

# Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation

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Newsletter—Literary Issue

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Edited by Bernice 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 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 ...

☆ The Art of Willa Cather

This issue of the Willa Cather Newsletter presents excerpts from lectures and papers delivered at the International Seminar on "The Art of Willa Cather," held in Lincoln on the campus of the University of Nebraska (with an excursion to Red Cloud), October 25-28, 1973. The Seminar was one event in the year-long Willa Cather Centennial Festival.

The ninety-six participants and special guests at the Seminar represented seven countries (England, France, Italy, Japan, Australia, Canada, and the United States), twenty-three states, and the District of Columbia. In addition, some five hundred persons attended the lectures by Leon Edel, Marcus Cunliffe, and Eudora Welty, and the open meetings of the Seminar. Among the special guests were Willa Cather's long-time publisher, Alfred A. Knopf; William A. Koshland, Chairman of the Board, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.; Mrs. E. K. Brown; and Helen Cather Southwick, niece of Willa Cather.

The brief selections printed here give only the flavor of the Seminar. The complete papers, with comments by participants, will be collected in **The Art of Willa Cather**, to be published in Fall 1974 by the University of Nebraska Press.

## JAMES WOODRESS

University of California, Davis

Willa Cather's importance results from a successful graft of her native experience on to the roots and trunk of European culture. Or to change the metaphor, her appeal rests on the happy marriage of the Old World and the New. The New World experience in her novels gives them character and drama, color and romance—the emotional content. The Old World experience provides the texture, the ancient myth and symbol, the profundity—the intellectual content. The reader who plunges into Sinclair Lewis, for example, is likely to hit his head on the bottom, but with Cather there is no danger. The reader can dive as deep as

he wishes and stay down until he has to come up for air. The reader who enters the world of Thomas Wolfe, to cite another example, is overwhelmed by the astonishing vitality of his work, but, as Lionel Trilling notes, he is dismayed by "the disproportion between the energy of his utterance and his power of mind." It is the intellection coming from the European tradition that gives the reader room to swim in Willa Cather's fiction. One would not accuse Cather of writing intellectual novels, but the intellectual content is there, well assimilated and carried along lightly by the emotional content. The emotional content, I think, owes its vigor to Cather's Nebraska experience and to the commitment she was fond of calling "the gift of sympathy."

... The relationship between Willa Cather's experience and her fiction is close and important, but the experience is of two kinds. There is the experience of the body, the contacts with people like Antonia, the adventure of living in Nebraska, the tales of immigrant farm women heard first hand. Also there is the experience of the mind, the vicarious travel through books, the contacts with France, Rome, and the world through poetry, fiction, and drama. Cather's fiction is a subtle blend of the two kinds of experience. Her roots in the soil of Webster County are deep and well nourished, but at the same time her knowledge and use of Old World culture is substantial and pervading. The warp and woof of her fabric is native American, but threads of European culture are woven into the texture.

## ALDO CELLI

Università degli Studi di Firenze, Italy

Like fables, Willa Cather's tales and novels are based on essential situations, and in them one can discover an implicit system of unity and discreet rules of codification. Furthermore, her modes of narration include a frequent use of processes of anticipation. The anticipations, in her stories, re-echo until they develop and transform themselves to the point of becoming essential to the understanding of the whole on their own level as well as on others. . . .

Like the folk tale, Willa Cather's novels have the recurrent process of elaborating common material in a pluridimensional context. On the other hand, actions in her novels may become emotions, and produce an atmosphere which can ensnare the reader as well as the characters in the book. It is sometimes difficult to describe Willa Cather's plots, in the Aristotelian sense of "men in action," because her stories are distinguished by their emphasis on a situation more than on an action, as it was in the old Germanic epic tales. As in the old saga, the characters of her stories may be better defined as men in tension, who become more interesting for the psychological problems arising out of them, than for what they seem actually to be "doing."

## MICHEL GERVAUD

Université de Provence, France

Naturally it would be only too easy to show how much Willa Cather's vision of French civilization was subjective. She saw only what was best or thought best in our country, its highest achievements in the fields of thought, art, and society. Yet manifestations of pettiness, stupidity, arrogance, intolerance, Parisian superficiality or provincial suffocation, blindness to artistic values (as evidenced notably by the bourgeois of Aix en Provence, including its academics as well, who in his lifetime ignored the genius of the native-born painter Cézanne) were not rare in the France of her time, just as nowadays. Because she was not interested in these facts she was hardly aware that the same economic laws that ruled the United States were at work in the Old World, and that in the field of machine-made materialism the French lagged only a little behind America. She never anticipated, I hope, that one day Paris's noble perspectives would be destroyed by ghostly office buildings erected by the frantic speculators of today, or that the lovely fishing harbors on the Mediterranean shore would be turned into gaudy, sprawling holiday resorts. On the other hand, one would be very naive indeed to think that she was actually blind to all of France's blemishes. As E. K. Brown wrote, "Willa Cather had an extraordinary power of obliterating from a historic scene its modern encrustations." One could aptly apply his remark to her general vision of France. That she was not deluded about a country dear to her heart is furthermore evidenced in Mrs. Wheeler's reflections on the meaning of Claude's death on the battlefield in France: "He died believing his country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be. . . . She would have dreaded the awakening."

