23]). This one, Joanna, is my daughter — her last name is Byers now, and she's American Red Cross Director here in Lawrence. And this is Sarah, my sister's daughter. Sarah has a fine collection of [Cather] first editions that Willa gave to her. Cather always had a Christmas party for her friends and the children of her friends. I think she was probably one of the first women I knew who did things on her own but she also like families. Her sister Jessica married our banker, Auld, and Jessica's daughter, Mary Virginia [Auld], was my good friend. So in a way we were all like family.

I. Mary Virginia eventually settled in New York; she and Willa were close.

S. Yes, certainly. But they were a close, close family. And then they had Catherton up north [where the Cathers lived before moving into Red Cloud and where Cather's Uncle George Cather and his family remained]. And she had the one-legged Bohemian [Emil Ondrak; actually, he walked with a limp; see Bennett, *World*, 162] who painted the church in Catherton and then there was Governor [Silas] Garber, who is in *A Lost Lady*, and we visited at Crooked Creek, at the Garbers. But these things didn't seem so important to us [as opposed to what Cather saw in them], because they were just part of our childhood.

Once a reporter from the Kansas City *Star* came to talk to me about my work as a housemother, and along the way I said that I knew Willa Cather, and that was the end of the housemother thing; he only wanted to hear about Cather. But she was such a friend that I never even thought about her fame and how important she was until later, because she was such a down-to-earth person.

But she was a fantastic, lovely lady, and very strong-willed. Yes, and she was bossy, too. She loved the cottonwoods around the courthouse; she wouldn't let them cut them down, and she wasn't even living in Red Cloud then. She had a deep, throaty voice and beautiful hair, beautiful auburn hair. And, well — you know how small towns are. If you lived there, you heard stories about how different she was, and how when she was younger she wore heavy boots and had her hair cut short. And they [the family] called her Willie; they never called her Willa, even when she was an adult. It was Willie, always Willie. But she kept coming back. She loved all these old people, the shoemaker, and Emil Ondrak, who did the painting of this church, they were her friends. Those were the people she really liked; she was a down-to-earth person.

I. So she kept in touch with people at all levels of society.

S. Oh, yes, she had lots of connections, and was interested in what was going on there.

I. Were there also people in Red Cloud who did not care for her? One hears that some thought she was prickly, difficult to get along with, even arrogant.

S. Oh, yes. Several people thought she was different and didn't like that. This was during times when not many people saw people like Willa Cather. In a small town like Red Cloud, Nebraska, which I love, but . . .

I. You seem to be indicating not only that Willa Cather was different, but that the family as a whole was distinctive.

S. Yes, that's true. In fact, in some ways I think her mother made more of an impression on me. Her mother was a very stern disciplinarian. She ruled the roost. Well, why do you think we ate in the first dining-room, while Father ate in the second dining-room?

But Mrs. Cather also loved young people. She bought my daughter Joanna all sorts of pretty little things, and if the girls wanted to wear lipstick, Mrs. Cather would buy lipstick at Burden's grocery store, but she had them put in on "groceries." She didn't want people to know that she'd bought lipstick. You didn't wear it then, you know.

And the family would make grape juice, and then if it had fermented, Willa would label it "wild." It was an interesting family, an interesting part of your life that you enjoyed.

Willa liked pretty clothes, too. When we had these Christmas parties . . . Willa would dress up, she had these beautiful dresses, and I had my daughter always curtsy to Willa; Willa thought that was something special. Of course, in Red Cloud you didn't curtsy! But I think she liked the cultivated people at the top of the society, and the "different" or even downtrodden people, at the bottom, but not necessarily the people in-between.

I. Do you have any recollections of a more general sort from the years before you knew Cather, not so much as of a famous author but as someone who had gone east to the big city and was making her way?

S. Yes, I already knew of her as somebody special, before I came to know her or realized who she was as an author. And of course I had a sense of her from knowing Elsie, Douglas, Jack, and Jessica.

