

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Newsletter — Literary Issue

1979

Edited by Bernlce Slote

Twice a year literary issues of the Newsletter will present new Willa Cather material: reprints of some of Cather's early, hard-to-find, and still uncollected journalistic writings; early reviews, interviews, and notes about Cather's work; bibliographical information; and — from Cather's readers — original brief notes, observations, explications, or short critical articles. (Submit manuscripts to CATHER NEWSLETTER, 201 Andrews Hall, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska 68508).

... In This Issue ...

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A New Review

Although she had been writing play reviews since the fall of 1896 and contributing notes on opera in early 1897 for the *Pittsburg Leader*, Willa Cather first covered an orchestra concert at Carnegie Hall on December 9, 1897. This orchestra review of December 10, 1897, in the *Pittsburg Leader*, signed "Sibert," has not been previously listed in the Cather bibliographies. It shows that she was more knowledgeable about music than some have thought her to be. Most interesting, however, are the comments on Saint-Saëns' "Suite Algerienne" which link with the "Algerian" references in *The Troll Garden* (1905) stories of "A Death in the Desert" and "Paul's Case," and the mention of "Pierre Loti's description of the frantic songs of the [griots] in the spirit revels of the Senegal." Willa Cather's earlier article on Pierre Loti's *The Romance of a Spahi* (*Courier*, November 9, 1895; reprinted in Slote, *The Kingdom of Art*, University of Nebraska Press, 1966, pp. 365-67) emphasizes the passionate, tropical tone: "All through this book one can smell the aroma of the tropics, see the palms and the tamarinds and the old white mosques, and the burning sandy water of the Senegal, hear the sound of the tom-tom and the epic chants of the griots. The language is simple, simple as the savage life it pictures, intense as the savage emotions it portrays. It is a tragedy of environment and the bitterness of exile."

The second paragraph of the orchestra review also records a typical Catherian, and unabashed, comment.

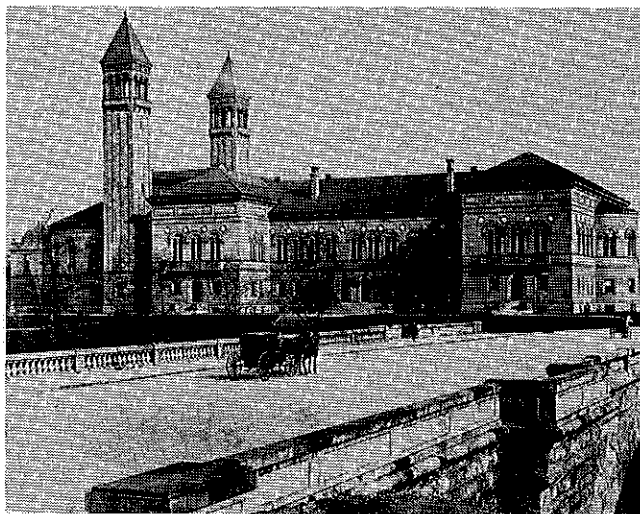
— B. D. S.

PITTSBURG ORCHESTRA

First American Production of d'Albert's "Gernot"

— Evan Williams, Soloist.

The Pittsburg orchestra gave the first of its sixth concerts at the Carnegie Hall yesterday afternoon. The first number on the program was Mozart's brilliant symphony in E flat. The number was exceedingly



Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh

well rendered with the exception of the first movement, in which the intervening scale passages for the first and second violins were not played with that smoothness and fine precision necessary to produce the best effect. The andante, or "Swan Song," was well rendered and the minuet was played with spirit, the first clarinet doing excellent work in the famous trio passage. Saint-Saëns' "Suite Algerienne" was decidedly the most successful performance of the afternoon. The orchestra has always paid particular attention to the music of the modern French school and has been unusually successful in rendering it. A predilection for French music is rather unusual in an English conductor, and Mr. William Archer's marked skill in handling Saint-Saëns and Massenet is evidence of a wide latitude of taste. The suite is one of Saint-Saëns' most poetic compositions and has a lavish richness of color distinctly and unmistakably Oriental. The "Moorish Rhapsody," the second number of the suite, is thoroughly unique, the pizzicato of the strings gives a vivid imitation of Moorish instruments, the monotonous clang of the cymbals and tympani working the climax up to a pitch of intoxicating fury which recalls Pierre Loti's description of the frantic songs of the [griots] in the spirit revels of the Senegal. It has all the fierceness and fervor of those half savage lands. In the next number, the "Evening Reverie at Bildah," the flutes and strings take up that profound and melancholy languor which in the Orient inevitably follows this frenzy of abandonment. Then, in the last number there is the triumphant flag of France and the "tanta superbia."

Graender's capriccio was unfortunately marred by the fact that the conductor had mislaid his music and did not discover the fact until the orchestra had played half-a-dozen measures, when he had to stop the performance, hunt for his music and begin over again. Such mischances mar the finish of a concert very considerably.

The introduction to the second act of Eugen d'Albert's "Gernot" was produced yesterday afternoon for the first time in the United States. The composition is one of barbaric brilliancy, introducing a beautiful lyric theme.

Oberthur's romance for harp and orchestra was excellently done. The harp of course is the dominant instrument throughout, and for the first time this season Madame Wunderlee had an opportunity to exhibit that skill which is known so well throughout this country. For delicacy and precision of touch and an unflinching intelligence in the matter of tempo, we have no harpist who can excel her. More than that, she has sound musical scholarship. The orchestra is very fortunate to have her services for the season.

Mr. Evan Williams, the soloist of the occasion, has been heard here when he was in better voice than he was yesterday afternoon, but the fact that his low tones were noticeably husky did not detract materially from either the mellow fullness of his voice or the telling intensity of his manner. Mr. Williams has the gift of force in a lavish degree. His first selection, "Farewell to Summer," from Goring Thomas' "Swan and the Skylark," was done in Mr. Williams' best manner and he rose to the climax magnificently. Instead of the two Schubert songs announced on the program, he sang the prize song from the "Meistersinger," and sang it with real dramatic power. His encores were "If I Were a Rose" and Schubert's "Wanderer."

— Sibert

— *Pittsburg Leader*, December 10, 1897, p. 13

Mary Austin and Willa Cather

Ethnicity always fascinated Willa Cather and played an important role in major novels like **O Pioneers!** and **My Ántonia**. The impact of the frontier, the Nebraska of her childhood, on peoples of European culture was a fundamental theme in her writing. Two early stories, "A Son of the Celestial" (1893) and "The Conversion of Sum Loo" (1900), stand apart because they portray Oriental immigrants. Her source for these stories had to be largely literary and a quick perusal of American fiction in the late nineteenth century reveals that a number of writers, including Bret Harte, Frank Norris, and Mary Austin, found the Oriental in California an interesting subject for short fiction. Such stories almost constitute a literary sub-genre with a set of conventions that include the inscrutable protagonist, the bartered bride, the opium den, the joss house, and the numerous devils of the spirit

world. Of central importance is the detached, tourist-like narrator who submits the Oriental characters to occidental scrutiny. The essence of this kind of story is captured perfectly in "A Son of the Celestial" in which Cather describes the friendship between a venerable Oriental merchant and a derelict American scholar. In a moving outburst the American admits that he has lost the vitality and human feelings of his own culture but accuses his friend of belonging to a civilization that has been dead for centuries. The American fails to penetrate the living mystery of this alien culture.

