

Willa Cather

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Cather and the Great War

Willa Cather NEWSLETTER & REVIEW



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On the cover: Cavalry and Tanks at Arras, Alfred Théodore Joseph Bastien, 1918. Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art. See story on page 19.



Letter from the Executive Director

Ashley Olson

As you'll read in the pages that follow, our 2016 spring conference provided an occasion to reexamine the Great War. We delved deeper into events leading up to the conflict, the aftermath, life on the home front, and the literature, propaganda, and art of the time. The period from 1914–18 has been called the forgotten conflict of America's war-torn twentieth century. As we observe the 100th anniversary of entry of the United States into the Great War, it seems fitting that we revisit this turbulent time, reflect on the past, and use it to inform our future.

It's always been astonishing to me to examine the remarkable period of time in which Willa Cather lived. It's difficult to imagine what it might have been like to be born into the period of Reconstruction, witness the settlement of the American frontier, and observe two world wars. And if this isn't enough for one lifetime, insert the Great Depression, Prohibition, the introduction of the automobile and the "flying machine," and countless other technological advances.



Letter from the President

Lynette Krieger

The love between a mother and her son creates a special bond that no war can destroy. Surely the death of a son would be among the worst nightmares of any mother's life. Willa Cather's *One of Ours* makes us feel this anguish when it filters the news of Claude Wheeler's battlefield death in France through the consciousness of his grieving mother. For her, as Cather writes, "the thought of him is always there, beyond everything else, at the farthest edge of consciousness, like the evening sun on the horizon."

As an owner of the George Cather home (the childhood home of G. P. Cather, the cousin who was a model for Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours*), I have often been moved to seek out honored places in the house after reading a passage or being reminded of a moment in the story. One such spot is the "sitting-room" from which Claude's mother watches him leave when he sets off for France, and where she receives the telephone call bearing news of his death. Of great interest to all who notice one of the windows in that room is a handsome etched glass figure in its upper portion. Many homes of the era have windows

Examining Cather's life alongside major historical events enhances the study of her literature. For instance, we know that Cather intended, but failed, to complete the manuscript for *My Ántonia* in 1917. Why? Like most Americans, she was distracted by the United States declaring war on Germany. Much to the delight of readers then and now, the novel was eventually published on September 21, 1918. And the wait was worth it (but not without complication; one of the essays in this issue explores the range of reactions from readers and critics when the novel made its appearance).

2018 brings us the publication centenary of *My Ántonia*—an occasion to reread the timeless novel, discuss its enduring themes, and be inspired. I'm pleased to say that the Willa Cather Foundation and our partners have wonderful plans taking shape to celebrate the novel and share it with new readers, both near and far. Stay tuned.

But first, another grand celebration is in store. Please join us on June 3, 2017, as we dedicate the National Willa Cather Center. You won't want to miss the unveiling of our new exhibit, a tour of the archive, and many more meaningful surprises.

with beautiful imagery etched in the glass, achieved in a process involving beeswax and acid.

For this etched glass pane, the George Cathers chose a painting titled *End of Day* by the French artist Louis-Emile Adan (you can also see the painting referred to as *End of the Journey*). This once well-known painting may date from the middle 1870s, around the time the oldest portions of the George Cather house were built. This window itself probably dates from one of the later expansions of the house, which were made up to around 1900.

The etching shows a lone toil-ridden farmer, rake and scythe slung over his shoulder, walking toward home—away from us. But as we perceive the scene in the Cather's east window, he seems to be coming *toward* us. I often wonder, was this effect purposeful? Perhaps by luck, or something other than luck, Cather's Claude Wheeler can be that farm boy returning home—toward his mother, toward us—at the "End of Day."

It's just one parlor window, more than a century old, but I can't look at it without my imagination taking flight.



End of Day. *University of Southern California Libraries/California Historical Society.*



Highlights from the 2016 Passing Show, “Decades Since Our Doughboy: *One of Ours* and the War Years”

One of the traditional features of the annual Willa Cather Spring Conference is the Passing Show, a panel discussion in which experts share their ideas and insights about the issues and texts under consideration (named for “The Passing Show,” Cather’s late-1890s newspaper column for the *Nebraska State Journal*). This year’s Passing Show brought together four people for an especially lively and enlightening discussion.

We were fortunate to have a distinguished panel with a wide range of approaches to the novel. Daniel Clayton, professor of history at Regis University in Denver and founding director of the Regis University Center for the Study of War Experience, brought his expertise on war and memory; Max Frazier, Lt. Col. and associate professor at the U.S. Air Force Academy, brought to bear not only her knowledge as a Cather scholar but her experience in the Air Force; Andrew Jewell, professor in the University Libraries, University of Nebraska–Lincoln and coeditor of *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, shared his expertise, including his experiences in the classroom; and Richard C. Harris, John J. McMullen Professor of Humanities and Assistant Dean at the Webb Institute in New York and the editor of the *One of Ours* scholarly edition, shared many years of teaching, writing, and thinking about the novel.

In preparation, panelists were asked to consider a number of topics, including questions about the relevance of *One of Ours*, which was published in 1922, to today’s world; the ways in which a literary work can capture aspects of experience or of history that other types of writing cannot; the panelists’ experiences teaching *One of Ours* or discussing it with general readers; their favorite passages in the novel, and which aspects of it particularly intrigue or interest them. What emerged was a lively and thought-provoking discussion. Although it’s impossible to reproduce the experience of having been in the Opera House Auditorium for the Passing Show, we hope that the following short personal essays will recapture some of its best moments. We have taken one slight liberty: “Claude’s Visit to the Church of St. Ouen” by Richard Harris, while brief, expands significantly on his remarks at the panel with new material suggesting a connection between Claude’s visit to the the church of St. Ouen and Cather’s own experience as a young American traveling in France. While retaining the informal feel of the Passing Show for the other essays in this grouping, we have deemed it appropriate to present this piece here as a full scholarly essay.

Julie Olin-Ammentorp

The Transcendent Meaning of War in *One of Ours*

Daniel Clayton | Regis University

I read Willa Cather’s *One of Ours* for the first time in the spring of 2006 for a course I co-taught that semester with my colleague Daryl Palmer of our English department. As we worked through the novel with our students, Daryl asked me to comment on the authenticity of Cather’s rendering of war experience. The authority I brought to the matter of judging the truthfulness of Cather’s war story derived not only from the fact that, as a historian, I had taught courses on the world wars for forty years, but also from my study of the hundreds of hours of videorecorded testimonies of war veterans and their loved ones we have collected in the archive of the Regis University Center for the Study of War Experience.

I loved *One of Ours* and proceeded with enthusiasm to point out the many places in the text where I felt she really got it right. Richard Harris’s historical essay in the scholarly edition of *One of Ours* takes us through Cather’s exhaustive and meticulous research in the primary sources of veterans’ letters, interviews, and oral histories, making it clear that Cather knew what ordinary people did in war and what war did to them. In the person of Claude Wheeler, for example, she accurately captured the mood and spirit of the many young volunteers who donned the uniform eagerly, became beloved officers, and sought their destiny in war, young men who believed, like Claude, that they “commanded wonderful men.”





Repairing Field Telephone Lines During a Gas Attack at the Front. Keystone View Company, Publisher. Library of Congress.

In assessing Cather’s achievement, context is important. Our veterans tell us that war is stupid, sadistic, gruesome, but also honorable and heroic. The paradox of war is striking; it is at once a horrifying experience that haunts your nightmares all your life and a defining moment you wouldn’t have passed up for anything in the world. Getting to the meaning of war is not an easy proposition. The veterans’ responses to questions of meaning range from “war carries deep personal meaning” to “war is meaningless.”

In this regard, Felix Sparks’s meaning-making is instructive. Sparks was one of America’s most decorated WWII soldiers who commanded young infantrymen on battlefields in Italy, France, and Germany, over 500 days of combat in 1944 and 1945, losing five full rifle companies and all his platoon leaders in the slaughter. I asked Sparks to talk about the meaning of his war, when all was said and done. He located it in a letter he had received in 1945 from a mother whose son was missing in action at Anzio. Every time Sparks spoke at Regis, he ended his story by reading the mother’s letter. “Dear Captain,” the grieving mother begs, “please, please tell me what happened to my boy.” He kept this letter with him all his life to “remind me of what it was all about,” and when he went back to his old battlefields in Italy,

they take in the certainty that their boys are “with the Lord now and safe.” Mrs. Wheeler and Mahailey echo this spirituality. For example, eyes clouded with tears and losing sight of Claude as he leaves the farm on his journey to war, Mrs. Wheeler cries out her premonition, “Old eyes . . . why do you cheat me of my last sight of my splendid son!”

And in the last scene, of course, as the two women comfort one another in the sanctuary of the kitchen, Mrs. Wheeler is grateful to God that Claude is now “safe, safe.” For Mahailey, Claude’s resurrected body is close at hand. “As they are working at the table or bending over the oven, something reminds them of him, and they think of him together . . . Mahailey will pat her back and say, ‘Never you mind, Mudder; you’ll see your boy up yonder.’ Mrs. Wheeler always feels that God is near,—but Mahailey is not troubled by any knowledge of interstellar spaces, and for her He is nearer still,—directly overhead, not so very far above the kitchen stove.”

In this final scene, Cather’s prescient historicity is front and center. She anticipates how a powerful civic religion based on the sacrifice and resurrection of the “Fallen Soldier” worked on the individual level in everyday life, a myth we continue to worship today.

he told us, he searched the cemeteries, looking for this mother’s son.

Among the authors writing war stories at the time, including Hemingway, Cather’s composition of the mother-son relationship comes closest to this transcendent meaning of war: mothers grieving dead sons. (Fathers of fallen soldiers grieve, certainly, but their voices are quiet, soft, and often silent.) Year after year at Regis, we’ve heard mothers mourning fallen sons tell the stories of the premonitions they had of their sons’ deaths and of the consolation

As If It Had Never Happened Before

Max Frazier | U.S. Air Force Academy

One of the most striking features of Willa Cather’s writing is her uncanny ability to apparently predict the future. Perhaps her prescience can be better ascribed to Carl Linstrum’s insight in her second novel, *O Pioneers!*, when he says that “there are only

two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before.” Cather conveys universal experience as something produced through feeling rather than the kind of thinking provoked by received wisdom.



In the Passing Show panel at the 2016 Willa Cather Spring Conference, our focus on *One of Ours* allowed us to engage her attitude toward intuition or feeling versus received knowledge.

When, on his way to the front, Claude Wheeler mistakes the church of St. Ouen for Rouen's cathedral, his contemplation of the sanctuary's "rose window, with its purple heart" emphasizes Cather's perspective on thinking and feeling. She writes about how he was "vainly trying to *think* about architecture" (emphasis mine), yet his purposeful deliberation unintentionally morphs into a snippet of received knowledge about the number of years starlight travels before reaching earth. He knows this *fact* from an astronomy class, but what he *feels* is the ancient "purple and crimson and peacock-green" going "through him and farther still." In these moments when knowledge competes with intuition, Cather suggests that a feeling, imbued with a beauty surpassing history, outshines the facts gathered through his university lectures. Claude's sense that he is a part of something great, something that belongs to the larger stream of time much the same as the light passing through him, helps him feel that his role in the war is imbued with purpose.

But the closing of *One of Ours* returns to knowing and feeling in a way that complicates the positive connotations we might associate with Claude and his early experiences in France. In a striking passage near the novel's end, we learn that Claude's mother "feels as if God had saved him from some horrible suffering, some horrible end," yet we know he was shot and killed at the lip of a rodent-infested, squalid trench. Evangeline Wheeler seems to understand that her son's violent physical death is easier than the loss of his naïveté. She is aware of what seems to be an alarming number of soldier suicides after the war, all people she imagines to be "so like" her son. The connection is in her conviction that the



The rose window in the church of St. Ouen. Wikimedia Commons.

soldiers had to "hope extravagantly, and to believe passionately," but for those who survived, she is sure that they had "hoped and believed too much." Fine and admirable actions came from these soldiers' hoping, believing, and feeling, yet Cather suggests that they are naïve in the face of ambitious nations and wars. A common military adage is that "no plan survives first attack," and neither can the patriotic sentiment that helps young people charge out of a trench and into enemy fire. Passionate naïveté is essential to war; idealism cannot survive the awareness gained through combat.

On the day we held the Passing Show last June, several of my friends were participating on social media in the "#22KILL" pushup challenge to raise awareness about the high rate of suicide among veterans. According to a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs study, eight thousand veterans of the military commit suicide each year, averaging twenty-two people per day. The Military Suicide Research Consortium website suggests that the statistic is more complicated than a straight twenty-two deaths per day on average (based on how the data was compiled), but no one denies that the veteran suicide rate is alarming. What struck me that morning when I saw my friend completing pushups while I was reviewing notes for the panel was how Cather predicted the outcome of war.

In the end, Willa Cather is clearly troubled by the cost exacted by countries waging war. She questions the patriotic feeling that convinces young Claude Wheeler and people like him to fight. And if those people happen to survive the dangerous landscape of war, what they've been asked to do in combat becomes an unbearable burden once they return home. She shows that the disappointing results of the Great War were not worth the price. From Cather's telling, war is one of those "two or three human stories" that would be better not revisited, and yet it goes on repeating itself as fiercely as if it had never happened before.



Church of St. Ouen, Rouen, France. Brooklyn Museum Archives, Goodyear Archival Collection.



One of Ours was published in 1922 and richly evokes the years of World War I, now a century past. Given the distance in time, one would assume that many younger readers see the book as a kind of time capsule, that its value—and challenge—is its revelation of a different time and culture. Witnessing the responses of these readers, however, I have learned a great deal about the book’s ability to resonate on all sorts of levels.

Once, when I was discussing the book with a group of undergraduates at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, a young woman shared her frustration with Claude Wheeler in the first half of the novel: he was spineless, he was indecisive, he lacked self-awareness. We had just read *My Ántonia* together, and I think she missed the powerful, grounded woman that fills the pages of that novel. *One of Ours*, and especially Claude, annoyed her terribly. What a loser.

After she let Claude have it, another student in the class said, “Hold on. When I read *One of Ours*, I feel like Claude is me.” The class laughed a little awkwardly, and he went on: he was in the same basic stage of life as Claude, and, like him, he felt that making big decisions about college and jobs and relationships was overwhelming. He often felt afraid and confused, and he, too, made mistakes.

The first student, to her credit, listened, and the whole class took up this double perspective. He is a frustrating character, as he fails to see what seems so obvious to the readers (“Gladys is the right one, not Enid!”). At the same time, his imperfections are so common, so human, that we feel for him, we empathize with him, we understand him. And, through him, we can understand ourselves a little bit better.

Student responses to the character of Enid have also deeply influenced me. That character seems so cold and distant that she risks becoming a caricature. But as several students, particularly women, have pointed out to me, she seems that way only because the fallible central character of Claude desperately wants her to be something she is not and never pretended to be. Her interests lie outside of marriage and domestic life, and why shouldn’t they? She tells Claude plainly who she is, and he foolishly believes that marriage will magically change “a cool, self-satisfied girl into a loving and generous one.” Their unsatisfying marriage is the result, in part, of Claude’s unwillingness to see and value what she wanted from life.

Most readers seem to strongly dislike Enid, and Cather made it pretty easy for them by filtering her character through

the sympathetic, if distorted, vision of Claude. But to her credit, Cather also gives the reader enough information to draw another conclusion about Enid. She is an independent, self-motivated, self-assured young woman, and her choice to become a missionary in China is a fulfillment of a long-held desire to do that kind of work. She seems cold and unkind because she lives in a world that expects her to be devoted to pleasing her father and husband rather than be a missionary (when she made her foolish choice to marry Claude, she temporarily got caught up in that world, too). Though Cather did not share Enid’s worldview or religious zeal, she could empathize with Enid’s desire for an independent, self-directed life, as she claimed just such a life for herself.

The way young readers respond to the novel remind me of art’s ability to transcend the moment of its creation. It goes on living as readers defend, blame, explain, and relate to its characters.



G. P. Cather, the cousin who was a model for Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours*. From the Sayra Cather Wagner collection of the Willa Cather Foundation.