I. What were her sisters and brothers like as people?

S. They were all very, very nice people, but Willa sort of overshadowed them, at least in later years. She had a kind of arrogance; she could rule people. She sort of took charge; she was the older sister, there's a picture of her reading to Elsie. She rode a bicycle when women didn't ride bicycles, and she wore heavy shoes, and some people thought she was sort of unfeminine, or homosexual, a lesbian, and all that.

I. Did that make people dislike her?

S. Oh, no, no, no. I think they didn't even know what it was all about. It was something different, something "that can't be." She was somebody special, to the whole town.

I. But to be special, in a small town, is to be the center of a certain amount of controversy.

S. You are so right. If you're special, for any reason, you're admired, but then there's conflict. That happens.

I. So she might have been resented simply for being different, and going off and doing things that a woman didn't usually do.

S. Yes, yes.

I. At least some people resented her; but her friends were the people who didn't?

S. Yes. But knowing her was a part of my life I wouldn't change for anything. Probably one of the best parts of my life in Red Cloud was knowing her.

I. Do you remember any stories about how people in Red Cloud felt about her fiction?

S. Not really.

I. Do you remember which of the novels you read first?

S. Oh, dear. *O Pioneers!*, I think. I read it when I was a child. And then I read them in sequence; I loved *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and *A Lost Lady*, because we used to go across the creek to Governor Garber's house.

I. Did you think that was a realistic portrait of Lyra Garber? Some people thought the book was exaggerated, or even untrue.

S. No, it was true. (Laughter.) It was a beautiful old house, and, yes, she was a very charming lady. No, I think the novels were true. That's what I think is so interesting about them, that you can relate to the times and the people. And I think that's why lots of people [in Red Cloud] had a feeling that it wasn't right, that they didn't want to be exposed. But the truth comes out!

I. You must have heard stories about Cather as a child; she herself liked to tell stories about how she spent time talking to the immigrant women, and so forth.

S. Well, that was her forte, talking to down-to-earth people. She liked things that were earthy, earthy people, earthy things. She loved the earth and Nebraska, the prairie. And it was talked about that she did so many outdoor things, with her brothers. That wasn't done, either.

I. It sounds as if there was a social distinction peculiar to Red Cloud, between those who approved of Willa, or Willie, and those who didn't!

S. Yes, there was. And then there were those people who just thought it was fun to talk about her; that was their happiness, gossip; they didn't have anything else to do. I think I told you about the woman who lived near us, who went to the funeral just to get a look at the little old lady who lived with them.

I. A couple of times you've mentioned that there was a tall fence around [actually, only at the back of] the [second Cather] house [at 6th and Seward Streets]. Was it therefore unusual in those days to have a fence around the house?

S. Yes, people didn't put tall fences around their houses; a little fence was another thing. So people thought it was there to keep them out, and the strange little old lady in! Maybe it went back to the Cathers' Virginia background; that was their privacy. It was as if they were saying, Here we are, and we want to be alone; and in a small town, people recognize that. And the house the Cathers lived in was, for a small town, a big house. So all these things made them seem different.

I. As the novels came out, one by one, did people in the town read them so as to recognize themselves?

S. People talked about them. I don't know whether they really read them.

I. You talked of Willa "ruling the roost," but some of the things she wrote give one the impression that

Cather thought that her mother preferred Jessica, because Jessica was feminine.

S. Well, I think that's true. It was Willie says this, and Willie says that, and the more that she wrote the more her mother respected her — in fact, her mother respected her always, but she wasn't quite as feminine as Jessica. And Jessica had a big, big beautiful home. And Jessica had two children, Mary Elizabeth and Tom, and that was Jessica's happiness, those two children. But Willa was . . . gone.

I. Aside from Cather, since you grew up in Red Cloud and lived there almost all your life, what are some of the ways in which it's changed?