## JAMES E. MILLER, JR.

University of Chicago

**One of Ours** and **The Professor's House** utilize no reporters or observers, primarily because they are novels of interior action, or dramas of consciousness, in which the protagonists grow into some kind of critical knowledge about their lives and experiences. **One of Ours** has been much maligned because it has been mistaken for a novel about World War I, and many a male critic (including Ernest Hemingway) has snorted at the temerity of a female novelist attempting to recreate wartime experiences. But of course, Willa Cather's subject is not the war, but the developing consciousness of Claude Wheeler, son of the Nebraska farmlands, who seems fated to live his life in quiet desperation on the Nebraska prairie married to a vacuous wife devoting what little energy she has to neurotic religious and temperance causes and surrounded by family and friends increasingly devoted to the acquisition of things and the accumulation of wealth. By an accident of fate, the war picks Claude up off the prairie out of his meaningless life and carries him across the seas to France and the battlefields, where he discovers not only the horrors of war, but also a redeeming purpose to his life. Willa Cather handles the awakening of Claude with great skill and subtlety, with the bulk of the novel devoted to Claude's life in Nebraska. When she follows him overseas on a ship devastated by the influenza epidemic, and into France and the

battlefield, she has clearly researched her material carefully to give it as much authenticity as possible—indeed, some of the scenes of grotesque mutilation and death are handled without sentimentality and a keen sense of the "banality" of horror. (An interesting novel for comparison is Henry James's **The Princess Cassimassa**, in which Hyacinth Robinson's consciousness develops in parallel ways with Claude Wheeler's; James's problem in working up the material—revolutionary conspiracies and working class life—was not unlike Willa Cather's problem in dealing with military life and battle scenes of World War I.)

But when Willa Cather introduces the war scenes into her novel, it is not to dramatize the war for its own sake or to make an elaborate moral commentary on the war, but to show its impact on her central subject—Claude's developing consciousness about life and experience. As a matter of fact, Cather goes to great pains in the closing pages of the novel to show the reader that whatever the war meant to Claude in his small but critical experience of it, the war as it really was in its totality was something quite different from his perception. But this fact made the importance of the war to the growth of his consciousness no less critical.

## LEON EDEL

University of Hawaii

Willa Cather always was a writer of "success" stories; we remember **The Song of the Lark**, for example. But success is a limited subject. In her prairie tales, which are also success stories, she expresses more than the drive to power; she feels deeply what it means to be uprooted and to go in quest of new roots in a new land carrying a few household goods and certain memories of a life that can never be relived. Her own migration at a tender age from Virginia to the Divide made her aware of things lost, of the poetry of absence, that provided the elegiac note and the lyricism in her melancholy. "Life began for me when I ceased to admire and began to remember," she once said. Beyond these experiences of her childhood and youth, she possessed what I can only describe as a large human reach: her curiosity about people, her love of anecdote, her craving for detail, her way of cross-examining friends and neighbors about their lives and adventures—how things are done and what was the recipe. Within all this, within the frame of success, the quest for new roots for the uprooted, the sense of finding and making, was her strong masculine drive to conquest. She was a woman who early had to make her peace with a man's world, especially among her brothers, and within the extreme masculinity of the frontier. In recording the dramas of the frontier, she spoke with a voice so authentic that it holds us still, even in its most contrived moments. And then we remember her later phase, her despair at the way in which the pioneer's handiwork was exploited by the middleman, the still-present rape of the land; this will remain beyond the era of a school of fiction addicted to cinema-violence and television immediacy. If ever the printed word is able to assert itself against the crushing visuality of the camera, we will be able to feel once more Miss Cather's human drama of the quest for civilization as against the voice of an achieved society, and the story of its ultimate corruption in America.



Pictured from left to right are: Bruce P. Baker II (Moderator), Leon Edel, Hiroko Sato, Donald Sutherland, Robert Hough (Moderator), Eudora Welty, Bernice Slote (Co-Principal Investigator), John Robinson (Moderator), Aldo Celli, Marcus Cunliffe, Michel Gervaud, James E. Miller, Jr., James Woodress.—Photo by Lucia Woods.