Claude Wheeler's Visit to the Church of St. Ouen

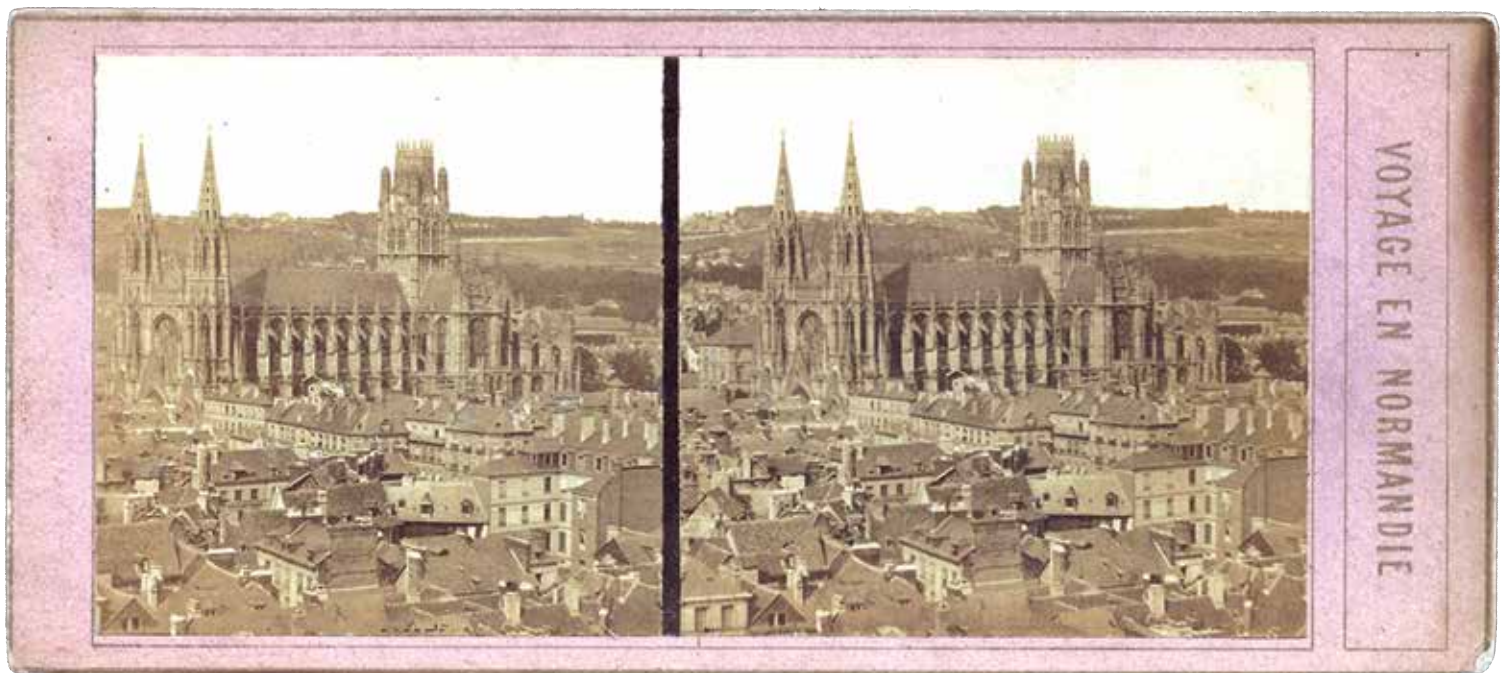
Richard C. Harris | Webb Institute

In book 5, chapter 4 of *One of Ours*, Claude Wheeler, having recently arrived in France, finds himself in the “harsh Norman city” of Rouen, the city in which Joan of Arc had been burned at the stake in 1431. Late in the morning Claude, who has been searching for the Cathedral of Notre Dame where the heart of Richard Cœur de Lion is interred, stands alone before a huge church that, perhaps because of its size, he assumes is the cathedral. In reality, it is the Abbey Church of St. Ouen. He removes his hat, enters quietly, and walks softly down the long side aisle toward the altar. When he reaches the choir, he turns to look back at the magnificent rose window (448–450).

At that moment the great church bell begins to toll eleven hours. The simultaneous experience of sight and sound evokes a moment of transcendence for Claude, an intimation of something that he cannot fully understand or explain: “The revelations of the glass and the bell had come almost simultaneously, as if one produced the other; and both were superlatives toward which his mind had always been groping” (450). Cather places Claude in the church as opposed to the cathedral, but her description of the feeling that Claude experiences is clearly related to her own visit to the Rouen Cathedral in 1902 in which she felt a “silence absolute and infinitely sweet” evoked by “the stillness and whiteness

and vastness,” so that the interior of the Cathedral “is vested with a peace that passes understanding” (“Dieppe and Rouen” 99–100). Claude’s experience, however, has another dimension: he experiences not only a sense of peace but also a moment of intuitive insight into “something splendid” for which he had been searching for years (79).

In describing this moment, Cather further establishes the finer, more sensitive aspect of Claude’s personality, a side of him that she develops in several other passages in the novel. His comrades have found the site where the heart of Richard Cœur de Lion is buried, “the identical organ,” Sergeant Hicks quips (452), his vulgar, joking comment making clear the difference between their experience and Claude’s. Claude’s experience, however, evokes a memory of “old astronomy lessons” (452), a quiet pondering of man’s place in time and space. Having experienced this momentary insight into the sublime, Claude sits alone in the church, “looking up through the twilight with candid, thoughtful eyes” (452). Cather’s reference calls to mind Henry Adams’s comment on his initial response to Chartres: “Like all great churches, that are not mere storehouses of theology, Chartres expressed, besides whatever else it meant, an emotion, the deepest man ever felt,—the struggle of his own littleness to grasp the infinite” (104).¹



19th century stereoview image of the church of St. Ouen, Rouen.



The passage also suggests two other points, one having to do with Cather herself and the other with her development of Claude Wheeler. Claude's naïveté reflects not only his own inexperience but Cather's as well. Writing to Dorothy Canfield Fisher in early 1922, Cather reflected on their 1902 visit to Europe and confessed to Fisher that she had felt ignorant and uncomfortable next to her: "That was the way you made me feel when we were together in France that time; and that was the way that I made my poor cousin feel" (*Selected Letters* 316). Like Claude, Cather too on her first visit to France had been a naïf. One wonders whether she herself, upon her first visit to Rouen, like Claude, had mistaken the Church for the Cathedral. Like Claude she too must have been awed by both. Adams's *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres* was published in 1913, some years after Cather's first travels to Europe. He also describes a situation that Cather may have been thinking of as she wrote this scene in *One of Ours*: "Many a young person, and now and then one who is not in first youth, witnessing the sight in the religious atmosphere of such a church as this, without a suspicion of susceptibility, has suddenly seen what Paul saw on the road to Damascus, and has fallen on his face with the crowd, grovelling at the foot of the Cross, which, for the first time in his life, he feels" (106). Claude has experienced a moment of aesthetic and spiritual enchantment that he finds mystically fulfilling. Claude's experience might be understood in light of the idea of "an infusion of grace," a notion fundamental to Christian belief, though Cather couches her description in spiritual, not specifically religious terms. The ridicule of Claude's comrades, who subsequently inform him that he had gone into the wrong church, does not diminish the experience he has had in St. Ouen. His experience has been far more significant than theirs.

This brief passage thus suggests the extent to which Claude Wheeler's story is also, in part at least, Willa Cather's story too, and it once again suggests something of the broad base of knowledge upon which Cather could draw in pursuing the art of fiction. If she indeed did have Adams's *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres* in mind as she wrote *One of Ours*—and perhaps his *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918) as well—she may have seen his search for "unity" and "a fixed point" (*Education* 434–435) as comparable to her own quest for meaning and order. For Cather and her Claude Wheeler, this search was conducted amid what T. S. Eliot in 1923 described as "the vast panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history" (483).

NOTE

1. In a January 1914 letter to Ferris Greenslet, Cather thanks him for sending her a copy of "the Adams book," clearly referring to *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres*, which had been published by Houghton Mifflin in November 1913. She declares, "it is the grandest present I have had in many a long day. I am now its passionate press-agent" (Houghton Library, Harvard; noted in *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather* #273). In September 1928 Cather, writing to Elizabeth Vermorcken, noted the excellent essay on Adams in R. K. Whipple's *Spokesmen: Modern Writers and American Life* (*Calendar of Letters* #944). And in an April 12, 1947, letter to E. K. Brown, Cather remarks, "I wish I could have had a comfortable boardinghouse near Chartres when Henry Adams used to prowl about the cathedral" (*Selected Letters* 672). My thanks to Janis Stout for providing me with a copy of Cather's letter to Greenslet.

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The Great War: 1914–1918

The war that came to be known as “the Great War” began on July 28, 1914, a month after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in Sarajevo, Bosnia. National identities and rivalries led both smaller countries and world powers to divide into two main sides. The Allied powers consisted chiefly of Great Britain, France, Russia, Canada, Australia, and Italy; the Central powers were principally Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria, as well as Japan and several countries from the Middle East. On the European continent, the German invasion of “tiny Belgium” as a pathway to France shocked the world. At the outset of the war, the German high command was confident they would achieve victory “before the leaves fall.” In the first great battle on the “Western Front,” however, the French stopped the German advance at the Marne River and thus prevented the capture of Paris.

Soon this became a war of stalemate and attrition. According to conservative figures, four years later when the war ended, more than sixteen million soldiers and civilians had died, and another twenty to thirty million had been wounded or injured.

The area along the “Western Front,” which stretched 450 miles across France from the North Sea to Switzerland, became a wasteland, denuded of plants and wildlife, filled with artillery craters and covered with barbed wire. Approximately 23,000 miles of trenches cut through the landscape—nearly enough to circle the planet.

In these four years, technology—the machine gun, heavy artillery, poison gas, the flamethrower, the tank, and airplanes and dirigibles—changed the concept of warfare and redefined man’s role in it. The Marne, the Somme, Verdun, Ypres, Passchendaele, and Soissons, and for Americans in particular, Château-Thierry, Belleau Wood, and St. Mihiel, became household names.

America’s major allies, England and France, urged the United States to enter the war early on, but President Woodrow

Wilson waited until early April 1917 to ask Congress to do so. In his “war message” he declared that “the world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty.” (But his message did not include the phrase often associated with Wilson, “the war to end war.”) The United States expedition to Europe came to be seen by many Americans as a “great crusade.” The spirit of the American soldiers impressed soldiers and leaders on both sides of the conflict. As the war went on, however, the initial patriotic fervor and the sense of honor and courage that informed the feelings of citizens and soldiers gave way in many quarters to a sense of frustration, betrayal, and disillusionment.

Although American troops did not see significant action until the spring of 1918, the American presence was essential in stopping the last German offensives of that summer and fall. The war officially ended on November 11, 1918, “at the 11th hour, of the 11th day, of the 11th month.” The entry of the United States into the war had led to a massive mobilization effort at home and abroad, rallied American citizens to the cause, and finally led to the emergence of the United States as the world’s greatest power. The Treaty of Versailles, however, which officially ended the Great War in 1919, helped pave the way for what would later be called “the Second World War.”

Willa Cather’s interest in the war effort was influenced to a great extent by the death of her cousin Lieutenant G. P. Cather, who was fatally wounded at the battle for Cantigny in late May 1918. Initially inspired and then obsessed by the idea of writing a story about a “red-haired prairie boy” who desired to find “something splendid” in his life, Cather drew upon many sources to create her protagonist and his story, including newspaper articles, fictional and nonfictional accounts of the war, interviews with veterans, a return visit to France in 1920, and elements of her own life. Although she originally titled her novel “Claude,” it was published in 1922 as *One of Ours*. Despite the feeling of some contemporary critics that Cather had romanticized the war experience, *One of Ours* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1923 and has long remained a reader favorite.

Richard C. Harris



Gassed, John Singer Sargent, 1919. Imperial War Museum, London. Wikimedia Commons.

“The Mirror of the World’s Events”: World War I, *One of Ours*, and the Omaha Bee

Kelsey Squire | Ohio Dominican University

As Stephen Trout notes in *Memorial Fictions: Willa Cather and the First World War*, one way of viewing *One of Ours* is through a pattern he calls the “iconography of remembrance,” a memorial to commemorate a specific individual and World War I itself (8). The act of commemoration brings a certain amount of closure or reflection regarding the death of individual loved ones in the war, or more broadly, about the significance of the war in terms of history, politics, or international relations. As Cather herself explained to her friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher, the character of Claude was inspired by her cousin, Grosvenor Cather, who died fighting in France. In March 1922, Cather writes: “It’s a misfortune for me and my publisher that anything so cruelly personal, so subjective, as this story, should be mixed up with journalism and public events with which the world is weary and of which I know so little” (*Selected Letters* 312). In this essay, rather than viewing *One of Ours* as a *memorial*, I trace how the novel was indeed “mixed up with journalism and public events.” Cather’s objections to mixing her story with public events and journalism become even more fascinating when considering that, about five months after *One of Ours* was published in book form (in September 1922), the entire novel was serialized daily (Sundays excluded) in a Nebraska newspaper, the *Omaha Bee*, from March 2 through June 16, 1923.

During the fourteen-week serialization of Cather’s novel, the *Bee*, touting itself as the “Mirror of the World’s Events” in one advertisement, devoted significant space to examining the aftermath of the Great War through articles, editorials, and political cartoons. In fact, the war was so present within the pages of the *Bee* that, although the war had technically ceased with the Armistice five years earlier, the international community was still grappling with its impact in 1923. Daily, readers of the *Bee* would have encountered ongoing reports regarding tenuous peace and threats of further international conflict. Viewing *One of Ours* in the *Bee* reminds us of the climate in which Cather’s novel was received, where the war had yet to become a historical event or memory, but rather, was still a fact of daily life.

The *Omaha Daily Bee* was founded in 1871 by Edward Rosewater, who had immigrated to the United States with his family in 1854 at the age of 13 and claimed to be the first Bohemian in Omaha (Larsen and Cottrell 98, 159). A former

telegraph operator, Rosewater founded the *Bee* as a “temporary venture to promote local educational reform” (“The *Omaha Daily Bee*”). Rosewater was active in the Republican Party, and he frequently used the *Bee* as a means of championing causes that he supported; as result, the *Bee* was known to have a contentious relationship with other newspapers, particularly in the 1870s. The *Bee*’s attempts to navigate the media marketplace in Omaha can be seen in its shifting name, as readers encountered the paper under different mastheads and edition formats. By 1923, the *Bee* had three distinct editions (*Omaha Morning Bee*, *Omaha Evening Bee*, and *Sunday Bee*) and had its third owner: after Edward Rosewater’s death in 1906, the paper was taken over by his son Victor, who sold the paper in 1920 to Nelson B. Updike, an Omaha grain dealer who believed that newspaper ownership



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Advertisement from March 14, 1923. This and all the newspaper images in this essay are courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society.



might help his political aspirations (Peterson 417–418). During the ownership of Victor Rosewater and Updike, the *Bee* continued to support Republican issues, but lost some of the intensity and focus brought by its founder. From 1920 through 1924, in fact, Updike went through a series of editors; as a result, during the serialization of *One of Ours*, the *Bee* does not include a masthead that lists the owners, editors, or other affiliations.

Cather, who began her writing career in outlets such as the *Nebraska State Journal* and the *Lincoln Courier*, was poised to understand the role of newspapers in local communities; as Janis Stout affirms, Cather remained an “avid newspaper reader,” which is reflected in her letters (“Between Two Wars” 75). In fact, Cather explains to Canfield Fisher how she happened to hear of the death of her cousin G. P. Cather: “I first came on it in the morning paper when I was having my hair shampooed in a hairdresser’s shop” (*Selected Letters* 312).

In *One of Ours*, newspaper reading plays a subtle but important role in the lives of the Wheeler family. By the year 1920, more than 600 newspapers covered the state of Nebraska (“Publication History of Newspapers in Nebraska”). This variety and volume of available reading material is reflected throughout

One of Ours. Mr. Wheeler, Claude’s father, “subscribed for a dozen or more [newspapers]—the list included a weekly devoted to scandal—and he was well informed about what was going on in the world” (17). In one scene, Claude consults several newspapers, including the *Bee*’s competitor, the *Omaha World-Herald*, in an effort to clarify the present state of the conflict Europe and, in turn, his own opinions on it:

He went upstairs and sat down before an armchair full of newspapers; he could make nothing reasonable out of the smeary telegrams in big type on the front page of the *Omaha World-Herald*. The German army was entering Luxembourg; he didn’t know where Luxembourg was, whether it was a city or a country; he seemed to have some vague idea that it was a palace! His mother had gone up to “Mahailey’s library,” the attic, to hunt for a map of Europe,—a thing for which Nebraska farmers had never had much need. But that night, on many prairie homesteads, the women, American and foreign-born, were hunting for a map. (218–219)

It is tempting to read this passage as a representation of Claude’s naïveté about the world beyond the Nebraska prairie; I would argue, however, that the news has a more complex role in the novel. On one hand, these journalistic reports encourage the development of an international consciousness in Claude and other members of the Wheeler family who had, until this point, primarily defined their identities through local and regional affiliations. But Wheeler family members also remain skeptical about how to interpret what they read: Mrs. Wheeler wonders if the headlines are “only a newspaper scare” (217), and Mahailey, the family’s live-in help, raises questions concerning the images of German brutality that she sees in illustrated papers, images that conflict with the behavior of her German neighbors (228).

Examining the novel within the context of the *Omaha Bee* reveals a continued preoccupation with the potential for further violence and uncertainty concerning economic recovery. Along these lines, one issue that dominated the *Bee* headlines in the spring of 1923 was the continuing “Ruhr Crisis,” the occupation of German territories by Allied forces in an effort to secure the reparations outlined by the Armistice. When German defaults on reparations grew more significant, members of the French and Belgian armies took control over industrial manufacturing sites and transportation routes in Germany’s Ruhr Valley in January 1923. Many articles in the *Bee* regarding the Ruhr occupation situate the event as a European issue that the United States should watch, but not necessarily become involved with actively.

“And the Villain Still Pursued Her”



Editorial cartoon from March 13, 1923.



City Hall and the Omaha Bee building, ca. 1915.

Particularly in the early weeks of March, the articles on the Ruhr take an informative approach; while no formal position is expressed in support of Germany or France, it is also telling that the articles do not criticize the French actions as unjustified or overly aggressive. Other articles in the *Bee* reflect growing uncertainty in European countries; as striking German citizens refused to work in the occupied areas, more criticism arose in Allied nations, suggesting that the occupation would further interrupt German industry and economic growth, and subsequently, would only increase Germany's defaults on reparations.