What is curious is that Willa Cather gave her second "Oriental" story, "The Conversion of Sum Loo," a title almost the same as that of a story by Mary Austin entitled "The Conversion of Ah Lew Sing." Austin's story was published in 1897 in the **Overland Monthly**, a magazine Cather read and which had published her story "On the Divide" the year before. The Austin and Cather stories have a number of features in common. They are both about Chinese shopkeepers, first-generation immigrants to California. Both turn on the issue of the shopkeeper obtaining a wife and starting a family in America. Austin's tale is essentially comic and focuses on the shopkeeper's sleight of hand in getting a wife, while Cather's tale has a more tragic cast, centering on the shopkeeper's desire for an heir. But in both stories the Orientals use the offices of the Christian mission, presided over by a woman, to secure their ends. In Austin's story the shopkeeper attends services at the mission because that is where his beloved has taken refuge from an evil captor. In Cather's story the shopkeeper and his wife follow the religious rites of their adopted country as well as their own ancient ceremonies to ensure that their baby boy have every possible advantage. In both stories the two religious traditions fail to mesh. In the Austin tale with its happy ending the Chinese couple, married and raising their son, drift away from the mission and only attend service occasionally out of "grateful remembrance." In Cather's tale the baby dies and his death is attributed to the Christian religion. The "conversion" in both titles is unsuccessful and is intended ironically. The essence of both stories is summed up in the first paragraph of Cather's story when she observes that "the soul of the Oriental is a slippery thing . . . to hold in the meshes of any creed."

The question is why Cather used a title so close to Austin's. We have no evidence that she then admired Austin's writing, although both writers shared an interest in minority cultures and would later write with deep feeling about the Indians of the Southwest. However, this was a period when Cather looked for models for her writing. The influence of James is particularly evident in a number of stories from this period, stories Cather would later dismiss as apprentice work. I surmise that if Cather knew the Austin

story (and it is almost certain that she would have) it suggested to her the dramatic possibilities inherent in her earlier Oriental sketch, "A Son of the Celestial." When she wrote "The Conversion of Sum Loo" in fact she used some of the same material verbatim to account for her protagonist's past in China — his life as a young scholar, his travels. The "conversion" in Austin's title perhaps focused for Cather the idea of the two cultures influencing each other but failing to unite successfully. Perhaps, too, in a spirit of challenge Cather echoed the Austin title as a way of asserting that she could do better than her slightly older, more widely published contemporary, for Cather would have judged her own serious treatment of the theme more worthy. But Cather's story is not the better one, nor ironically does it rework "A Son of the Celestial" more effectively. If Austin's story served as a model for Cather it was not a particularly happy choice because Cather's talent did not lie in plot making. Austin's tale is a minor one but she handles her little plot deftly and with just the right touch of humor. Cather's plot is heavy: the baby dies and the story ends melodramatically with Sum Loo burning her New Testament and the nun, in tears, withdrawing her application to do missionary work abroad. Much more effective is the sketch of the two friends in "A Son of the Celestial" which Cather subtitled simply "A Character."

What might have impressed and influenced Cather in reading Mary Austin's fiction was a certain tone in the latter's fictional treatment of immigrants and Indians. Both writers observe a proper distance between the narrator and the subject matter which resonates not with condescension but respect. In the best works of both writers the integrity of cultures is held up as inviolable and supreme.

— David Stouck, Simon Fraser University

The Cather Bookshelf

"Willa Cather, the Prairie, and Red Cloud" is the title of a chapter devoted to Miss Cather in Stephanie Kraft's **No Castles on Main Street: American Authors and Their Homes** (Rand McNally, 1979; \$9.95). Explaining how she came to choose the thirty authors represented in her book, Mrs. Kraft writes that a final criterion "was the importance, as best I could judge it, of an author's home to the community in which it was located. The question of whose house is preserved seems to have even more to do with writers' relationships to their localities than with the long-range consensus as to the quality of what they achieved. . . . These chapters are rooted in towns and regions where people remember that somebody who lived around the corner or down the road from them wrote good books."

An earlier, related work, **Literary New York: A History and Guide**, by Susan Edmiston and Linda D.