S. It certainly has changed; we were back there last summer, and if it weren't for Willa Cather, I don't know whether the town would even be there. The conferences that go on about Willa Cather, for instance, which my friend Mildred Bennett [told] me about, those are probably the biggest things that happen there. When I talked to the Kansas City man, he wouldn't have known anything about Red Cloud, outside of Chief Red Cloud, if it hadn't been for Willa Cather.

I. But during the earlier decades of the century; how was the town changing?

S. It was larger then; it grew and grew, but [later on] when people graduated, they went away, and didn't come back. For a time, there wasn't even a doctor; it became really depleted. It wasn't that it was poor; it was a wealthy farming community. But when the young people graduated [from high school] they went on for their schooling elsewhere, and they didn't come back. It made a difference when going to college became common.

I. You said last time that you thought Willa was one of the early feminists. How do you mean that?

S. I thought that she could have been a "women's libber."

I. Was it the model she presented, or did she converse about women's issues?

S. I think that she thought that everybody could do anything that they wanted to do if they tried to; and I don't think she had any use for people who didn't want to try. Even those people she wrote about, she wanted to bring them out, to make them more than what they were And they had never had anyone like Willa Cather. Emily Taylor, who used to be the Dean of Women here, would come to the sorority and exhort the students, onward and upward! And that's how I think of Willa Cather. She brought out her characters; she really did. I talked about the one-legged Bohemian who painted the church; she wrote about him in something and it did so much for him, that he was somebody. Before that he'd just been a one-legged Bohemian in Nebraska. She wrote these people a little larger than they were, and then they became that. Like the Pavelkas; they were lovely people, but no one had ever paid any attention to "My Antonia," until she was "My Antonia." Most everybody was somebody that

[Willa] knew; for instance, there was a real Alexandra Bergson and her family (in *O Pioneers!*). Not much was fictitious.

I. Well, then, people like the Pavelkas, after she had written about them and made them famous — of course, this would be observation on your part — but do you think they then went about being conscious of that for the rest of their lives?

S. No, I don't think they went around being conscious of that, not really, but I do think that they were pleased. For instance, the Miners [the Harlings] in *My Ántonia*: they were lovely people, but nobody had ever paid any particular attention to them. So [when Cather wrote about them] that made them feel like they were somebody.

I. She saw real meaning or significance in them?

S. I think she did that with everybody. Even the people she didn't like.

I. Yes, she would take a town scoundrel and make him into a real symbol of evil, not just your average town scoundrel. Or take one of the horrible town boys, and make him into Ivy Peters.

S. Yes, that's right.

*I. So *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was your favorite novel?*

S. I think it was the most interesting. Many of the novels were what I'd grown up with, but *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was far away, and sort of mysterious, and I loved it; I do love that part of the country. I liked all the novels, but with the Nebraska novels, I felt like I knew that. But *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was something I didn't know. Although it was [also] based on historical fact.

*I. Do you see any autobiographical elements, anything of Willa, in any of the other novels, outside of *My Ántonia*?*

S. Not really.

*I. When you first read *The Song of the Lark*, did you see that as in part a novel about Cather herself?*

S. Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes.

*I. We were wondering about some of the characters in her fiction that's not set in Red Cloud. For example, she portrays her grandmother as Rachel in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, but then Rachel's mother in that book — does she remind you of anybody you ever knew? Because it's been suggested that that character is partly a portrayal of Willa's mother.*

S. Well, I suppose it could be. She should have written about her mother; her mother was such a strong character. That is interesting, it really is. I never thought about that, but there are some similarities; she sure ruled the roost, that woman. That gives some food for thought. She was very stately and tall, real regal.