One local issue that made the front page of the *Bee* in the spring of 1923 resonates directly with the content of *One of Ours*: the ruling on Meyer v. Nebraska, a Supreme Court case challenging a 1919 law that placed restrictions on teaching in foreign languages. The law, commonly called the Siman Act, responded to fear surrounding the German language during World War I, and to anxieties concerning the assimilation of immigrant populations. This law calls to mind the scene in *One of Ours* where Mr. Wheeler comes to the defense of his neighbor August Yoeder, one of two German immigrant defendants on trial for charges of disloyalty; as Cather reveals, however, the charges have been brought in order to undercut economic success of these two immigrants (320). Although the unnamed judge in this scene does ultimately convict both Yoeder and Oberlies of making disloyal statements, the judge clarifies that they are “not asked to recant” the statements, but that they are “merely asked to desist from further disloyal utterances, as much for your own protection and comfort as from consideration for the feelings of your neighbours” (321). In his courtroom the judge presents himself as orderly and fair, above

the petty prejudices of the common crowd. His ruling is not necessarily grounded in stripping immigrants’ ties to their homeland and customs, but rather, to create a “comfortable” and “safe” society.

While the trial in *One of Ours* concerns specifically disloyal statements against the United States, the case of Robert T. Meyer versus the state of Nebraska addressed a broader law, one that banned instructing children below the ninth grade in languages other than English, regardless of the lesson’s content. Meyer, a teacher in a parochial school, was arrested after he was overheard instructing a 10-year-old student in German. On June 5, 1923, *Bee* headlines announced the Supreme Court ruling in Meyer’s favor, overturning the restrictive language laws. The tone of the *Bee* article, “Opinion Delivered in Nebraska Case,” does not disagree with the Supreme Court ruling outright, but it does employ careful language that supports some of the principles behind the original law. For example, the *Bee* article states that “perhaps it would be highly advantageous if all [United States citizens] had ready understanding of our ordinary speech, but this cannot be coerced by methods which conflict with the Constitution . . . and cannot be promoted by prohibitive means.” It continues, “the desire of the legislature to foster a homogenous people with American ideals, prepared literally to understand current discussions of civic matters, is easy to appreciate. . . . But the means adopted, we think, exceeded the limitations upon the power of the state and conflict with the rights assured to the plaintiff in error.” The ruling also seems reasonable, however, due to its timing; as the *Bee* points out, there



The top story, June 5, 1923.



are not “adequate” reasons to support such laws in “times of peace and tranquility.” In the case of the trial in Cather’s novel—which takes place during the war—the judge seems to resist the goal of creating a homogenous American community. While his ruling aims at creating an environment of “peace and tranquility” in the town, it probably does not solve the larger issues of anti-immigrant hostility that the trial airs in the first place.

The *Bee* headlines also address the promotion of “peace and tranquility” through alternative proposals: the League of Nations and the creation of an international court as a means of avoiding war and bloodshed. Although several articles on the international court appear in the *Bee* during the serialization of *One of Ours*, the most extensive appears on April 8 in “League of Nations Shies at Big Issues” by David Lloyd George, a member of Britain’s Liberal Party who served as Prime Minister of the wartime coalition government from 1916–1922 and who was instrumental in negotiating the Treaty of Versailles (for more on Lloyd George, see Crosby). His article addresses many of the recurring themes and concerns about the League of Nations raised by the United States. Lloyd George first recognizes the successful humanitarian efforts sponsored by the League of Nations, such as its active role in preventing the spread of typhus in Eastern Europe. “But these humanitarian tasks, praiseworthy though they be,” writes Lloyd George,



When *One of Ours* was serialized, Cather was billed as “Famous Nebraska Author.”

were not primary objects of the foundation of the league. Its main purpose was the averting of future wars by setting up some tribunal to which nations would be bound by their own covenant and pressure of other nations to resort in order to settle their differences. Its failure or success as an experiment will be judged by this test alone.

While Lloyd George does acknowledge some successful conflict mediations negotiated by the League, the achievements are limited. In some cases, the settlements have not been accepted as fair by both parties. More significant weaknesses include the potential for bias and the lack of world representation. Without American involvement, the primary members are Britain, France, and Italy: if these three countries disagree on the issue, then “nothing is done” (4B).

Local perspectives on the League of Nations are offered in a collection of editorials from around Nebraska which appeared on April 16. Despite the headline “World Court in Favor; Nebraska Editors Believe Tribunal Will Aid in Solving Problems and Preserving Peace,” the editorial selections include more hedging. Representing the *Lindsay Post*, H. G. Whitacre writes that “neither the world court nor the league of nations [sic] can hardly be expected to do away entirely with war, but either is a fair step in the right direction. The

main thing now is to form some sort of world organization where international differences may be aired.” M. F. Kimmel, writing for the *McCook Tribune*, highlights more of the difficulties in his response: “a world court with adequate teeth for the enforcement of its decisions and awards would doubtless fill all the possibilities of a league of nations [sic] such as America would support in public opinion and sentiment. America is clearly opposed to the idea of joining in a league to police Europe.” These editorials and articles on the League of Nations suggest that individuals and communities around the world continued to feel the reverberations of the Great War when *One of Ours* was published in 1922.



“Read the Omaha Bee”—a newspaper vendor plies his trade, ca. 1918.

Regarding *One of Ours*, Cather claimed that she never wanted to write a “war story” (*Selected Letters* 311); in fact, she reported to her publisher Alfred Knopf her partner Edith Lewis’s complaints in writing the dust jacket copy for *One of Ours*: “Miss Lewis says that it’s very difficult to write an ad for a story when the author insists that the theme of the story must not be whispered in the ad!” (308). While many national reviewers situated *One of Ours* firmly within the tradition of war novels, the two editorials appearing in the *Bee* about the novel are less interested in the novel’s reflections on war and more interested in how the novel—and particularly Claude’s story—reflects Nebraskans. In a September 1922 review of the novel, the *Omaha Bee* writer “P. G.” writes that in Cather’s novels the “mirror of her tolerant realism unflinchingly is held up to the people of her native state, who regard their own reflections unflinchingly and with interest” (130). The reviewer goes on to say that “it is not a flattering picture of Nebraska life that she paints in her novel” and hypothesizes that there are many youths in the state who may, like Claude, be “restless seekers for broader living” (130–131). Five months later, in the editorial response to the novel’s serialization, the *Bee* staff looks to the novel for a didactic meaning, stating “the lesson is that Nebraska should be broad enough, many-sided enough, to offer ambitious, idealistic or talented youth the opportunities for experience and development and triumph that now require a war or a far journey to achieve” (“One Out of Many”).

Such a clear lesson fits uncomfortably with the serialization of the novel in the *Bee* itself. It is difficult to reduce Claude’s story into a didactic lesson, and more broadly, no clear “lesson” of the war itself emerged from the pages of the *Bee* in 1923. As Cather herself writes in a letter to *Atlantic Monthly* editor Ellery Sedgwick in late 1922, the war provided little triumph or clarification: “I think these last few years have been hard on everyone. It seems to me that everything has gone wrong since the Armistice. Why they celebrate that day with anything but fasts and sack-cloth and ashes, I don’t know” (*Selected Letters* 327). Although many national reviewers critiqued *One of Ours* for what they considered an overly sentimental view of the Great War, viewing the novel within the context of the *Omaha Bee* demonstrates just how difficult it was not only for Cather, but for citizens in Nebraska and across the United States, to begin to form a cohesive narrative about the war’s meaning and significance. In 1923, the war had yet to become a memory, and instead, was still a constellation of current events unfolding in the headlines of the daily paper.

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Willa Cather's Shifting Perspectives on the Great War

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It has become commonplace in the story of the twentieth century to see World War I, the Great War, as an experience that changed the course of world history. The war changed the political histories of dozens of countries and transformed the cultures of those countries. In western Europe and the U.S. the war is widely credited with undermining the ideals of Victorian progressivism and pushing culture toward the subjective, ironic, experimental age of modernism. The war, then, has tremendous symbolic meaning for many who interpret it. In literary history, this view of the war's meaning so dominates our reflections on it that we may forget how different its meaning seemed to writers who witnessed it, who saw its meaning unfold over time. This essay is an attempt to understand Willa Cather's distinctive view of the war. Through investigation of letters and published writings, we can learn about how Cather interpreted the meaning of the Great War, and the evidence suggests that the war did not have a single meaning to Cather. Rather, it had multiple meanings at different times. She felt those meanings most powerfully when the experience of war was not abstracted but, instead, was highly personal and subjective. Cather made meaning from the war as it came to her through varied individual human experiences. Over time, she developed a personal, psychological connection to specific versions of the war that prevented investment in big picture, analytical contemplation about its "meaning."

In the earliest days of the war, well before the United States entered into it, evidence suggests Cather was watching it from afar with interest, sympathy for those suffering, and also something like journalistic curiosity. In the fall of 1914, she wrote Elizabeth Sergeant that she was preoccupied with war news, even while traveling in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Later, she wrote to her aunt Frances ("Franc") Smith Cather that she had heard a lecture by a woman soliciting donations for Belgians starving under the German occupation and that

she meant to forgo Christmas gifts in order to give as much as she could to the relief fund (*Selected Letters* 195; 196–97). Then, for a time in 1915, she was planning to go to Germany as a correspondent for the *New York Evening Mail* with her old boss, S. S. McClure, and her friend Isabelle McClung. They

were to investigate, in McClure's words, "the leaders of German thought and the makers of Prussian policy." Cather told Ferris Greenslet that she refused to write anything pro-German for the *Evening Mail*, whose editors had German sympathies, but would only write "the history of the military idea in Prussia, and a true report of the statement of the men I was to interview." Still, she knew her idea of what was "true" and what was pro-German might be different from what the *Evening Mail* editors thought, and realized that, even though they didn't seem inclined to pressure her, "in such times as these people's judgment and reasonableness are a good deal warped by strong feeling" (Letter to Greenslet). Cather seemed to have been on the verge of a trip that would have dramatically altered her understanding of the war, and could possibly have

resulted in articles explaining the German perspective on the war in Europe, significantly shifting her career thereafter. Though Cather claimed she was eagerly anticipating the "tall adventure" of such a trip, it was ultimately called off when Judge Samuel McClung asked his daughter Isabelle not to go out of fear for her safety, and Cather refused to go without her.

Shortly after this planned trip to Germany was abandoned, *The Song of the Lark* was published, and Cather's writing life remained active and productive. While she was at work on her next novel, *My Antonia*, in May 1917, a few weeks after the U.S. had declared war on Germany, Cather admitted to feeling a little burdened: "The war has made everything so much more difficult," she wrote her sister Elsie, "housekeeping and meeting ones bills,—and it has taken all the fun of work away, somehow. One can't



Created by Eugenie De Land, one of the few female artists designing posters during the Great War, this 1917 poster puts responsibility on viewers—potential purchasers of Liberty Bonds—for determining if this is to be a "Sunrise or Sunset." Library of Congress.

feel that writing books is very important.” But she was also full of patriotic pride and claimed in the same letter that “The United States has never had such a chance before; no country ever has. We can literally save Democracy-----or lose it-----for the whole world” (*Selected Letters* 240–241). After the death of her cousin G. P. Cather in May 1918, Cather wrote multiple letters to her Aunt Franc, G. P.’s mother, that continued to embrace this grand view of the war and its meaning. In June 1918, she called the war “the greatest cause men ever fought for” and, a few months later, on Armistice Day, she told her aunt that her “heart turns to [those] who have helped to pay the dear price for all that this world has gained. Think of it, for the first time since human society has existed on this planet, the sun rose this morning upon a world in which not one great monarchy or tyranny existed” (256, 260).

These comments seem to suggest that Cather had a rather grandiose, idealistic perspective on the war and that she shared the common view of it as “the War to End War,” as a war about “Making the World Safe for Democracy,” phrases ascribed by Elizabeth Sergeant to President Woodrow Wilson. Sergeant notes that Cather “had no patience” with Wilson and his habit to “borrow his phrases from *The New Republic*,” but that “the American people” were wrapped up in an idealistic belief that “our quest in Europe was one of ideal mercy and helpfulness” (*Willa Cather: A Memoir* 155). Even though Cather apparently shared this hopeful view of the war soon after the U.S. became involved, we must also understand her statements about it in letters to her family, particularly to her Aunt Franc, as performances for a specific audience. When she wrote Aunt Franc about the meaning of the Great War, she wrote to a mother who had lost a son fighting it. Her goal was not to thoughtfully consider the meaning of world events, but to comfort a woman in mourning. Her statements about the war are filtered through her need to communicate the value of G. P. Cather’s death. Note the fuller context of her statement that the war was the “greatest cause men ever fought for”:

I know how terrible it must be for you that it all happened so far away. But I feel sure that you are glad G. P. lived through his illness the time he was burned, lived to find the work he loved and seemed to be made for, and to give his life to the greatest cause men ever fought for.

You remember, I was staying at your house the week in August, 1914, when this terrible war began. I drove over to Campbell one day, and G. P. took a load of wheat over. I was coming back and met him just on the edge of town, and we stopped to chat about the war news. I believe he always wanted to be a soldier. I can see him sitting on his wagon as plainly as if it were yesterday, in the middle of a peaceful country, with thousands of miles of land and sea



Army field hospital in the ruins of a French church, 1918. Library of Congress.

between him and those far-away armies we were talking about. What would have seemed more improbable than that he should fall, an officer, in France, in one of the greatest battles the world has ever seen. He was restless on a farm; perhaps he was born to throw all his energy into this crisis, and to die among the first and bravest of his country. (*Selected Letters* 256)

The claims Cather is making about the meaning of the Great War are inexorably interwoven with the story of this one man and the mother left mourning for him. She underscores G. P.’s personal success as she characterizes the war and its value in human history: he wasn’t just a soldier, but an *officer* who was “made for” his military work; he didn’t die in just a large battle, but one of the “greatest battles” in world history. When she writes again on Armistice Day a few months later, she says G. P. went to France to “fight for an ideal,” that he was now one of “God’s soldiers,” and that they must all “be thankful that we have both lived to see this day, and to know that our countrymen and kindred have done such noble things to bring it about” (261). All of these statements—the tone, the grandiosity, the idealism—must be understood as authentic, but only authentic within the context of the writing. That is, Cather was writing with the purpose of comforting her aunt, and she must have believed that Franc would respond to such extravagance of sentiment.

I don’t mean to imply, however, that Cather was cynically telling her aunt what she wanted to hear. Instead, Cather’s variance in tone in different letters to different people is an expression of her self in relationship with the person she is writing to. As with all





*W. T. Benda's illustration of soldiers advancing through barbed wire accompanied a poem by Mary Carolyn Davies, "God, Be Good to Her," in the August 1918 issue of Cosmopolitan. Cather's *My Antonia*, containing eight drawings by Benda, would be published the following month. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.*

of us, different aspects of her identity are heightened or minimized when she is in relationship to others. When she writes her Aunt Franc, an educated, patriotic, pious woman who was grieving her son, she empathetically shares the sentiment she assumes her aunt feels. She sees the world, in part, through her aunt's eyes. Likewise, when she writes to other people, such as her friend Elsie Sergeant, a writer and intellectual, her tone about virtually the same topic shifts considerably. Only a few weeks after writing the Armistice Day letter to Franc, Cather writes Sergeant, who is recuperating from an injury in the American Hospital in Paris after being injured by an explosion in France. The letter is a long one, covering Cather's sympathy with Sergeant's injury, her delight with American soldiers returning to New York, her feelings about *My Antonia*, influenza in American training camps, and the rising cost of living. In its discussion of war topics, however, the letter strikes a very different tone than the letters to Aunt Franc. Cather writes to Sergeant with praise for American soldiers, but there is a noted absence of grandiosity about the war's meaning. Instead of making noble claims about the ideals of democracy, Cather instead tells Sergeant about the sweetly naïve soldiers who have returned from France and are in New York. A "funny little marine" she plans to dine with "never wears his *croix de guerre*" medal "except indoors because people look at him so"; the Americans are "so wonderfully, so unsuspectingly picturesque"

and have started using French phrases when they speak: "It's going to make quite a new Broadway language," she tells Sergeant, "like the Norman Conquest!" Her praise of the soldiers is a touch ironic, perhaps condescending. The closest she gets to grand pronouncements about the meaning of the war is to comment that Sergeant's injury was a "share of the unjust suffering of this unjust war," and to note, "It's a queer world we look out upon, isn't it?" (263–265).

Cather's teasing, often informal tone with Sergeant—a tone she uses consistently with her friend—evokes a very different sense of Cather's perspective on the war. In this December 3, 1918, letter, she almost seems to be viewing the war ironically, from a distance, as something that humorously affected the behavior of unsophisticated American men. She briefly notes the suffering of the war, of influenza in the camps, and of Sergeant

herself, but tonally the letter is not despairing. Cather seems detached from the suffering and is delighting in the novelty of soldiers in town. Even the acknowledgement of Sergeant's injury is filtered through wit: "[The newspaper] said you 'got off with slight injuries.' *Got off* somehow conveyed to my mind—well, that you had 'got off'—certainly not that you had most woefully got in!" (263). The solemnity of the Armistice had given way to the celebrations of victory that were rushing over New York, and Cather's sense of the war had shifted. As Sergeant's memoir details, Cather did not have an accurate understanding of her audience when she wrote to her; though she knew Sergeant was injured and confined to the hospital, she didn't properly understand the trauma Sergeant was experiencing in both mind and body, and Cather's tone about the war did not sit well with her reader. "I did not know how to bridge the gap between her idealized war vision," Sergeant wrote of Cather, "and my own stark impressions of war as lived" (*Willa Cather: A Memoir* 165).