### DONALD SUTHERLAND

Formerly University of Colorado

If Latin grammar was even physically too much for her, how did the language get into her? The answer is simple, and much the same as for music: through her extremely attentive ears. When Latin is quoted or mentioned in her work it is, not always but ordinarily, being recited aloud rather than read in silence. It can be murmured, as by Father Joseph, and it can even be sung, as when in an early story (*A Son of the Celestial*, 1893) a white man is shipping the body of his Chinese crony back to China and sings—to what music I have no idea—part of an ode of Horace to his friend Maecenas.

A more telling instance is Tom Outland, in *The Professor's House* (1925). When Tom is alone on his mesa he commits to memory "fifty lines or more" from the second book of the *Aeneid*, and recites them aloud to himself, in the high solitude of the Indian ruins. The lines are about the Trojan Horse, the beginning of the fall of Troy, and no doubt they enlarge his feeling, as well as the reader's, about the Indian ruins and the fall of that civilization. Later he recites the lines to the Professor with, says Willa Cather, "a good pronunciation and good intonation," but they are primarily inside Tom Outland, as they were first recited to himself alone, not for the Professor's ear. At this rate Latin is something assimilated into the organism, mentally by memory and physically by the muscles of the mouth and throat. The vocal performance for the Professor, however correct externally, belongs to a vital interior which has become somewhat Virgilian in feeling.

### MARCUS CUNLIFFE

University of Sussex, England

It would be too much to claim that Willa Cather single-handedly supplied the usable past for her country. She did however furnish some authentic and most valuable fragments. They could be no more than fragments or vestiges, like the Coronado sword in *My Antonia*, because the record itself within the United States was fragmentary and discontinuous. Imaginatively, though, she brought them into a continuum. Figuratively, it could be said that she was

the discoverer of the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde and the pueblo on the plateau of Ácoma. She restored them to the American historical consciousness, and thereby enriched it. I myself, as a wandering student of American history, went to see them a quarter of a century ago, having read about them in Willa Cather, and know that they enlarged the meaning of that history for me.

... Why is Willa Cather not given her due in the average history class? In a way the question is misleading. I presume that courses on the history of the frontier do include her. My point was that during her lifetime she did not conspicuously say the right things at the obvious moments. Like all important artists she was essentially a private person, not a platform performer. Yet looking back, we can see that she did, after all, mirror her own time, in her own ways, and speak for it. She helped her country to understand itself and its momentous, momentary heritage, and she brought dignity instead of rhetoric to such understanding. Perhaps she is too good for the historians, in their everyday teaching? For generally, in spite of what Frederick Jackson Turner said about the mutuality of history and literature, the historians are ill at ease with first-rate imaginative material. They can get more out of literature that lies nearer the surface, unmistakably signalling its intentions and its provenance.

### HIROKO SATO

Tokyo Woman's Christian College, Japan

I would like to add a few words about why Willa Cather is especially interesting to the people of the younger generation in Japan. Recently, the idea of anti-progress has been seriously discussed among us because when we reflect on our time, we realize how difficult it is to know what is the most important and fundamental thing in life. Our lives seem burdened and made complicated with all kinds of distractions and unnecessary trivialities. We come to notice that her idea of a "return to simplicity" and renewal is quite similar to the idea that lies behind the search for the radical root of human existence which we are engaged in, though her approach is fundamentally aesthetic, while ours is sociological. Amazed by the irony of time that makes the most conservative the

most radical, we feel deep admiration for her keen insight in foreseeing the destiny of this materialistic civilization about fifty years ago, when most people still believed in the possibility of scientific and material progress.

## EUDORA WELTY

### Novelist

Truth is the rock. Willa Cather saw it as unassailable. Today the question is asked if this is indeed so. Many of us align ourselves with Willa Cather—I do—in thinking the truth will hold out; but there are many who feel another way, and indeed, I believe, many who would not feel life was over if there were no truth there.

One of the strangest things about art, nevertheless, is that the rock it is built on is not its real test. Our greatest poem made a mistake about the construction of the universe, but this will never bring the poem down.

Yet plain enough is the structure she built on these rocks she herself believed were eternal. Her work we, today, see entirely on its own, without need of that support. It holds itself independently, as that future church appears to be doing above the dreaming head of Saint Francis of Assisi in Giotto's fresco. Her work has its own firm reason for existence. And here it stands, a monument more unshakable than she might have dreamed, to the independent human spirit she most adored.

She made this work out of her life, her perishable life, which is so much safer a material to build with than convictions, however immutable they seem to the one who so passionately holds them. It is out of our own lives that we, in turn, reach out to it. Because the house of Willa Cather contained, embodied, a spirit, it will always seem to us inhabited. There is life in that house, the spirit she made it for, made it out of; it is all one substance: it is her might and her heart and soul, all together, and it abides.

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#### AIMS OF THE WCPM

- To secure the bonding, insurance and housing of a permanent art, literary and historical collection relating to the life, time and work of Willa Cather.
- To identify and restore to their original condition, places made famous by the writings of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial in the form of art and literary scholarships.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.



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