I. Then perhaps Cather got some of her imperiousness from her mother.

S. Yes, she did.

I. When she came back for Christmas gatherings, did she talk about her work in any way?

S. No, they were just visits; she came back to get away from everything, I think. She loved to eat, so we would talk about food. If she'd just published a book, we didn't talk about it at all, not at all. She'd talk about finding a new vegetable, wild rice, for instance! Oh, and how she loved to eat! It was all just little, foolish [talk]. When I look at some of the pictures of her, she's so regal; but in Red Cloud she'd go about in these awful walking shoes, really ugly, to relax. It's like she was two people; but then for the Christmas parties, she'd always be dressed up.

I. So she would revert to the harum-scarum Willie, and then return to the dignified woman of the world.

S. Yes, she was two characters, and sometimes we'd get them both at the same time.

I. By the way, how did your family come to Red Cloud?

S. We were all born and raised there, my mother and my father, and myself and my sister. My father's folks came from Pennsylvania, but he was born in Red Cloud.

I. What did your husband do?

S. We ran a hotel, the Royal Hotel. Willa ate with us lots of times. She wrote about the Holland House; it was right across the street from the Royal Hotel. She didn't write about our hotel, but she loved to eat there and loved the trees in our back yard. She loved fresh asparagus and new potatoes with the skin on; she was a real fussbudget about her food. I think that's why she liked [my sister] Elizabeth so much, because Elizabeth cooked everything just the way she wanted it.

I. So the town supported two hotels.

S. Long, long years ago it did, but then the Holland House became a place for transients, a sort of house of ill repute, if you can imagine that in Red Cloud, Nebraska, or at any rate that's what the talk was. And then they tore it down. Our building is still standing, but it's an apartment house now.

I. I think those are all our questions. Is there anything that you wish we had asked you?

S. No, I think we've just taken care of Willa Cather . . . imagine what she'd say to that!

Catherland News

The Nebraska members of the WCPM Board of Governors hosted their Nebraska State Historical Society counterparts, prior to NSHS's quarterly meeting, at a reception attended by about fifty people at the Red Cloud Depot on June 5. On June 19 a group of twenty-two students from the University of Missouri-Columbia's School of Natural Resources stopped in Red Cloud during their three week institute on climate and agriculture to visit Cather points of interest.

I Heard of Willa Cather

Ruth Webb, Salem, Arkansas

The following reminiscence is a one item in a collection of personal writings by a woman whose English teacher in Red Cloud was Elsie Cather. The piece was written sometime in the 1960s by Ruth Webb, now living in Salem, Arkansas, and was delivered to Professor Marilyn Arnold by Louise Brown, a grand-niece of Ruth Webb now pursuing graduate studies at Brigham Young University. Louise Brown, who hails from Hastings, Nebraska, remembered meeting Professor Arnold in Hastings, and when she found the reminiscence among Mrs. Webb's numerous writings, thoughtfully made it available to WCPM Newsletter readers. Mrs. Webb, who was born in 1905 just southwest of Red Cloud, graciously supplied a snapshot for the photograph that accompanies the article and consented to the publication of her reminiscence. Of particular interest is the story of Charles Cather's ire at receiving a letter from his novelist-in-embryo daughter written in pencil instead of ink.

Willa Cather? Oh, yes, I've heard of Willa Cather. I lived in her home town — Red Cloud, Nebraska. Miss Elsie Cather, younger sister of the author, was my first English teacher in the Red Cloud High School (1918-1919). Miss Elsie was a dedicated teacher. We read literature and studied grammar and all forms of English work.

One class stands out clearly in my memory. Miss Elsie was trying to impress on our minds the fact that letters should always be written in ink. She illustrated this very dramatically by imitating her irate father when he found a letter written in pencil by Miss Elsie's sister, who was [then] at the University. He stomped up and down the room roaring, "Just imagine: A daughter of mine writing in pencil! I should have her brought home!"

Miss Elsie's imitation was emphatic. We got her message. I've always written my letters in pen when possible. It wasn't until some time later that it dawned on me that the sister writing that letter was probably Willa Cather.