In the years immediately following the Armistice, Cather continued to think about the war, of course, as she wrote *One of Ours*. In these years, as she created a novel about a man transformed by his war experience, she must have come to realize that her "idealized war vision," as Sergeant called it, and the general understanding of the war's meaning in the intellectual

and artistic community were at odds. Or perhaps her vision also shifted during those years. Certainly there are hints that it did. Four years after the Armistice, in November 1922, she commented to Ellery Sedgwick that “I think these last few years have been hard on everyone. It seems to me that everything has gone wrong since the Armistice. Why they celebrate that day with anything but fasts and sack-cloth and ashes, I don’t know” (*Selected Letters* 327). This comment probably indicates Cather’s disappointment in the aftermath of the war and the traumatized world left behind. Sergeant noted that Cather was “skeptical about the post-war world” and impatient with some of the emerging intellectual and artistic trends, like Freudian psychology (173), and perhaps this comment is consistent with her famous claim about a shift in cultural values, that the world “broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts” (*Not Under Forty* v). It is hard for me to believe, however, that when she says “everything has gone wrong” she’s thinking of the evolution of intellectual trends. Instead, she must be responding, like so many, to the evaporation of Wilsonian ideals that she had apparently believed motivated U.S. entry into the war.

One wonders, too, if her expression of these sentiments to Sedgwick, the influential editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, should be read alongside other letters to intellectual peers in 1922, letters that mostly seek to defend her approach in *One of Ours*. Some of these letters—especially those written to Dorothy Canfield Fisher and H. L. Mencken—suggest a sensitivity to the possible resistance these readers could have to her portrayal of the war in the novel. Specifically, she seems to want to dispel any notion that the book is meant to defend an idealized version of the war’s meaning. As she writes Mencken in February 1922, in a long paragraph explaining her ambition with *One of Ours*, “Remember: this one boy’s feeling is true. . . . I knew the ugliness of his life and the beauty—to him—

of his release. He can’t help what went over this country, any more than you or I can” (*Selected Letters* 309). Cather wants to separate Claude’s perspective from her own perspective, to decouple Claude Wheeler’s experience from a generalized analysis of the war experience. She takes pains, in a series of letters to her friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher, to claim her authority for writing the book by telling the story of her relationship with G. P. Cather, the cousin who inspired it. She tells of hauling wheat with him early in the war, of learning of his citation and death, and of her psychological and creative fixation on him. “He was in my mind so much that I couldn’t get through him to other things,” she wrote, “I never meant to write a story with a man for the central figure, but with this boy I was all mixed up by accident of birth.” She did not mean it to be a story about the war, only a story about an individual man: “It’s a misfortune for me and my publisher that anything so cruelly personal, so subjective, as this story, should be mixed up with journalism and public events with which the world is weary and of which I know so little” (312).

As Janis Stout has pointed out, these letters to Mencken, Fisher, and others are undoubtedly strategic attempts to provoke positive—or at least empathetic—reviews of the novel. Cather is quite explicit about that in her letter to Mencken: “Please save this lengthy epistle and read it over when you read the book. I may be guilty of special pleading, but I want to give this boy every chance with you,” she writes (310). But the letters also function as a way for Cather to disavow any authoritative perspective on the Great War. She says, in several different ways, that she regrets the war is so present in the book, that she fears her lack of war knowledge will hurt the novel, and that she doesn’t really know anything about the war except for this one man’s experience of it. She wrote Fisher in March 1922, “External events”—that is, the war—“made [the novel], pulled it out of utter unconsciousness, and external events mar it—they run through it ugly and gray and cheap” (313). A week later, she thanked Fisher for her sympathetic reading: “You say you find just what I tried so hard to make; a narrative that is always Claude, and not me writing about either France or doughboys” (315). She insisted the war was incidental, merely the experience through which she understood the subject of the book, Claude Wheeler. As Edith Lewis commented in her memoir, “In *One of Ours* she did not choose the war as a theme, and then set out to interpret it through the experience of one individual. The whole story was born from a personal experience” (122).

This disavowal of interest in the war as such is, some may argue, a pose being struck for the critics who are likely to resist aspects of Claude’s story. And many prominent critics did find something to resist. Mencken, whom she hoped would be more



Boy Scouts participate in the “Wake Up America Day” parade in New York City in support of military recruitment, April 17, 1917. Underwood & Underwood photograph originally published in *National Geographic Magazine*. Library of Congress.



sympathetic, though her scenes in France were fanciful and disingenuous, and comments, misogynistically, that the war scenes are “precious near the war of the standard model of lady novelist. Which Miss Cather surely is not” (O’Connor 142). Fisher’s review, which is very positive, praises Cather’s approach to the war in the novel, particularly her resistance to the intellectual fashions of the moment. “Unlike nearly every one else nowadays who has occasion to mention the war,” Fisher writes, “she has no fear of the bitter tongues of the disillusioned, makes no attempt, as nearly all knowing writers do, to disarm them by giving occasional knowing hints that she is quite as smartly modern and skeptic as they” (O’Connor 119). That may be true in the novel itself, but if Fisher had seen the letter Cather wrote to Mencken, she certainly would have detected a few “knowing hints.”

Given this range of statements Cather made about the Great War throughout the 1910s and 1920s, how are we to understand how she thought about it? One should not expect to find a stable, easily digestible description of Willa Cather’s conclusions about World War I. She did not have a perspective; she had many perspectives. For most of the war, particularly after the U.S. entered it, Cather was not looking at the war analytically, as a journalist or historian might; she was engaged as an individual, original creative artist. The artist, according to Cather’s creed, does not and should not provide an analysis of current events, but instead should pursue the impact of experience on fully realized human characters.¹ Her view on the war was eclipsed by Claude Wheeler’s view. On this point, I take her at her word, repeated continually: she was not interested in the war abstractly. She wrote about the war because it revealed the story and character of Claude.

Cather, generally speaking, embraced this sort of understanding. She found her grip on big events, as so many of us do, through the narrative filter of a subjective, individualized experience. Data didn’t move Cather or provoke her imagination. She needed empathy. Claude came to her from G. P. Cather, but also from other soldiers whom she spoke to in New York in the weeks after the Armistice. The war—and the war’s meaning—came to her through individual stories. That means the war’s meaning varies, depending on for whom and by whom the meaning is being made. The platitudes Cather wrote to her Aunt Franc in 1918 are not easy lies, but the truth of the moment, the truth of the emotional exchange Cather was engaged in when writing the letter.²

Cather’s major statement about the war is, undoubtedly, *One of Ours*. In no other place is her attention so focused on the meaning and experience of the Great War. But, as a Cather novel, that book is not a “statement” at all, but a story and a meditation

on character. It is a war book, and it isn’t a war book. To her, and to the informed reader, it is a book about a man who happened to be revealed to himself through the disruption of a war experience. His distorted, incomplete, naïve understanding of global events was, to her, the view of the Great War that finally mattered, because her artistic commitment was to Claude Wheeler. “Even if the book falls down,” she told Fisher in March 1922, “I’d somehow like Claude himself to win through in spite of that—I’d like to save him outside the book; have him jump from it as from a burning building and catch him in a blanket” (*Selected Letters* 314). The book, a construction created to reveal Claude Wheeler to the audience, can burn to the ground, if only the character, the imperfect person, can survive.

NOTES

1. This creed is discernible, implicitly, in the way Cather’s structured her fictions, but also, more explicitly, in statements like “On the Art of Fiction” in *Willa Cather on Writing* (University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

2. And this subjective entrance into meaning is, of course, what drives much of Cather’s fiction. *My Ántonia*, *A Lost Lady*, *My Mortal Enemy*, *Lucy Gayheart*, and other works find their power in filtering the narrative through a quirky, individual viewpoint. Cather knew one person’s emotional connection to an old friend could evoke empathetic emotion in thousands and thousands of readers.

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Cather's "Doomed" Novel: *One of Ours* and the Chivalric Tradition

Richard C. Harris | Webb Institute

Events in the life of her cousin G. P. Cather, a young man for whom a series of misadventures finally ended in his finding "something splendid" in his military service in World War I, were at the heart of what became Willa Cather's fifth novel, *One of Ours*. "Claude," the title she used until shortly before publication, was a story Cather felt she had to write, and Claude Wheeler was a character with whom she became obsessed. In large part because of the romantic nature of G.P.'s actual experience, Cather came to feel that the novel was "doomed" (Cather to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *Selected Letters* 313). She was convinced that the story she had to tell would be perceived as a romanticized, sentimental "war story." The widespread familiarity with medieval chivalric tradition, revived in literature, art, and music in the nineteenth century and embraced by many early on in the war, then attacked and dismissed by many during and after the war, also undoubtedly led to Cather's concern as to how reviewers and critics would see her novel.

Published in 1922, four years after the war ended, when disillusionment, frustration, and anger about the war had become widespread, *One of Ours* seemed unacceptable to a number of reviewers and critics, chief among them H. L. Mencken, who had decided that only a novel like John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers* (1921) "truthfully" told the story of that war experience. As Cather told Elizabeth Vermorcken shortly after publication of *One of Ours*, "It's disconcerting to have Claude regarded as a sentimental glorification of War" (*Selected Letters* 325), and as she adds in that letter and as her title suggests, Claude Wheeler's story was intended to be the story not of "the American soldier" but of merely one soldier. At the same time, Daniel Clayton asserts that "Cather convincingly evokes the American popular mood during World War I and the romantic aura surrounding camaraderie" (214). Cather's depiction of that mood, based to a great extent on

the chivalric tradition that she captures in *One of Ours*, is no less valid because some by 1922 had come to see the war in other terms. That chivalric tradition was central to the conceptions of war that young men carried onto the battlefield and into the air, and its underlying role in Cather's novel cannot be overestimated.

By the early twentieth century, war had become a distant memory for most Europeans. Ninety-nine years passed between Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in June 1815 and the beginning of World War I in late July 1914. While the Crimean War of the 1850s and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 had once again placed the horrible reality of warfare before some Europeans, these had been relatively brief local conflicts. Wars for most European countries during the latter part of the nineteenth century were fought in their colonial possessions. In the United States more than 620,000 men had died in the Civil War in the 1860s, but even that war had become a memory and the stuff of storytelling and legend. For many, time made the horrors of war seem more distant, sometimes encouraging a more selective nostalgic view of the military experience; memories often came to focus on camaraderie and events apart from actual battle.



The 1896 Kelmscott Press edition of William Morris's *The Well at the World's End* featured four woodcut illustrations after Edward Burne-Jones, of which this is one. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917.



More importantly, the conception of warfare that many men and women, in both Europe and the United States, brought to the war that began in 1914 was largely based on notions derived from the nineteenth-century revival of and interest in medieval and chivalric traditions that began as the Napoleonic Wars drew to a close. The key figure in this revival initially was Sir Walter Scott. *Ivanhoe*, the first of Scott's medieval romances, published in 1819, was the first fictional "best seller." Scott makes it clear in his "Dedicatory Epistle" to the novel that he has claimed and taken "the fair license due to the author of a fictitious composition" in his handling of historical material (18). As David Cecil has said, Scott's intention in his medieval novels was to "combine the substance of a realist with the imagination of the romantic" (287). Scott addresses his opening remarks in the Dedicatory Epistle to a Reverend Doctor Jonas Dryasdust, an "antiquarian" who wants historical characters and events to be described with an exacting accuracy and is appalled by the romance writer's "polluting the well of history" and "impressing upon the rising generation false ideas" of the age that he describes (17).

That latter phrase might well be seen to characterize much of the literature and painting that seized upon and idealized medieval characters, events, and themes throughout the decades following the publication of Scott's tales. Prominent examples include Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859–1885), a poetic rendering of Arthurian legends; the Pre-Raphaelite movement that began around 1850, led by painters Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones; and William Morris's tapestry renditions of the Arthurian legends and his novel *The Well at the World's End* (1896). According to World War I historian Paul Fussell, "There was hardly a literate man who fought between 1914 and 1918 who hadn't read [Morris's novel] and been powerfully excited by it in his youth" (135). Especially popular in the United States were the illustrated medieval tales of Howard Pyle, whose *Otto of the Silver Hand* (1888) was one of Willa Cather's favorite novels when she was young girl, and whose *Men of Iron* (1891) was especially influential in forming the early ideas about men at war of Ernest Hemingway's generation. Soon after it began, the Great War came to be seen by the Allied forces as a "great crusade," recalling again those medieval journeys to the Holy Land that,

according to legend, were undertaken by good Christian knights to defend both Christianity and civilization. And Cather, of course, was very familiar with Richard Wagner's "Ring Cycle," four operas appearing over three decades (1854–1882) based on the twelfth-century German heroic epic *The Nibelungenlied*. This interest in the Middle Ages is reflected in Claude Wheeler's thesis on Joan of Arc, who becomes for him "a living figure in his mind"; "about her figure there gathered a luminous cloud, like dust, with soldiers in it . . . the banner with lilies . . . a great church . . . cities with walls" (92–93).

All of these works reflect a romanticized view of medieval society, or rather of that portion of medieval society that held the chivalric ideal at the heart of its values and attitudes. Bold knights and fair maidens, good versus evil, and principles such as courage, honor, and justice were central to this tradition. Mounted warriors were distinguished from the common soldier; knights on horseback were gentlemen in arms, brave warriors who acted with integrity and honor and fought for goodness and justice. While the *adventures* of knights remained a part of the storytelling and art of the nineteenth century, in the popular imagination the *values* that they and the tradition represented ultimately assumed a greater importance.

Virtues fundamental to the tradition were Duty, Courage, Honor, Brotherhood, and Sacrifice, all of which in the Western tradition were to some extent associated with Christianity. Although not all medieval knights fought on horseback, the romanticized chivalric tradition often did center on the *chevalier* or mounted warrior. The single knight on horseback (the word "chivalry" comes from the French word *cheval*, horse) at some point, of course, gave way to the cavalry. Ernest Meissonnier's painting *1807, Friedland* (1875; see page 22), which celebrates one of Napoleon's greatest victories, is typical in its glorification of the nineteenth-century mounted warrior. In World War I's first real confrontation between French and German forces—100 years after the Napoleonic era and 500 years after the end of the Middle Ages—French cavalry actually charged the German lines armed with lances. British General Alexander Haig was convinced from the outset until the end of the war that the cavalry was the key to victory in any battle. The lances were quickly replaced by rifles, but



The Accolade (1901) by Edmund Blair Leighton. Private Collection. Wikimedia Commons.

the concept remained the same: after an artillery barrage, after foot soldiers had broken the enemy line, the cavalry would charge into battle to win the day. This traditional notion of how a battle should be fought also remained strong in the United States. According to historian Gary Mead, even after three years of modern warfare in Europe, cadets at West Point still studied past wars, and “The instructors continued to emphasize cavalry tactics and made no attempt to teach cadets anything about trench warfare” (172).

Writing from France in April 1917, John Masefield mused, “I sometimes see cavalry, & feel in the Middle Ages again” (261). He adds in another letter written several weeks later that he doesn’t understand how anyone can believe that a cavalry charge across No Man’s Land, through shell holes and trenches and barbed wire, could possibly succeed.¹ The cavalry, he contends, “belongs to a past age in war, with the battleaxe & the British cocked hat.” The cavalry “look pretty, & they clink, & catch the ladies’ hearts & all the rest of it; but time has passed; & though soldiers naturally are loth [sic] to give up so many helps to attracting female interest, the sight of a cavalryman today ought to be limited to outside the good old war museum in Whitehall.”² Writing only weeks after the United States declared war on Germany, Masefield says, “the thing now is to use cavalry in the skies & have whole vast divisions of aeroplanes” (283).

In fact, when Masefield wrote this letter, the old cavalry charge had already given way to a new type of cavalry charge with the introduction of the tank in the fall of 1916. Canadian soldier/painter Alfred Théodore Joseph Bastien’s *Cavalry and Tanks at Arras* (1918; see cover) shows both the old and new cavalries. Despite the suggestion of the heroic tradition shown by Bastien, the new, mechanized cavalry initially met with only limited success; the first tanks were slow and lacked maneuverability, and thus became easy targets for enemy fire. However, as the military historian B. H. Liddell Hart commented in 1925, “The tank assault of tomorrow is but the long-awaited re-birth of the cavalry charge . . . as the cavalry-tank replaces the cavalry horse. Thus to paraphrase, ‘The Cavalry is dead! Long live the Cavalry’” (quoted in Frantzen 157).

Old notions of warfare did not die easily, however. When it became apparent that life on the ground and in the trenches would in no way meet the generally accepted notion of chivalric warfare, there were the fliers, who were dubbed “the knights of the sky.” Lord David Cecil, speaking before the House of Commons on October 29, 1917, declared, “They are the knighthood of this war, without fear and without reproach; and they recall the legendary days of chivalry, not merely by the daring of their exploits, but by the nobility of their spirit” (quoted in Horne 199). World War I historian Paul Fussell refers to the trenches as “the troglodyte world” (36). Alistair Horne makes the point particularly well:

Confronted with a “drab war of amorphous anonymity . . . the public yearned for identifiable heroes,” who still engaged in single combat (200). The war in the air certainly provided heroes in the chivalric tradition. As French infantryman Raymond Jubert said, “They [pilots] are the only ones who in this war have the life or death of which one dreams” (Horne 199). The feeling is also obvious in the comments of the German infantryman Ernst Jünger, who in *Storm of Steel* speaks enviously of those men for whom “a chivalrous duel” was still possible (Fritzsche 63).

Several examples illustrate the point. The Baron von Richthofen, the “Red Baron,” a former cavalry officer, recognized as the greatest ace of all, scoring eighty “victories,” was both a national hero and a world-renowned figure. The funeral of Max Immelmann, the first German ace killed in the war, was attended by twenty generals and a crown prince. In 1916 the French ace Jean Navarre engaged in more than 250 combats over Verdun. His countryman Charles Nungesser, though wounded seventeen times, continued to fly though he had to be lifted into and out of his plane. French ace Georges Guynemer, who could trace his ancestry back to Charlemagne, scored fifty-four victories. One day he flew into the clouds and never returned to his home field. Although the wreckage of his plane was found and he was confirmed killed by several sources, his body was never recovered by the French and he was officially listed as “Missing.” Many French schoolchildren were taught that God had simply reached down on that day and taken him into heaven (Horne 200).