Cirino (Houghton Mifflin, 1976; \$7.95) includes directions for locating three of Willa Cather's dwelling places in Manhattan: 82 Washington Place in Greenwich Village, where she lived from 1908 to 1913; the nearby Grosvenor Hotel, where she moved in 1927 when 5 Bank Street was razed; and 570 Park Avenue, her home from 1932 until her death in 1947.

Space limitations preclude the **Newsletter's** even listing, let alone discussing, all the many articles, essays, feature stories, and dissertations devoted to Willa Cather and her writing. For authoritative essays on current work, the reader is referred to the annual volumes of **American Literary Scholarship** (Duke University Press); at present, the section on Cather is contributed by Professor David Stouck of Simon Fraser University, author of **Willa Cather's Imagination**.

Among recent publications of particular interest is Floyd C. Watkins's **In Time and Place: Some Origins of American Fiction** (University of Georgia Press, 1977; \$10.50), which is concerned with the relationship between the American writer and his native ground. Of the eight novels studied, two are by Willa Cather — **My Antonia** and **Death Comes for the Archbishop**. In **Women, Women Writers, and the West**, edited by L. L. Lee and Merrill Lewis (Whitston, 1979; \$12.50), an essay by Bernice Slote, "Willa Cather and the Sense of History," considers how Miss Cather used regional and historical materials in creating her fictional worlds. Still another critical approach is exemplified in **A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine, 1877-1977**, by Grace Stewart (Eden Press, 1979; \$15.00), which seeks to "identify the psychological and sociological burdens of female novelists working within a patriarchal mythology." **The Song of the Lark** is one of eighteen novels examined in this context.

During Willa Cather's lifetime the most frequently anthologized of her short stories was "Paul's Case" (1905). The reason was simply that for many years it was the only one of her stories Miss Cather would allow to be reprinted. Along with two other **Troll Garden** stories "A Wagner Matinee" and "The Sculptor's Funeral," "Paul's Case" is still used in a number of anthologies designed for the classroom; but recently its popularity has been challenged by an even earlier story, "The Sentimentality of William Tavener" (1900), which combines a Nebraska setting with recollections of life in Virginia. Up until 1979, so far as can be determined, "William Tavener" was reprinted only three times (excluding volumes devoted solely to Cather): in **The Dimensions of Literature**, edited by James E. Miller, Jr. and Bernice Slote (Dodd, Mead, 1967), in a Japanese collection, **American Short Stories I** (Kaibunsha Ltd., 1968), and in **By Women** (Houghton Mifflin, 1976). But 1979 clearly is the year of "William Tavener." It is included in no less than

four anthologies: **Types of Literature** (Ginn & Co.), **America in Literature: The Midwest** (Scribner's), **Woman: An Affirmation** (D. C. Heath), and **United States in Literature** (Scott, Foresman). In 1980 it will appear in **Adventures in Appreciation** (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).

1979 also has seen the publication of Cather collections in Roumania and Japan: **On the Divide**, a selection of fifteen stories from **Collected Short Fiction, 1892-1912**, published by a Bucharest house and **Willa Cather's Three Stories** ("The Sculptor's Funeral," "Scandal," "Coming, Aphrodite!"), with notes by Tatsuo Yamaguchi and Hiroko Sato (Bunri Co., Ltd.). In 1973 Professor Sato presented a paper, "Willa Cather in Japan," at the Willa Cather International Seminar, held at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as part of the Cather centennial celebration.

— Virginia Faulkner, University of Nebraska

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Television

Filed partly on the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie, Robert E. Knoll's "The Humanities and the Gift of Sight," premiering November 14 on KUON-TV, University of Nebraska Television, discusses the European experience in pioneer America.

One episode draws on Willa Cather's "A Wagner Matinee" with founding board member Helen Obitz as Aunt Georgiana.

The program, which is based on research done by Dr. Knoll at the National Humanities Institute at Yale University, is funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Other television programs by national organizations dramatizing early Cather stories are tentatively scheduled for 1980. The **Newsletter** will keep you advised about them.

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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