As a senior, I became aware of an ardent junior girl with beautiful red hair, Virginia Auld. One morning she excitedly announced to a group in the hall, "My aunt has just won the Pulitzer Prize in Literature for her book *One of Ours*." This was something to be proud of, and I began to be aware of the author, Willa Cather.

I began to wonder why I had never seen Willa Cather. I am sure she came to Red Cloud on visits during those years. I asked my mother if she had ever seen the writer, who was about eight years older than my mother. She said, "Yes, I especially remember seeing Miss Cather at a farm sale. She was dressed in a rather plain, mannish-styled suit and did not seem



Ruth Webb, 1992

haughty in any way." Afterwards the purpose of Miss Cather's presence at the sale came to me. She was interested in people and places and she wanted authentic background for her stories. My grandmother, Ina Wickwire, too, told me about the Cather family, who lived near her at one time.

After I moved to another state, I read Mildred Bennett's *The World of Willa Cather*, which brought a touch of nostalgia. Several things came into focus. I realized that my ninth grade class was in the same building where Willa Cather attended High School; that some of her favorite stories and haunts were my favorites, too; also, I knew or knew of, many people she had known. If I had lived about thirty years earlier, I am sure we could have been friends.

Down through the years I have read her writings. Of her books, I enjoyed *My Ántonia* the most, because I lived for a time in a Bohemian community and this book gives such a true picture of the people. To me, it is a chronicle of Nebraska, not just fiction.

Yes, I have heard of Willa Cather. I wish I could have known her.

Impressions of a Spring Conference

John Anders, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Once again Red Cloud and Webster County lived up to Cather's high expectations. Talk with anyone who attended this year's spring conference and I'm sure you'll hear that wonderful things really do happen in the cornfields and wheatfields of Nebraska.

The weather itself is always Nebraska's greatest wonder, and this year was no exception. By Saturday a streak of record high temperatures had settled into the warm and breezy conditions so perfect for touring Catherland. And that's how we began. Refreshed by coffee and kolaches, with name-tags in place and the hymn to "All Things Bright and Beautiful" ringing in our ears from that morning's church service, we boarded the waiting buses for our trip into the country.



Baker and Murphy consider a point. — Cooper Photo

As we traveled over the Divide, my neighbor and I enjoyed a delightful conversation. Others on the bus were doing the same as the familiar sights along the tour, the fields and farmhouses, country churches and cemeteries, began to draw us together as a group. We discovered that we come to the yearly conferences from different places and for different reasons, and that we bring with us interesting stories to share. This year was a reunion of sorts for me as I had an opportunity to visit with friends I had met in Santa Fe two summers ago. But whatever our reasons for traveling to Red Cloud, our feelings about a single writer connect us with one another and create a special mood early in the day.

A spirited morning in the country works up a hearty appetite, and the women of Red Cloud had an all-you-can-eat buffet waiting for us at the elementary school. After lunch, chairs were set up for "The Passing Show," a panel discussion of *Obscure Destinies*. Bruce Baker, Betty Kort, Mellanee Kvasnicka, John Murphy, Susan Rosowski, Steve Shively, and Merrill Skaggs, all of them featured in the current issue of *Nebraska English Journal*, looked thoughtfully at the three stories, and the rest of us responded with insights of our own. "The Passing Show" also aptly describes our experience of the conference itself. For as the day lengthened, the impressions gathering around it showed us how easy it is to fall into the rhythm of Cather's prose, and how comfortable a place that can be.

Late afternoon brought with it a chance for relaxation, and I took the opportunity to enjoy all I could of Red Cloud. The cool charm of the Burlington Depot offered a retreat from the day's activities. Refreshments and autographs were available as well as leisure to observe Linda Lambrecht Stych's exhibit, "The Magical Essence of Willa Cather's Childhood." Different diversions led us downtown where we could shop for the newest Cather books at the WCPM Art Gallery and Bookstore or search along main street for the latest in Cather t-shirts and coffee mugs. But the ideal place for repose is the Cather Prairie just south of town, where you can listen for meadowlarks, follow the shadowy contours of the land, or just lie in the warm grass. Even the still chilly Republican tempted some adventurers to wade along its shallow banks.