Most Americans who went to fly in France were from wealthy and influential families, many of them Ivy League students who left college to seek adventure. In *One of Ours* Cather refers to them as “airmen whose deeds were tales of wonder” (605). Their devil-may-care attitude was typified by each member’s taking a sip of whiskey from “the bottle of death” before a mission. When the American Lafayette Escadrille was broken up in February 1918, every one of the original group who had survived to that point (three of seven) was found to be physically unfit to join the new American Air Corps because of previous wounds or injuries. First World War planes, made of wood, wire, and canvas, or observation balloons filled with hydrogen or coal gas were easily damaged or destroyed, and in most cases pilots had no parachutes. Despite the horrible injuries and deaths of pilots (they often burned to death as their planes plummeted toward the earth), the chivalric notions of honorable warfare remained especially strong among them, and a chivalric code was generally observed by both sides. A pilot shot down over enemy lines was given a proper burial by his enemy; a well-known pilot, such as Richthofen or Quentin Roosevelt, received a full military funeral. By mid-1916, however, even the nature of the war in the air had begun to change, as the Germans





Ernest Meissonier's 1807, *Friedland (1875)*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Henry Hilton, 1887.

developed the idea of the *Jagdstaffel*, the hunting pack. Now strategy increasingly involved pilots working together, sometimes in groups of dozens. Those pilots who flew regularly could expect to live only about two to three weeks (Mason 74).

An early end to one's life, of course, meant that one could take part in the "great adventure" and die without any of his dreams compromised or shattered, a point Cather makes about Claude Wheeler in the last scene of *One of Ours*: "He died believing his own country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be. And those were beautiful beliefs to die with. Perhaps it was as well to see that vision, and then to see no more" (604). In writing this about Claude, Cather almost certainly had in mind the comment of John Jay Chapman, father of airman Victor Chapman, killed at Verdun in 1916 and the probable prototype for Cather's Victor Morse, who wrote in his introduction to the volume of his son's letters home that his son had "died the most glorious death, and at the most glorious time of life to die, especially for him with his ideals" (*Victor Chapman's Letters from France* 41).

The comments of numerous First World War soldiers make clear their sense that they were going to participate in a noble venture, analogous to a medieval crusade. For example, American poet Alan Seeger, author of "I Have a Rendezvous with Death," declared, "Imagine how thrilling it will be . . . marching towards the front with the noise of battle growing continually before us."

The last entry in Seeger's diary, for June 28, 1916, on the eve of the first Battle of the Somme, reads, "We go up to the attack tomorrow. [This] will probably be the biggest thing yet. We have the honor of marching in the first wave . . . I am glad to be going in the first wave. If you are in this thing at all it is best to be in to the limit. And this is the supreme experience" (211). He died six days later. And even Siegfried Sassoon, who became an outspoken critic of the war and its leaders, admitted, "Like most of the human race, I had always wanted to be a hero" (quoted in Egremont 62). Like Seeger and the fliers, Claude Wheeler willingly confronts "the bright face of danger" head on (554). This idea is repeated throughout much of the war poetry, especially that of the earlier years of the war. Seeger's "Ode in Memory of the American Volunteers Fallen for France," written to be read on Decoration Day May 30, 1916, thanks France, which opened for American soldiers "your glorious ranks," and

Gave them that grand occasion to excel,
That chance to live the life most free from stain
And that rare privilege of dying well.

Seeger describes the dead as "brave hearts," "fallen warriors" "clad in glory" whose "gallant charge[s]" on French battlefields had been carried out in attempts to realize their "high mission" (170–74). In his early war sonnet "Peace," Rupert Brooke thanks God for providing a whole generation of young men with the opportunity to be reborn, transformed by the chance to be heroic:

“Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His Hour” (1914 and Other Poems 11). In a companion sonnet, “The Dead,” Brooke wrote,

Honour has come back as a king, to earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
And Nobleness walks in our ways again;
And we have come into our heritage.
(1914 and Other Poems 13)

As Janet Sharistianian points out, “Claude’s eagerness to sacrifice himself for France” may have been placed in “high relief” by the attitudes and comments made by Cather’s former University of Nebraska European History professor, Fred Morrow Fling. Sharistianian notes that, given Cather’s penchant for keeping up with local and state news after she left Nebraska, “she must have heard about Fling’s 1917 public assertion, made before the April declaration of war, that ‘I’m no fire-eater, but there are some things worse than war. The young man who gives his life for some great heroic thing, to humanity . . . has lived a long life though he dies at 21’” (96). Fling, of course, was only one of many to speak out in this vein.

Central to these notions of warfare, it should be remembered, was the role of women, initially those fair medieval maidens who were to be respected, honored, and often rescued and protected by the worthy knight, and whose blessing, admiration, and perhaps affection would be offered in return. The role of women in carrying on the old chivalric tradition and code was vividly depicted, for example, in pre-war years in paintings by Frank Dicksee and Edmund Blair Leighton (see page 20). During the war, the tradition was carried on in rallies throughout Europe and the United States in which women urged men to enlist and, if necessary, shamed them into doing so. In London, “Women stood on street corners, handing out white feathers, an ancient symbol of cowardice, to young men not in uniform” (Hochschild 150). The medieval sentiment is reflected in the war efforts of the well-known British activist, Emmeline Pankhurst, as is obvious in her comment, “I want men to go to battle like the knight of old, who knelt before the altar and vowed that he would keep his sword stainless and [act] with absolute honour to his nation” (Hochschild 107).

As Allen J. Frantzen notes, in the medieval tradition the role of women was fundamental to notions of chivalry, but what he calls “the Old Chivalry,” based to a great extent on “the youthful feminine ideal,” gave way in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the “New Chivalry,” which exalted “the youthful masculine ideal” (145). One of the more interesting manifestations of this idea involved Sir Robert Baden-Powell, who founded the Boy Scouts in 1912. His stated goals of educating boys in the acceptance of proper principles of thought, feeling, and behavior were summed up in

his standard issue Scout manual. In 1916, however, Baden-Powell also published *The Young Knights of the Empire: Their Code, and Further Scout Yarns*, in which he explicitly tied his aims to medieval tradition and values. “The Boy Scouts,” Frantzen declares, “are a paradigmatic link between the chivalry of duty, with its call for bloodless self-sacrifice, and the war” (149, 151). Boys became men and bloody self-sacrifice would, of course, become all too common, as Wilfred Owen suggests in his poem “Arms and the Boy,” in which he chillingly describes a young boy, fascinated by the “cold steel” of a bayonet blade and the feel of “blunt bullet-leads/Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads” (*The Poems of Wilfred Owen* 131).

Another factor that entered into the development of the popular attitude early on in the war was what Cather scholar Mary Ryder has called “the greatest propaganda campaign in history in support of a war” (147). As she notes, quoting Mock and Larson’s *Words That Won the War*, “The Committee on Public Information had done its work so well that there was a burning eagerness to believe, to conform, to feel the exaltation of joining in a great and selfless enterprise” (147). Like rallies, posters were very effective tools in recruiting and raising money. The public was bombarded with materials informed by the chivalric tradition, the famous Haskell Coffin poster of Joan of Arc being only one of them (see page 24). Postcards, popular songs, and film were also keys to the war effort; for example, between 1914 and 1920 almost 10,000 songs related to the war were published in the United States alone, and government films showing American soldiers in France as well as evidence of the destruction of the war, did much to popularize that still relatively new medium.

Romantic notions, of course, gave way to the horrible reality of modern warfare. Wilfred Owen speaks of “carnage incomparable,” and men who “stood in Hell” and died “as cattle” (*The Poems of Wilfred Owen* 146, 125, 76). In “Dulce et Decorum Est” he dismisses out of hand the line from Horace’s *Odes* commonly translated from the Latin as “It is a sweet and proper thing to die for one’s country,” calling it “the old Lie” (117). Thomas Hardy’s “Then and Now” makes a final bow to the chivalrous ideals that so many brought to the war, recalling a time “When battles were fought/With a chivalrous sense of Should and Ought”:

In the open they stood,
Man to man in his knightlihood:
They would not deign
To profit by a stain
On the honourable rules,
Knowing that practise perfidy no man durst
Who in the heroic schools

Was nursed. (*The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy* 545)



Hardy's subsequent references to the "sly slaughter . . . overhead, under water"—i.e., to airplanes, dirigibles, and submarines—suggest modern, mechanical and technological warfare, the increasingly impersonal and less than "honorable" methods of waging war, a far cry from the classical *aristeia* (individual combat between two heroes) of the *Iliad*, the noble combat between Hal and Hotspur in the last act of Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*, or any number of scenes in nineteenth-century romantic literature.

Why, then, did Willa Cather think her story—not a war story, she insisted, but the story of "a red-headed prairie boy" (*Willa Cather in Person* 39)—was "doomed"? Through his military service her cousin G. P. had, in fact, come to believe in those virtues fundamental to the chivalric code: Duty, Honor, Courage, Brotherhood, and Sacrifice. Claude Wheeler declares near the end of *One of Ours*, "Ideals were not archaic things, beautiful and impotent; they were the real sources of power among men. As long as that was true, and now he knew it was true—he had come all this way to find out—he had no quarrel with Destiny" (553–54). The war had been for him, as for so many others, "the rough-necks' own miracle" (413). Despite her abhorrence of warfare itself, Cather was proud of her cousin; she declared in a letter to her Aunt Franc, G. P.'s mother, on November 11, 1918, that he and others who had fought in France had been "God's soldiers" (*Selected Letters* 261). Although Cather was offering a grieving mother her condolences, the comment doubtless reflects Cather's own feeling about G. P., Claude, and the war.

Edith Lewis tells us that when she and Cather travelled to France in 1920, while Cather was writing *One of Ours*, "She said she wanted to live in the Middle Ages. . . . The Middle Ages may not seem to have had much to do with the story she was then writing; but in a way they did. She had to get the feeling of the whole of France to write about it" (119–20). References to the chivalric tradition are clear in several places in the novel, for example in the lengthy comments on Joan of Arc in book 1, chapter 11, and in the mention of the heart of Richard the

Lion-hearted in Rouen in book 5, chapter 4. They are introduced more subtly in Cather's allusion to Wagner's operatic interpretations of medieval German legend. Answering a reader's letter³ shortly after *One of Ours* was published, Cather remarked in response to his query about yet another traditional medieval tale, "You are the first sleuth who has dug the Parsifal theme out of Claude Wheeler—and I thought I had buried it so deep—

deep! Yet, all through the first part of the book, I kept promising myself that I would put 'The Blameless Fool, by Pity Enlightened' [a line from Wagner's *Parsifal*] on the title page, where I eventually put a line from Vachel Lindsay" (*Selected Letters* 328). (The line from the Lindsay poem, "Bidding the eagles of the west fly on," serves as both the epigraph to the novel and as the title of its book 5.) In his comments on this letter, James Woodress says, "Claude is a sort of Parsifal character seeking the holy grail, but ironically he does not succeed and dies in his quest." Cather's use of Lindsay's poem, according to Woodress, suggests the western agrarian populists' defeat at the hands of eastern financial interests in the election of 1896 and several that followed, and therefore "thematically it is consistent with" what Woodress calls Claude's "futile sacrifice in the Great War" (328).

Woodress's interpretation, however, bears a closer look. In Wagner's opera, Parsifal is characterized early on as a "poor fool," not because he is stupid, but because he is a naïf who lacks experience and understanding, and is thus prone to making mistakes. (He first enters having just killed a beautiful swan, a deed he regrets.)⁴ Cather's use of this allusion to young Parsifal certainly suggests parallels to the life of G. P. Cather, who also had spent years searching for a sense of identity and purpose, and whose life had been characterized by one mistake after another. Writing to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, probably in March 1922, Cather said, "The war gave him [Claude] to me. I never knew him till then. And it gave him to himself. He never knew himself till then" (*Selected Letters* 314). Both "fools" undergo a transformation. The key to Parsifal's transformation is his developing a sense of compassion for the suffering of Amfortas;



The Haskell Coffin poster of Joan of Arc (1918). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

the key to the transformation in the lives of G. P. Cather and Claude Wheeler is the sense of purpose—and the “something splendid” they thereby discover in their military experience. In Wagner’s opera, Parsifal heals Amfortas, and Parsifal does not die at the end of the opera. Parsifal’s actions clearly have not been futile. Woodress seems to suggest, however, that because Claude does die, he has died in vain, a notion that is contrary not only to the chivalric code of values and the idea of “noble sacrifice” but also, I believe, to Cather’s own interpretation of Claude’s life and death.

Cather was certainly familiar with the chivalric concept developed in the decades before 1914, and a part of her, at least, respected that tradition and saw the war in those terms. Although her views of the war itself may have changed, she too early on was swept up in the patriotic fervor of the time. Writing to Dorothy Canfield Fisher in early April 1922, Cather remarked that the war “really *was* like the Crusades” (*Selected Letters* 318). One might ask why, if Cather kept promising herself that she would put “The Blameless Fool, by Pity Enlightened” on the title page, she did not. Was her burying the allusion to Parsifal the result of her sense that her story was already “doomed,” as she indicated to Fisher (*Selected Letters* 313)? Would “Claude” be seen by critics and reviewers as only another example of a nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century chivalric romance in the tradition of Scott, Tennyson, Burne-Jones, Pyle, and others, which by 1922 was considered artistically unacceptable? Or would a more obvious reference too obviously, and thus less artistically, make the comparison between characters? To tell truthfully the story of Claude’s experiences and his finding a sense of purpose and direction in his life, Cather could not avoid what would have seemed to many readers in 1922 and after a very romantic, perhaps even sentimental, point of view. As a number of critics for several decades now have argued, however, Cather’s novel is in many ways ironic; she does acknowledge the wounds, both physical and psychological, suffered by so many of those who returned from the war, now thoughtful, melancholy, indifferent, or broken, sometimes to “quietly die by their own hand” (600, 605). Claude may have been naïve, but Cather was not. Despite her awareness of the cruelty of war, she was deeply moved by Claude Wheeler, whose admission, “I never knew there was anything worth living for, till this war came on” (552), reflected those of many others who went “over there.”

The “collision between innocence and awareness,” as Fussell calls it (5), haunted a whole generation and continues to intrigue readers of World War I literature. He argues that the clash between generally accepted ideals and the reality

of World War I in fact created a sense of irony that became fundamental to the world view of the rest of the century (35). According to Bernard Bergonzi’s 1965 study, World War I was, supposedly, the “heroes’ twilight.” Allen Frantzen notes at the outset of his study of the Great War that, according to much “popular history,” “Chivalry was born in the court of King Arthur and laid to rest in the trenches of World War I” (1). Yet, in the United States, in 1919, soldiers who had been wounded and families that had lost a loved one in the war received a certificate showing Columbia, sword in hand, knighting a kneeling American soldier clad in his First World War uniform. The caption reads, “Columbia Gives to Her Son the Accolade of the New Chivalry of Humanity.” Despite the disillusionment engendered by the First World War, chivalric notions did, in fact, survive though, as Philip Larkin declared in his 1960 poem “MCMXIV,” “Never such innocence again” (127–28). According to James Hannah, World War I “established a very real boundary between the old ways of seeing and a modernity best characterized by its attitudes of irony and skepticism” (quoted in Stout 2). In her story of one young man from the Nebraska prairie, Willa Cather recognizes both the old and the new ways of seeing the Great War.

NOTES

1. John Ruskin’s 1866 lecture on war to the Royal Military Academy in Woolrich, England, published in *The Crown of Wild Olive* later that year, reflects much of this mid-nineteenth-century interest in the chivalric tradition and also anticipates the mechanistic warfare that was to come a half century later. All honorable actions, Ruskin says, “rest on the force of the two main words in the great verse, “*integer vitæ, scelerisque purus*” [“Upright in life and pure of guilt”—Horace]. You have vowed your life to England; give it her wholly;—a bright, stainless, perfect life—a knightly life. Because you have to fight with machines instead of lances, there may be a necessity for more ghastly danger, but there is none for less worthiness of character, than in olden time” (209).

2. For an interesting description of the cavalry charge in both medieval and modern terms, see Winston Churchill, “The Cavalry Charge at Omdurman.”

3. Cather’s reply to this letter was addressed to “Mr. Johns” (*Selected Letters* 328). Mr. Johns is believed to be the American poet Orrick Johns.

4. Wagner’s use of the term “fool” merits special attention. It is important to note that Parsifal is described as “a *blameless fool*” (italics mine). Moreover, in the opera the noun Wagner uses



to describe Parsifal is *Narr*, which is certainly the least negative of a half dozen German words for fool, viz., *August*, *Blöder*, *Dummkopf*, *Junge*, and *Kerl*, all which suggest varying degrees of stupidity. *Narr* designates the innocent naïf. (My thanks to Wagner scholar John DiGaetani for confirming this distinction.) Cather surely recollects fictionally her own naïveté in 1902 in several incidents in the novel, such as Claude's mistaking Rouen's Church of St. Ouen for the Cathedral of Rouen (449–52). (See Cather to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *Selected Letters* 316.) For further discussion of the role of Wagner's *Parsifal* in *One of Ours*, see Kennicott.

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The Cost of Cheese and Hapless Sergeant Hicks: Measures of Value in *One of Ours*

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The small scene with which Willa Cather opens book 5 of *One of Ours*, her Pulitzer Prize-winning war novel, has received a surprising amount of critical attention. Guy Reynolds, Steven Trout, Julie Olin-Ammentorp, Mary Ryder, and Debra Rae Cohen have all discussed aspects of what is referred to as the “scene in the cheese shop” or the “cheese shop scene.” No doubt such notice is due in part to its structural position, opening as it does the novel’s last, climactic section which moves inexorably toward Claude Wheeler’s death. With its ambiguously heroic title (“Bidding the Eagles of the West Fly On”), book 5 calls into question all ideas of heroism or other abstractions used to give meaning to war. The second reason the cheese shop scene has received such scrutiny is due to its ambiguities, its puzzling, open ending, and the uneasy, unclear nature of the transaction between the American soldiers and the French shopkeeper. These ambiguities have made the scene a mysterious emblem through which one might try to discern the novel’s various meanings and to parse out Cather’s complicated attitudes toward the Great War in which so many young men, including her cousin G. P. Cather, died. Some scholars read the scene within larger patterns of American cultural history, specifically the rise of American hegemony and cultural imperialism. Such analyses, drawing on post-colonial criticism, offer important insights and useful language and yield illuminating and provocative interpretations. This essay, however, takes as its starting point not the larger historical picture, but a much smaller focus, the lived experience of the characters in the

French cheese shop. Reading from this inside-out point of view forces us to judge the characters’ actions at a closer distance and in a more personal way. Cather’s technique would seem to warrant such an approach. By so obviously and pointedly shifting points of view throughout the scene—from Claude Wheeler to Sergeant Hicks to the owner of the cheese shop,¹ she insists we understand the events from three different perspectives, and then that we, like the shop owner, try to make sense of them. Perhaps from an analysis of these layered perspectives, we can come nearer to an understanding of Cather’s attitude toward her characters and their historical situation.

The cheese shop scene describes the American soldiers of Claude’s platoon on their first day ashore after their harrowing voyage across the Atlantic on the troop carrier, the *Anchises*. The crossing itself raises questions about waste and heroism in war, for during the voyage Claude’s company lost twenty-five men, not in battle with German U-boats but in a far less glorious death to influenza. The cheese shop scene has three parts, each with its own focal character and tone. The first part of the scene belongs to Claude, our passive hero, beset as he has so often been by events and endeavoring to rise to the occasion. The tone here is oddly humorous. Cather’s depiction of the opening action is farcical with all of the broad, physical comedy of slapstick. Claude, lost in the unfamiliar city and hot from wandering stony streets, is resting under a shade tree when nine men from his company, equally lost and uncertain, come upon him. Each soldier is armed with a long stick of French bread, and the group is searching for some cheese. Suddenly conscious of his duty as a leader of men, Claude pulls himself together and marches them back to the bakery, where, in his best phrase-book French, he addresses the proprietor: “*Avez-vous du fromage, Madame?*” “*Du fromage?*” the baker shrieks. Tugging and shouting, she pulls the soldiers out of her shop, pushes them down the street like a pack of “stubborn burros,” and shoves them into a tiny cheese shop (425–427). Throughout this opening bit, the narrator’s tone is distant, bemused, and slightly sarcastic; the heavy irony suggests the darkness behind the humor. When Claude finally screws up his courage to speak French, the narrator tells us he is performing “the bravest act of his life.” When his rudimentary French is understood, Claude is “as much startled as if his revolver had gone off in his belt” (426). These sardonic references to guns and bravery remind us that,



Street scene, Dieppe. Cather’s description of the locale for the “street of little shops” suggests Dieppe, which she visited in 1902, although most AEF forces arriving in France in 1917 landed at Saint-Nazaire (*One of Ours* 761).



although these boys are still playing soldier, real guns and true bravery will be soon be necessary.

Once in the sour-smelling cheese shop, the action becomes more hectic, less comic, and the tone becomes darker as Cather shifts our focus from Claude to his men. The American soldiers are called “dirty pigs and worse than the Boches” by the shop owner, whose wares are decimated by the hungry, wolfish, and oblivious men: “The little white cheese that lay on green leaves disappeared into *big mouths*. Before she could save it, Hicks had *split* a big round cheese *through the middle* and was *carving it up* like a melon” (427, emphasis mine). Cather’s language here suggests both gluttony and brutality. Calling them “big stupid” (429), the shopkeeper roundly scolds the soldiers in French they cannot understand. Sergeant Hicks realizes something is amiss and asks Claude: “What’s the matter with Mother, Lieutenant? . . . Ain’t she here to sell goods?” (427). It then dawns on Claude that he and his men are wolfing down scarce and rationed food. Too late, he says, “We ought to have thought of that; this is a war country. I guess we’ve about cleaned her out.” Unconcerned, Sergeant Hicks suggests they placate the shopkeeper with sugar, another commodity, scarce in her country, that Americans possess in abundance. The fact that the soldiers are so blithely oblivious points not only to America’s great wealth but to its isolation and safety since 1914.

Such presumptuous ignorance provokes some critics’ severe disapproval, which for the most part falls directly on Sergeant Hicks, the only named enlisted man in the scene. In this passage, the narrator again emphasizes details which evoke the hard facts of the waiting trenches, noting especially the soldiers’ boisterous good humor, their strong, healthy bodies, and the beauty of their youth: “their bronzed faces with white teeth and pale eyes. . . . Ten large, well-shaped hands with straight fingers, the open palms full of crumpled notes (428).²

“Come on, ma’m, don’t be bashful. What’s the matter, ain’t this good money?” (428). With that question the point of view shifts for a final time. The last part of the scene belongs to the cheese shop owner. Failing to stop the wholesale consumption of her stock, she quickly tries to calculate how much to charge the men for the cheese they’ve already eaten. Deciding finally on “two-and-a-half times the market price,” she makes scrupulously correct change and sees them out the door with great relief,

thinking: “She liked them well enough, but she did not like to do business with them” (429). Standing in the street, watching the cheerful and friendly “brown band” amble away, she tries to analyze her irritation. They have unwittingly made a joke of her life values, just as they have made a shambles of her shop. They are “grown men who could not count” (430); her currency was as play money to them: “they didn’t know what it meant in the world” (428). As a careful businesswoman, she puts the transaction into its larger economic context. She has heard rumors of this army’s fabulous wealth—“An army in which the men had meat

for breakfast, and ate more every day than the French soldiers at the front got in a week”—yet she is kind or broad-minded enough to distinguish between the men and their extravagant culture. She may like Americans as individuals “well enough,” but she hates American “waste and prodigality” (429). American supply depots are the “wonder of France,” something out of a fairy-tale—“piled high like mountain ranges . . . everything the world was famished for” (430). Having lived four years in a “world of hard facts,” she has contempt for the Americans’ careless, disrespectful extravagance. Besides necessary supplies and war materiel, the American Expeditionary Forces, the AEF, “brought shiploads of useless things, too. And useless people. Shiploads of women . . . some said they came to dance with the officers.” Although these rumors are

no doubt exaggerated, the Frenchwoman knows that America’s entry has shifted what she conceives to be the nature of war: “All this was not war,—any more than having money thrust at you by grown men who could not count, was business. It was an invasion, like the other. The first destroyed material possessions, and this threatened everybody’s integrity” (430).

The cheese shop scene ends with a coda. As the American soldiers are leaving, the two in front trip on a sunken church step, after which the whole group proceeds inside to explore the sanctuary: “It was in their minds that they must not let a church escape, any more than they would let a Boche escape” (430). The Frenchwoman laughs aloud at the misstep, causing the men to look back and give her a friendly wave. She responds with a “smile that was both friendly and angry” (429).

This cross-cultural encounter is disconcerting and leaves the reader with an uncomfortable sense that something is seriously awry in this exchange between putatively friendly nationals. Most critics



Street scene, Dieppe.

who comment on the scene ignore its stagey, farcical beginning and concentrate on the interaction between the French *fromagière* and the American doughboy, seeing in Sergeant Hicks's bad manners and culturally insensitive behavior a critique of American soldiers and, more generally, of American cultural imperialism, although Trout calls it "amusing" (89), and Cohen notes the jocularity of Sergeant Hicks's "merry" band (191). Perhaps, in her insertion of this quasi-comic interlude, Cather is borrowing a page from Shakespeare. A fixer of car engines, Sergeant Hicks is most certainly a "rude mechanical," Shakespeare's term for the Athenian tradesmen who perform a comic version of a tragic play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the part of the scene focused on Claude, the narrator's detached, sardonic tone reminds one of Jaques's sour comments in *As You Like It*. And the bleak humor of the grave-digging scene in *Hamlet* may have suggested a model for Cather as she struggled to find her own tone, approach, or attitude toward the unimaginable horror that was the First World War.

In Julie Olin-Ammentorp's reading of the cheese shop scene, Sergeant Hicks exhibits some of the most benighted and embarrassing aspects of Americans as they travel abroad. Olin-Ammentorp discusses the doughboys' behavior in the cheese shop within the context of Willa Cather's and Edith Wharton's clearly justifiable

concern that American soldiers would comport themselves like boors in France. Francophiles both, during the war Cather and Wharton used their literary skills and prestige to educate young American recruits, writing tracts and giving speeches describing French manners and customs, and most importantly suggesting to the Americans that they keep open minds and develop a receptive rather than superior attitude toward foreign experience. Olin-Ammentorp finds Claude's behavior exemplary, but Hicks's behavior "typifies American soldiers at their worst" (11).

Trout argues that the soldiers' behavior should be read within the context of the American Army's project to make a homogenous, patriotically "American" army from an ethnically and geographically diverse group of recruits. The AEF commanders sought to indoctrinate the soldiers into a new kind of patriotic loyalty. According to Trout, "Home now meant [not Kansas or Nebraska but] America, and for thousands of soldiers . . . the experience of going 'over there' ultimately became an education in the awesome power of the United States as a collective force on the world stage and in the advantages of the American way of life above all others" (83). (This is, of course, precisely the boastful attitude

that Cather and Wharton were, according to Olin-Ammentorp, so strenuously protesting.) Trout, following historian Mark Meigs and using distinctions drawn by cultural theorist Jonathan Culler, establishes that the command of the AEF worked systematically to ensure that Americans who served abroad "pass[ed] through foreign cultures not as travelers, attuned to the possibilities of self-enrichment represented by cultural difference, but as tourists and consumers" (85). Tourists are passive, detached, and recreation-oriented shoppers, and to Trout, Claude and his company in their determination "not to let a church escape them" show themselves to be such shallow sightseers, eagerly checking off a guide book's list of monuments, consuming the foreign by collecting its artifacts and buying souvenirs. Trout points out that the legendary "acquisitiveness of the American soldiers [was] enhanced by their high rate of pay," and for him the behavior of Hicks and company exemplifies "the crass insularity of the typical American tourist" (89). Cohen follows Trout, suggesting that Hicks and his companions are participating in a competitive power display of wasteful consumption orchestrated by the AEF (191).³

Mary R. Ryder is by far the kindest critic in her discussion of the American doughboy as represented by Sergeant Hicks. She pays particular attention to Cather's use of the contrasting words "boys" and "men," and to the contexts in which these words appear, concluding that the former suggests "naïve idealism," the latter "mature realism," and that Cather's alternation between the two reflects her divided attitudes toward the war (152). Ryder sees the doughboy as a naïve bumbler, a version of R. W. B. Lewis's American Adam exploring the Old World instead of the new (145). Yet she too condemns the soldiers' behavior, especially when they promise to return to Beaufort where they have been billeted for two "idyllic" weeks. Not only will they return to marry their sweethearts, but they will put in waterworks for the town. Ryder finds this offer an example of "cultural bluster" and overweening confidence: "attractive in its idealism and repulsive in its arrogance" (150).

The words of these critics—"crass," "insular," "repulsive," "the worst"—are strong, but does Sergeant Hicks deserve such severe condemnation? Hicks's behavior in the cheese shop is certainly egregious. Barging in, neglecting a respectful greeting, gobbling the merchandise before it was paid for *is* presumptuous, rude, and unthinking behavior by anyone's standards, but are there not explanations (if not excuses) for Hicks and the others acting



Street scene, Saint-Nazaire.



in this way? I believe we can make a case for Hicks. First, as his name suggests, Hicks is undereducated in the ways of the world. The sergeant has *no idea* that he is insulting French culture or undermining the values of a lifetime. If he comes from a very small town, where everybody knows him and his family, he may be taking liberties he is used to taking at home. He assumes liberties taken at home can be taken abroad, and that goods, if set out in a shop, are meant to be purchased and consumed. In assuming that he does not have to be on his best behavior, that practices he might have got away with at home are appropriate in a foreign country, he makes a typical blunder which no one as yet has had the time (or inclination) to correct. In fact, as Trout argues, to advance such cultural sensitivity is exactly the *opposite* of the U.S. Army's intention (83). Mannerly, educated people of the twenty-first century have been sensitized to recognize and decry the arrogance of these assumptions. Readers of post-colonial literature know so much more about cultural imperialism and the intricate power balances that are in play even in minor cross-cultural negotiations than these raw men off the prairies would have any inkling of. Cather tells us these men, who have never seen Paris, imagine it to be of "incalculable immensity, bewildering vastness, Babylonian hugeness and heaviness" because those were "the only attributes they had been taught to admire" (449). Cather's phrasing not only condemns the aesthetic standards the men have grown up with, but it implies the young soldiers might be taught to admire

other attributes. Second, the disapproval heaped on Hicks and company seems disproportionate when this novel holds so many other examples of truly vicious behavior. The Chief Steward on the *Anchises*, for instance, steals life-saving supplies to sell on the black market, and Nat Wheeler, Claude's father, cuts down the shining cherry tree to prove his power and to see it wither.⁴ Third, we might consider a more benign interpretation of the company's behavior. Instead of seeing arrogance and "cultural bluster" in the soldiers' offer to improve the water supply, and finding their attitude "repulsive," we might see their offer as a kind and generous, if admittedly naïve, impulse. Furthermore, one might argue that, although he does not follow the shopping protocols of a Frenchman, Sergeant Hicks is *not entirely* disrespectful in his address to the cheese monger: "Come on ma'm, don't be bashful." Finally, the shopkeeper, who has the most right to take offense, is less perturbed by the Sergeant's bad manners (though she is distressed that they've consumed so much

of her stock) than by the fact that she cannot determine a fair price for her goods.

The cheese seller doesn't know what to charge the soldiers because, to use the vocabulary of an economist, her "standards of worth" have become confused, a disorder reflected in her intermingling of the vocabularies of ethics and commerce. For example, she clings to the arbitrary and inflated price as to a "*moral plank*;" she finds the situation "*unfair*;" and America's wealth "threaten[s] everybody's *integrity*" (428–430, emphasis added). Furthermore, in an economy of scarcity words like "useless" and "waste" also have moral implications, often invisible to those living in plenty. These American soldiers represent a nation so rich that its citizens are unaware of either their wealth or their excesses. As fish are unaware of the water around them, these soldiers do not perceive the abundance they swim in. The Frenchwoman dislikes Americans' wealth because the tsunami of their goods has changed her country, muddled her thinking, and put the "standards of a lifetime" in jeopardy (429). The shop owner's concern is prescient. By the late teens and the 1920s when Cather was writing this novel, many Americans felt as the shopkeeper does, that the "standards of a lifetime" had disappeared in a postwar flood of money and false values.

In fact, the brief interchange in the cheese shop foreshadows the destabilized economic world of the 1920s when prices were dissociated from formerly recognized values, and the language of the marketplace

became the *only* language for worth.⁵ Such is the world described in two great novels of the twenties, Cather's *The Professor's House* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Both were published in 1925 and are awash in money; each portrays a world in which money is the only publicly agreed upon indication of worth. Amidst an overabundance of goods it is difficult for anyone, especially the young, to discern items of intrinsic value. It may take time to sort through the glittering abundance to discover what will last. This problem of discerning value can be illustrated by asking how much the cheese shop owner *should* have charged the soldiers? What *would* have been a fair price for her cheese? Looking at her dilemma as an economist might, we understand her dismay.⁶ Since supply is low, she *should*, according to classic economic theory, maximize her profit and take *all* the soldiers' money, every last crumpled bill. However, since a war is on and goods are restricted, charging so much would rightfully be



"As they passed in front of the old church of St. Jacques, the two foremost stumbled on a sunken step. . . ."

condemned as “scalping,” “cheating” or “profiteering.”⁷ (Some of the soldiers might call “two-and-a-half times the market price” a cheat if they were to discover her original price and realize they were charged so much more.) And the war has disrupted the balance of supply and demand that undergirds the Frenchwoman’s sense of stability and order. When the Americans come, they do not bring any extra cheese, but they do bring more demand. This should raise the price and the quantity sold, *if* the quantity produced can adjust. But, because of the war, the quantity cannot adjust: cows, milk, farms, farmers, and hence, cheese, have all become scarce. Thus, no matter how much the Frenchwoman raises her price, no matter how much the soldiers are willing to pay, in this war-torn country, there is never going to be enough cheese to meet the American soldiers’ demand, nor the needs of the hungry and impoverished French people.