The afternoon must have been well spent, for that evening rows of happy faces lined the banquet tables arranged in the high school gym. The program included an old-fashioned dinner, the presentation of the Norma Ross Walter Scholarship Award to Erin Duncan of Franklin, Nebraska, and John Kunz' lyrical adaptations of Cather's stories. Bright red geraniums were everywhere!

The introduction of the guest-of-honor, the distinguished American actor E. G. Marshall began the evening's main event. Mr. Marshall's presentation of "Two Friends" well-suited the occasion, for not only is that story about friendship, it is also about the subtleties of speech. Listening to Marshall's cultivated voice quickly impressed upon us the pleasures of reading

aloud and provided the kind of shared experience so highly valued in Cather's fiction. An observation from the story nicely captures the skill of Mr. Marshall's delivery: "When he made a remark, it not only meant something, but sounded like something, — sounded like the thing he meant."



Erin Duncan delights in her award. — Cooper Photo



Marshall prepares to read. — Cooper Photo

During the banquet master of ceremonies Ron Hull proudly announced that "Nebraska is a very singular place." After a full day in Cather country, no one would argue with that. Later that night a wine and cheese party at the Red Cloud Country Club informally concluded the conference. But as always it's hard to return home after an exciting trip. On our way back to Blue Hill, my friends and I stopped once again at Antonia's farm and the starry peacefulness of a moonless night marked for each of us a memorable end of a truly memorable day.

Meetings

The fifth National Seminar on Cather, sponsored by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and WCPM, is scheduled for June 19-26, 1993 in Hastings, Nebraska. The week-long session will focus on Cather's later novels and feature distinctive new voices as well as veteran scholars. Cather was a major focus at the American Literature Association's 1992 Conference in San Diego, May 28-31. There were two sessions devoted to her fiction: one on the short stories, featuring Marilyn Arnold (Brigham Young), Bruce Baker (Nebraska-Omaha), and Matthias Schubnell (Incarnate Word); and a general session, featuring Charles Mignon (Nebraska-Lincoln), John Swift (Occidental), and Tom Quirk (Missouri). Other sessions as well included major presentations on Cather by Robert L. Coard (St. Cloud State), Elsa Nettels (William and Mary), and Dawn Trouard (Akron). Next year the ALA will meet in Baltimore during the Memorial Day weekend, although exact dates are unconfirmed. For information write Alfred Bendixen, Cal State University-Los Angeles. On April 7 in the Hesburgh Library at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, John J. Murphy presented "Willa Cather and the Literature of Christian Mystery," a lecture sponsored by the Theology and English departments.

WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER

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Willa Cather Newsletter welcomes articles and notes for its Literary Annual and other issues. Address submissions to WCPM, 326 North Webster, Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970/ Telephone (402) 746-2653. Essays and notes are currently listed in the annual MLA Bibliography.

Book News

Ann Romines's new book, *The Home Plot: Women, Writing, and Domestic Ritual* (U of Massachusetts Press) is now available from WCPM (\$15.95 paper and \$45.00 cloth, plus postage and handling). Romines examines works by Stowe, Jewett, Freeman, and Welty besides devoting two chapters to Cather, whom she sees as increasingly drawn to women's culture in her later novels. Also now available, from Ohio University Press at \$16.95 paper, is a new edition of Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's *Willa Cather: A Memoir*, an essential tool for Cather biographers and critics since 1953. This edition is enhanced by a lengthy foreword by Marilyn Arnold. Corrected indexes from the second printing of Mary R. Ryder's *Willa Cather and Classical Myth: The Search for a New Parnassus*, 1990 *Classical and Modern Literature* Incentive Award winner, are now available free of charge from the Foundation Book Store to those who purchased copies of the book from WCPM.



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- 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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