If the shop owner is to set her price according to the value of her cheese, she would have to be clear about her measure or standard of value. Economists Samuel H. Williamson and Lawrence H. Officer begin their article, “Explaining the Measures of Worth,” by cautioning readers that there are objects or ideas of “intrinsic value” which “are difficult, if not impossible, to measure in money terms.” In fact, they say, “there is probably no objective way of assessing the worth of freedom of speech, good health, or a beautiful sunset. . . . *Therefore we do not attempt to measure the worth of such things*” (emphasis added). Unless one holds onto this distinction and is very clear about “standards of a lifetime,” the fun-house mirrors of prices, costs, and values can be treacherous. These cheeses have value as nourishment which can be measured in calories or grams of fat and calcium; they also have sensual and aesthetic value. (How beautiful they are on their little green leaves!) But these latter values are intrinsic and cannot be measured. Even the value of cheese as food might be relative to one’s nationality: A little cheese might be an American’s snack, but a Frenchman’s whole meal. The American army . . . “ate more every day than the French soldiers at the front got in a week!” (429). If we compare the wealth/income/earnings of the cheese shop owner to the wealth/income of the American soldier, we find that their income discrepancies reflect divergent status and power, revealing a truth about the relationship of the Frenchwoman to the American soldier that neither of them has yet realized.

In the end it is clear that, barring a rearrangement of the whole economic system, there *is* no way for the *fromagière* to calculate a fair price for her cheese. The value of her currency has changed; she cannot measure the value of her cheese, and thus, she arrives at a practical conclusion: “If she didn’t take their money the next one would.” Nevertheless, the cheese shop woman begins to realize that, even in the steady, solid prewar world, agreed-upon values and prices have always been arbitrary. “All the same, *fictitious*

values were distasteful to her, and made everything seem flimsy and unsafe” (429, emphasis added). The shopkeeper is reluctantly acknowledging a permanent, but hidden truth, revealed by this destabilized economy: monetary values are, and always have been, fictions. Things that matter most—peace, good health, good will—cannot be bought. This, I believe, is the importance of the cheeseshop scene, and why (perhaps) we shouldn’t be so hard on Sergeant Hicks.

By 1922 when *One of Ours* was published and certainly thereafter, Cather’s readers would have in mind images of the Great War. Even as they struggled to find meaning in that senseless waste of lives, many in her contemporary audience would also have been conscious of its aftermath and looked with heartsick disillusionment on the hedonistic and cynical culture of the 1920s. It is by now a commonplace to say that the Great War destroyed or destabilized many values—not just economic ones or the seemingly more trivial standards of polite behavior. Thus, the “amusing” cheese shop scene is meant to be read as it was written, with horrific images from the killing fields of northern France playing in the backs of our minds. We know, as the young men crowded into that cheese shop cannot, what will happen to all the vibrant youth and health that the narrator has called to our attention. Hicks’s friend, Dell Able, will have half his face blown off; Willy Katz will get a “bullet in his brain, through one of his blue eyes” (567–568). Those smiling boisterous “boys” will trip on more than a church step. By deliberately creating this simultaneous consciousness of jolly present and devastating future, Cather makes the interchange between French shopkeeper and American soldier more poignant and suggests an attitude we might take toward these characters. We know from one of Cather’s letters that she had once thought of entitling book 5 “The Blameless Fool by Pity Enlightened,” a reference to Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal*.⁸ Although she eventually rejected this possible title, in the cheese shop scene Cather suggests that we all are blind, and probably fools of one sort or another.

Sergeant Hicks will return from the war with his own scars and souvenirs, including a more cynical view of the world. Having lost his partner, watched his two best commanders die, and seen medals and ribbons “blossom on the wrong breasts,” Hicks will come to wear “an expression which will puzzle his friends when he gets home” (603). He will memorialize his buddy, Dell, by continuing the life they’d planned, opening their garage, “Hicks and Able.” To handle his disillusionment he will “roll up his sleeves and look at the logical and beautiful inwards of automobiles for the rest of his life” (602). Nevertheless, Sergeant Hicks, who was stationed on the Rhine for a year after the Armistice, was determined to see Venice before he was shipped home. We have no way of knowing whether he went as “sympathetic traveler” or “detached tourist,” but



by himself, without proper papers, against advice, and with great difficulty, Sergeant Hicks made his way to the floating city of water and light because “he had always heard about it” (601). We might give him the benefit of the doubt, for to know something of this world one must begin somewhere. Willa Cather has shown that the cheese woman and Sergeant Hicks are, like Claude, “blameless fools.” In a violent and confusing world, they are doing the best they can. We might do well to view them with pity until *we* become more enlightened, for like them we can only see so far, can only behave as well as our training, education, and circumstances allow, and we, fools as well, know so much more than they did.

NOTES

1. Guy Reynolds points to this as a quintessentially modernist move typical of Cather (13).

2. The number “ten” is important because it means that Claude too is holding out his hand and is thus implicated in the raid of the cheese shop. The relation of Claude to his men has been the subject of some critical discussion. See, for example, Debra Rae Cohen’s essay, “Culture and the ‘Cathedral’: Tourism as Potlatch in *One of Ours*,” which asks if Claude is exceptional, set off from his men by his more sensitive nature and his ability to respond to foreign culture (191–192). Cohen concludes that the war collapses Jonathan Culler’s categorical distinction between the open-minded traveler (Claude) and his men (insensitive tourists) because all are eventually caught up in war’s aggressive potlatch of competitive destruction (197–198). Steven Trout also takes on this question, arguing that as Claude journeys “deeper and deeper into flowery France” (*One of Ours* 446), he identifies himself less and less as a discontented outsider and more and more as American (94, 104). Both suggest that Claude’s position vis à vis French culture is, at this point in the novel, distinct from his men’s. But those ten hands suggest he is already one of them.

3. Cohen further asserts that the values lamented by the cheese shop owner, those presumably destroyed by the American army, are false values—“rank, status, hierarchy, glory” (197).

4. Nat Wheeler is a home-grown example of the insensitive bully, who does what he pleases and wreaks havoc where he can, just because he has the power to do so. His bullying attitude and unquestioning certainty of his own rectitude, his willful destruction of the beautiful and assertion of brutal power over the weak make him as bad as “the Boches.” He, not Sergeant Hicks, is an example of the worst sort of American.

5. Many postwar writers have addressed the problem of debased language. Hemingway’s statement in *A Farewell to Arms* may be the most famous: “Abstract words such as glory, honor,

courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates” (196).

6. In this discussion I use the words “worth” and “value” interchangeably, but differentiate between “price” and “cost.” “Cost” and “price” depend on market forces of supply and demand; “worth” and “value” depend on an individual’s personal definitions. The vocabulary for this discussion owes a debt to conversations with economist Amelia Hawkins, and to articles by historical economists Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Williamson.

7. I disagree with Trout’s characterization of her as greedy and unscrupulous, happy to overcharge the soldiers (89).

8. See Cather’s letter to “Mr. Johns” (*Selected Letters* 328). See also Richard Harris’s explanatory notes to the epigraph of *One of Ours* and the title of its book 5 (677, 760).

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World War I, Anti-German Hysteria, the “Spanish” Flu, and *My Ántonia*, 1917–1919

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At first glance, *My Ántonia* might seem to have nothing to do with World War I. Despite the fact that Cather’s fourth novel was written between the fall of 1916 and June 1918, the war is nowhere mentioned in it, and no evidence exists to suggest that Cather consciously intended to embed any type of commentary about the war within its pages. Nevertheless, *My Ántonia* is inextricably connected to the war, chiefly because its early sales and reception among American readers were very likely heavily influenced by the xenophobic attitudes that the war exacerbated.

Unlike Cather’s two previous plains novels, *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *The Song of the Lark* (1915), which had been relatively popular, *My Ántonia* was a disappointment in terms of sales, not only for its publisher, Houghton Mifflin, but also for Cather herself. Published on September 21, 1918, Cather’s novel had sold only 5,000 copies by December 5, and during its first two years in print, *My Ántonia* sold only 11,322 copies (Woodress 392). In a letter to her editor Ferris Greenslet dated May 19 [1919], Cather expressed her displeasure with these low sales figures and blamed them on what she regarded as Houghton Mifflin’s uninspired advertising (*Selected Letters* 274–277). Biographer James Woodress, on the other hand, later attributed the novel’s poor sales to its publication “at an unfortunate time. The country was preoccupied with the final days of World War I” (391). Both explanations contain an element of truth. Houghton Mifflin’s advertisements for *My Ántonia* were indeed lackluster, typically consisting of two short paragraphs of text that blandly promoted *Ántonia* as “aglow with vitality . . . all impulsive youth and careless courage,” and the novel itself as “a love story of profound human appeal” (Advertisement). The most enthusiasm the firm’s copywriters could muster for the book was the very qualified statement that “it is . . . one of the really

notable American novels of recent years.” In addition, the war, which would officially end on November 11, 1918, was on almost every American’s mind during the months when *My Ántonia* was first available. Yet *My Ántonia*’s lack of popularity among readers from 1918 to 1920 can also be attributed to two other factors: its generally positive portrayal of immigrants and what Jean Griffith has called the novel’s “critique” of the “carte blanche nativism” exhibited by the townspeople of Black Hawk (407).

American readers’ attitudes toward people who appeared “foreign” had changed a great deal since *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, with their Swedish heroines Alexandra Bergson and Thea Kronborg, had been published in June 1913 and October 1915, respectively. Granted, even in the decade before the war began in August 1914, anti-immigration sentiment had existed among those who felt that the millions of darker-skinned and supposedly germ-laden “aliens” from southern Italy, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe were threatening the country’s well-being. Once the United States declared war against Germany in April 1917, however,

large numbers of Americans became even more xenophobic than they had been before. Most of this distrust and anger was directed toward those of German heritage, but it also sometimes extended to other immigrants previously considered “good”: i.e., lighter-skinned, northern Europeans. According to historian John Higham, “the average non-German alien passed through 1917 and 1918 unscathed by hatred” (215); nonetheless, the “100% Americanism” movement fueled by the war definitely made all those labeled as “foreigners” slightly suspect in the minds of many old-stock Americans. As Mark Granquist notes, even “Scandinavian-American Lutherans, who still employed their immigrant languages and were often equally isolated from



World War I propaganda postcard; Bernhardt Wall, illustrator.



'English' society, were often lumped together with the German-Americans in the popular imagination." Higham, too, states that "the war created a more widespread concern than Americans had ever felt before over the immigrants' attachment to their adopted country" (213). To be regarded as truly "American" and escape censure, all foreign-born and first-generation Americans now understood that they needed to conspicuously display their 100% patriotism for the United States, its values, and its customs. Cultural productions that celebrated both immigrants' differences from Americans and elements of their native cultures would, one might imagine, have been viewed with much more suspicion than they had been previously. *My Ántonia*, which conspicuously extols the virtues of the Bohemian Ántonia, the Norwegian Lena Lingard, the Swede Tiny Soderball, the three Bohemian Marys, and the four Danish girls, would certainly fall into this category.

Also contributing heavily to many Americans' fears of "foreign contagion" was the catastrophic virus incorrectly dubbed the "Spanish flu," which, thanks to the war and its massive troop movements, swept throughout the world in 1918 and 1919. This pandemic, combined with the xenophobia fomented by the war, most definitely made September 1918 a very inauspicious time to release *My Ántonia*, at least if one wanted it to sell well.

German aliens residing in the United States, as well as naturalized German-American citizens, had before the war been generally regarded quite positively. After the war began, however, they were viewed with increasing suspicion. The German torpedoing of the *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915, resulting in the deaths of 128 Americans on board, a few isolated acts of German sabotage in the United States, and the famous Zimmermann telegram of January 1917 that revealed a plot to enlist Mexico as an ally of Germany, made most Americans extremely fearful of foreigners, even before the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917.



Berlin, Nebraska, ca. 1910. Suspicious fires destroyed much of main street in 1918. The town's name was changed to "Otoe" in October 1918, less than a month before Armistice Day.

After the United States had officially entered the war, this distrust spread rapidly. By the time the war ended in November 1918, about 250,000 German aliens and Americans of German ancestry had been put under surveillance by the U.S. government; approximately 6,300 of these—including German-language newspaper editors and symphony musicians—had been arrested and detained (Higham 210), with some 2,000 of these being incarcerated in prison camps at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, and Fort Douglas, Utah (Kirschbaum 71–72).

Furthermore, in order to counter Germany's supposedly longstanding plan to infiltrate the country, a panoply of private and quasi-governmental organizations such as the American Defense Society, the American Protective League, and states' Councils of National Defense expended a great deal of effort in trying to eliminate all vestiges of German culture in the United States. As Erik Kirschbaum writes, from this point on, "Innocent activities in German clubs, churches, schools, and newspapers were regarded as part of an organized German propaganda effort to try to sweep the United States into the pan-German movement of the Kaiser and his government" (42).

One of the largest targets of the various "patriotic" groups trying to root out "foreign" influences was the German language. Across the country, learning, speaking, and reading German became highly suspect activities in the eyes of the non-German majority. The American Defense Society argued in a pamphlet entitled "Throw Out the German Language and All Disloyal Teachers" (January 1918): "We can make war on the Hun language, and we will. Any language which produces a people of ruthless conquistadors, such as now exists in Germany, is not fit to teach clean and pure American boys and girls, and the most ordinary principles of self-defense demand that it be eliminated" (quoted in Kirschbaum 103). Not surprisingly, the number of students enrolled in German language classes in schools dropped precipitously. A great number of state, county, city, and town governments actively moved to enact laws banning the speaking of German in public (Luebke 252), and in many rural communities it was not uncommon for people of German heritage to have their telephone party lines cut in order to keep them from communicating privately in German. Even as late as April 1919, the Nebraska State Legislature reflected the general anti-foreign sentiment in the state by passing what was known as the "Siman Act," which read in part, "No person, individually or as a teacher, shall, in any private, denominational, parochial or public school, teach any subject to any person in any language other than the English language" ("Meyer v. Nebraska").

While German was the language most conspicuously singled out by American "100 percenters," it was not the only



Gassed! —another Victory for KULTUR

Drawn by
Louis Raemaekers
for The Century Magazine

Barron Collier Series of Patriotic Cartoons

World War I poster created for The Century Magazine. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

language under attack. Various states went further and forbade the speaking of any foreign language in public. In May 1918, the governor of Iowa, William L. Harding, issued a proclamation which “stated that English was the only language permitted in public in Iowa and that foreign languages were banned from all train cars, telephone conversations, public addresses, in public and private schools, and in churches” (Kirschbaum 125). The result was a very tense environment; as Kirschbaum states, “The laws against foreign-language use during that wartime frenzy were strictly enforced, and many ordinary Americans were eager to do their part to protect the nation’s security by informing authorities about people who violated the ban” (125).

Other signs of German “influence” besides the language itself were also actively rooted out. “Sauerkraut” was renamed “liberty cabbage,” and “Bismarck” pastries became “American beauties.” The names of countless streets, towns, schools, and businesses with German associations, such as “Berlin,” “Germantown,” or the “German National Bank” were officially changed. Statues and other monuments dedicated to Germans such as Friedrich Schiller were vandalized or removed (“From the Archives”; “The Schiller Linden Tree”). A great number of German-language newspapers and magazines were forced out of business by declining sales or had to begin publishing in English in order to avoid harassment by “patriotic” citizens and prosecution by the government (under provisions of the Espionage Act of June 1917, the Trading with the Enemy Act of October 1917, and the Sedition Act of May 1918). The American Protective League was especially active in intimidating German language newspapers, both by pouring symbolic yellow paint on their offices and by breaking into them and raiding or destroying their files. German books and newspapers were also removed from almost all public and high school libraries,

and frequently these were burned as part of patriotic rallies (Kirschbaum 99, 114, 135–136).

German music and musicians—many of them beloved by Cather—also came under attack. Numerous orchestra conductors and musicians with German backgrounds were dismissed; some were sent to internment camps. Throughout the country, music by German composers such as Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Mendelssohn, and Schubert were removed from programs (Luebke 248–49).

Kirschbaum reports, “In Pittsburgh, the city council issued a city-wide ban on all music by Beethoven. The Metropolitan Opera Company of New York forbade the production of German works; the Philadelphia Orchestra said it would stop performing all German music, beginning November 10, 1917” (132).

In a number of instances, the xenophobia took an even more aggressive and sometimes violent turn. Sadly, for instance, a great number of dachshunds and German shepherds, whether they belonged to Germans or not, were killed by superpatriots (Kirschbaum 119). German-Americans were often dragged out of their homes and forced to publicly kiss an American flag and/or recite a loyalty oath (Thompson 145). Many people with German surnames lost their jobs. In many communities, clergy members, usually those serving German Lutheran congregations, were actively intimidated in various ways. In July 1918, for example, Nebraska attorney general Willis H. Reed told one minister that, while there was not yet an actual law forbidding a minister from conducting church services in German, he felt that “by continuing the use of German in religious services and Sunday school the churches employing it are helping to discredit their own profession of loyalty” (“Discredit to Vocation”). In Eustis, Nebraska, the pastor of the German Church was arrested for preaching in German and “charged with violating the espionage act” (cited in Faber 98). Ministers were often threatened with physical violence if they didn’t stop preaching in German, and a great number of churches serving German-Americans and resident aliens were set on fire.

In addition, those who didn’t buy enough Liberty Bonds or pledge enough to the Red Cross—whether of German heritage or not—were frequently harassed and sometimes brought before ad hoc “slacker courts” for punishment. In Oakland, Nebraska, an affidavit was sworn out against Mr. Tom Kerl, who was alleged



to have protested about buying Liberty Bonds in November 1917, saying, within earshot of witnesses, that he thought it was ridiculous to buy war bonds that would pay for bullets that might be used to kill his German relatives (“Blood and Gore”). In April 1918, Rudolph Schopke, a banker who had lived and worked in Emerson, Nebraska, for 35 years, “was tarred and feathered and driven through the streets of the town because of alleged pro-German sympathies” (“Record for Buffalo”). This was not an isolated incident. At some point during the war, three men in Avoca, Nebraska, were also tarred and feathered; one even had a noose placed around his neck, and it was taken off only after he “promised to be good and contribute to the Red Cross or anything else they wanted him to” (“Three Men at Avoca”). Such activity was by no means limited to Nebraska; people with allegedly pro-German allegiances, including ministers, were tarred and feathered “in at least thirteen states . . . and in some cases [this] resulted in fatalities” (Kirschbaum 129, 141).

This widespread anti-German feeling ultimately appears to have served as an opportunity for the Ku Klux Klan to return to a number of communities. When I spoke about anti-German activities during World War I in Omaha in 2014, two people came to me separately afterward to tell how the story had been passed down in their families of Ku Klux Klan groups coming to their German relatives’ houses in two different Nebraska towns and burning crosses in their yards to intimidate them. Two newspaper reports of what appear to have been KKK attacks on ethnic Germans during this period support these personal accounts. One, from November 1917, described “a group of men clad in white robes” who tarred and feathered a Michigan man “accused of pro-Germanism” (“Tar and Feathers”). The second, from May 1918, recounted how “fifty white-robed persons” in Richmond, California, took one Guido Poenisch from his home, “tried’ [him] for loyalty, and then tarred and feathered” him (“Tarred and Feathered”).

Anti-German and generally anti-immigrant feelings were thus running at a fever pitch in the United States in the fall of 1918, when *My Ántonia* was published. Given this environment, one can understand how contemporary reviews of the novel, which conspicuously mentioned Ántonia’s Bohemian heritage and emphasized that *My Ántonia* was chiefly about immigrants, would not have likely served to boost sales. The reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review* wrote, “There are other immigrants in the book besides the Shimerdas—Norwegians, Danes, Russians, etc.—and the ways of all of them are more or less fully described. They are all, to some extent, pioneers, the period of the book being that in which the first foreign immigrants came to Nebraska” (*Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews* 79). The reviewer for the *New York Call* magazine stated, “This book gives us a picture of the



Emergency hospital during the Spanish flu epidemic, Camp Funston, Kansas, 1918. Otis Historical Archives, National Museum of Health and Medicine.

grim and determined fight for life and prosperity of the vigorous foreigners who have settled in the West and helped to make it a land of fruitfulness” (83). These comments were undoubtedly intended as praise, but they probably served to prejudice the larger, generally xenophobic, reading public against the novel.

The marketing people at Houghton Mifflin appear to have recognized the general anti-immigrant feeling in the country much earlier than did these reviewers. This is suggested in the way Houghton Mifflin reacted to Cather’s complaints about their not having used favorable reviews in their initial advertising. In response, the firm created a dust jacket for later printings of the first edition but, instead of using the tepid two promotional paragraphs mentioned earlier or reprinting parts of the glowing reviews about *My Ántonia* as an “immigrant” novel, they reproduced excerpts of reviews from *Reedy’s St. Louis Mirror*, *Smart Set*, *Detroit Saturday Night*, and the *Chicago Daily News* that not once mentioned immigrants or the Bohemian Ántonia. Instead, undoubtedly in an attempt to strike a patriotic chord among prospective book purchasers, the word “American” appears a total of five times in these quoted sections.

As if the war itself weren’t reason enough for many potential book-buyers in the United States to distrust anything or anyone “foreign” in late 1918, the influenza epidemic that swept across the globe in 1918 likely would have further encouraged them to believe that any “outsiders,” or cultural products with a “foreign” tinge, were a threat to public health. Even though this deadly flu strain had originated in Haskell County, Kansas, in the spring of 1918 and subsequently spread rapidly to Europe and other parts of the globe due to the dispersion of American troops (Barry 169–170), it was widely known as the “Spanish influenza” in

the United States because initially Americans believed it had originated in Spain (Barry 171). In large part this was because for several months after the first outbreak in Europe, Spain was the only country where the flu's ravages were openly reported, since other countries (including the United States) did not want their enemies to know how it was decimating their troop strength (Barry 171). Many Americans, too, were led by news reports to believe the flu came from the Germans ("Medical Science's Newest Discoveries"). In other words, a threat that actually had originated within the United States was recast in the public's imagination as a "foreign" disease.

By late September 1918, the flu was spreading across the United States and the world, chiefly through military training camps, including those where many of the troops from Webster County had been sent, such as the flu's epicenter at Camp Funston, Fort Riley, Kansas (Cooper-Skjelver 315). Many times more Americans eventually died of the flu (approximately 675,000) than died from fighting in the war itself (116,000) (Barry 397).

American newspapers in the fall of 1918 were filled with stories about the flu pandemic. Even in Red Cloud, the brief front-page note in the *Red Cloud Chief* on October 17 about *My Antonia* being newly available at the Auld Library had to compete with news of the deaths and funerals of two young men from Red Cloud who had died at Fort Devens, Massachusetts ("At the Auld Library" and "In Memoriam"). These notices do not mention the flu, but everyone would have known the real cause of these deaths; after all, on one of the inside pages of the same day's issue one could read about multiple events in Nebraska being cancelled due to the flu and about the disease raging across the state ("Short State Notes"). In Red Cloud the schools were closed and "the local health board prohibited public gatherings from October 24 to November 2 in an attempt to halt the spread of the flu" (Cooper-Skjelver 315). Cather was fully aware of how attention-consuming the influenza pandemic was. She told Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant in a letter dated December 3, "It's cruel how many boys have died in our training camps here [in the United States]. Before I left Red Cloud we had seven funerals in one week for boys who were sent home from Camp Dodge, Iowa. The rumor is that more of our boys have died in camp at home than have been killed in France" (*Selected Letters* 264). Many of Cather's friends and acquaintances caught the flu, and some died of it; somehow, though, Cather herself never contracted it (273).

Is it any wonder, then, that the release of a relatively little-known Nebraska author's fourth novel in late September 1918 might have had a difficult time gaining many people's attention, either in Nebraska or in the rest of the country? Not only would the flu have distracted people—it's hard to think of reading fiction

when a deadly virus seems to threaten from every quarter—but the flu's linkage to a "foreign contagion" would also have prompted many readers to not be very interested in a novel that was as pro-immigrant as *My Antonia*.

Worthy of further investigation, too, but beyond the scope of this essay, are the ways in which the anti-German hysteria and flu pandemic caused by World War I possibly affected the ways in which those readers who bought the novel actually responded to it. Were these readers predisposed to see Tiny's and Lena's successes as "American" success stories, or as "foreign" opportunism? Were *Antonia's* many children a cause for celebration or a threat to the "native stock" gene pool? How did readers respond to the fact that the heroine of *My Antonia*, even after thirty years living in the United States, still spoke Bohemian at home with her husband and children, and as a result, "the little ones could not speak English at all—didn't learn it until they went to school" (*My Antonia* 324)? Did the implicit critique of the nativists of Black Hawk offend readers? How many would have identified with the xenophobic tramp who commits suicide as he shouts, "My God! . . . so it's Norwegians now, is it? I thought this was Americy" (172)? Some might even have regarded him as a symbolic and tragic victim of too many immigrants being allowed into the country.

Undoubtedly both Cather and her editor Ferris Greenslet would have been well aware of the widespread anti-foreign sentiment pervading the United States during the years 1916 through 1918. Whether Cather considered it when she was constructing *My Antonia* or whether Houghton Mifflin thought of this when making the decision about its release date is unknown. It appears clear, however, that if one were most concerned with ensuring high initial sales and popularity for *My Antonia*, a novel that portrayed immigrants very positively, September 1918 was not a good time for its publication. On the other hand, one might say that if a novel's success is judged more by the degree to which it interrogates prevailing ideologies, Cather's celebration of immigrants could not have come at a better time. One might criticize Cather for not having directly confronted the anti-German xenophobia of the time in her novel in some way, and it is possible she purposely avoided including any major characters of German heritage out of fear that their inclusion would hurt sales. But whatever Cather's intentions, the novel's very positive portrayals of *Antonia*, *Lena*, and *Tiny*, as well as its numerous references to hardworking Swedes, Norwegians, Bohemians, and Danes, still implicitly offered a rebuke to the nativist sentiments espoused not only by some of the fictional citizens of Black Hawk but also, during the war, by numerous Americans across the country.



Today, as the United States is experiencing another generalized wave of anti-immigrant feeling similar to what swept the country from 1917 to 1919, it is again a great time to read *My Ántonia*. Doing so can serve as a valuable reminder to readers not to stereotype people from particular nationalities and religions as dangerous criminals who should be quarantined and not allowed to spread their “disease” to America and Americans. Ántonia Shimerda, Lena Lingard, Tiny Soderball, and the three Swedish Marys, along with countless immigrants from other countries, eventually thrived and made important contributions to the United States. Members of America’s latest generation of immigrants will undoubtedly do so as well.

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War's a Farmers' Game: *My Ántonia*, Tractors, and Tanks

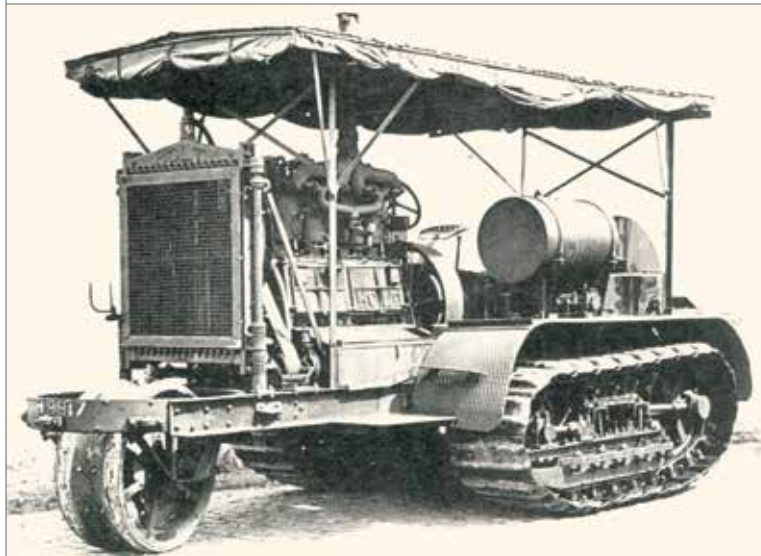
Jessica Hellmann | United States Air Force Academy

The iconic hand plow featured in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* greets visitors as they enter the town of Red Cloud, Nebraska. It sits silhouetted against the sky, evoking responses that usually range from the romantic to the nostalgic. For many, the plow outside Red Cloud and the plow in the novel signal the end to a way of life. It may be more useful, however, to read the plow as a warning of the dangers of technological innovation and the relation that Cather implies between that innovation and the First World War. Cather began writing *My Ántonia* after visiting Red Cloud in 1916, and it was published approximately six weeks before the Armistice that ended the war in November 1918. She doesn't directly address the war in the novel. Nor does she acknowledge the beginnings of the ecological decay, resulting from over-farming and drought, that would lead to the Dust Bowl almost ten years after the novel was published. She does, however, deal directly with the feelings and culture that helped create these events and their historical impact.

Through the novel's narrator and main character, Jim Burden, we are introduced to a thoroughly modern man. He is "legal counsel for one of the great Western railways," lives in New York City, and is married to a woman of independent means (*My Ántonia* x). Cather uses Jim Burden as a lens to view specific moments in his life, which focus primarily on his neighbor and arguably best friend, the Bohemian immigrant woman, Ántonia. The Jim who sits down to write *My Ántonia* is a technologically advanced character who benefits from the developments that occur around the turn of the twentieth century, while Ántonia is a character intimately related to and affected by her environment. Cather naturally sets these two characters in opposition to one another. We read the adult Jim as arid or unfruitful, while the old-fashioned farm woman, Ántonia, brims with life and abundance. Ántonia lives in an almost symbiotic relationship with the land, while Jim wants to divide, name, and own it.

Cather critic Joseph Uργο compares Jim's rhetoric about the land to the early conservation movement. In his essay "*My Ántonia* and the National Parks Movement," Uργο argues that, according to the conservationist movement in its early stages, people must "protect American resources from irresponsible or wasteful development and preserve them for responsible and profitable use" (47). Jim, a railroad man, views the American landscape as

something to be developed and profited from, not to be preserved as is. Only through the invention of the gas-powered tractor could Jim's childhood grasslands be transformed into a profitable enterprise. Despite the seeming fecundity of endless fields of wild grass, hindsight allows contemporary readers to understand that the extreme farming methods available through motorized tractors caused the farmland and hardy, yet fragile, prairie to be destroyed. As modern readers we understand what follows the ecologically and agriculturally unsound plow-up of grasslands in the early twentieth century. These negative consequences would not have been obvious to Cather when she began writing the novel in 1916. She does, however, set up the readers of *My Ántonia* to begin to read technology as something to be paired to be with images of infertility and unsustainability.



The Holt 75 tractor, ca. 1914. Wikimedia Commons.

Early conservationists, like Jim, saw unplowed acres of grass as "irresponsible or wasteful," but after the drought and dust storms hit the American Midwest in the early 1930s, people began to understand the importance of those "wasteful," untouched acres. Irresponsible farming practices and the new technology, like gas-powered tractors, were found to be to blame. The New Deal government and its artists highlighted and focused on this economic and ecological crisis. For instance, Pare Lorentz's Dust Bowl documentary *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, released in



1936 (and available on YouTube), attributes the ecological and financial destruction of the Great Plains to new methods of farming, specifically the gas-powered tractor. Lorentz also connects the First World War in Europe to more agricultural concerns. He shows how the war caused an increased demand from Europe for American wheat and how new equipment first used in the wheat fields of America influenced one of the major technological and tactical advances of the war: the tank. Lorentz pairs images of tractors plowing American fields in formation with tanks plowing over trenches in Europe. The invention of the tractor not only led to millions of acres falling fallow in the Dust Bowl, but also contributed to a war which resulted in millions of deaths. To emphasize the fact that with technology there are costs as well as benefits, Lorentz uses images of tractors, tanks, and blowing dust.

To understand both *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and *My Ántonia*'s veiled discussion of technology, we need to understand the role American farmers played in the First World War. Even though the U.S. did not officially enter World War I until 1917, it supported the war in Europe from its onset in 1914 in more material ways. Historian Donald Worster, in *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, writes that "it was World War I that put the American farmer into a happy dither. As the Turks cut off wheat shipments from Russia, the largest producer and exporter in the world, Europeans turned to the Great Plains" (89). This heavy demand for wheat more than doubled the grain's price during the war years. A patriotic appeal of "Plant more wheat! Wheat will win the war!" (89) was issued from the highest political offices in the country, helping to augment the new demand. And the American farmer responded by plowing up more acres, an act made possible by the innovative, gas-powered tractor.

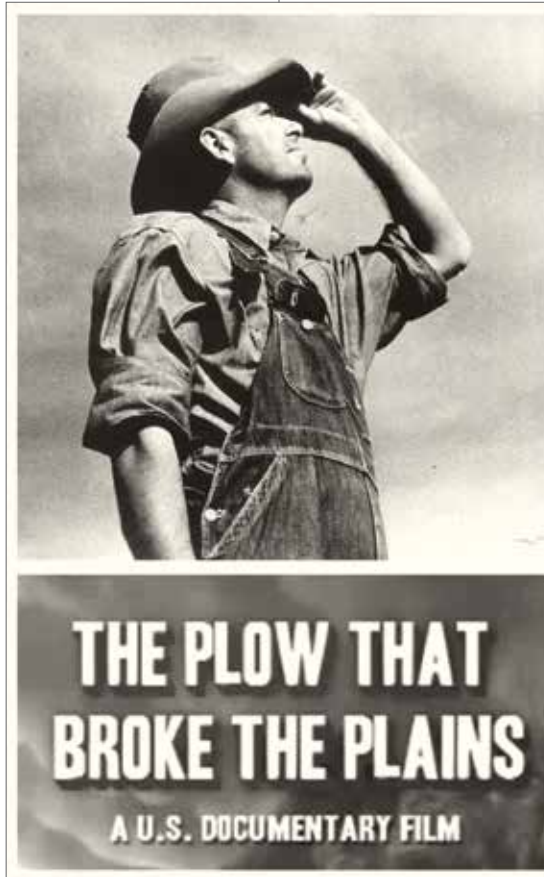
Not only would wheat help win the war, but so would farm technology. In *The Art of Warfare in the Western World*, Archer Jones shows that "the French and British both began early to seek a way to apply the principle of the Holt agricultural tractor to trench warfare. The Holt tractor ran on a track, which enabled

it to operate off roads, a capability the armored car lacked" (465). Around 1904, Benjamin Holt, after noticing that the heavy farm equipment he produced became bogged down in loose soil, began to use self-laying tracks instead of wheels on his new tractor. This track-type tractor became known as the "Caterpillar" ("About Us: A Heritage of Innovation"). These tractors originally

hailed heavy equipment to and from battles in Europe. Later the French and British figured out a way to take the Holt tractor body and create an armored, weaponized "landship" or tank. A unique coincidence links the name "tank" to agriculture. When the British shipped the first weaponized Holt tractors to France, they labeled the containers as "water reservoirs," or tanks (Archer 465). Knowing the intimate relationship between farming technologies and one of the greatest technological advancements to come out of World War I helps us make sense of Lorentz's juxtaposition of images of the farms of the Midwest and the battlefields of Europe. Lorentz's correlation between the Great Plains and the battlefields also opens up and enhances our discussion of the role technology plays in *My Ántonia*.

Again, because Cather published the novel just six weeks before the end of the First World War and writes about a time that seems to end with the

publication of the novel, she purposefully engages the present-day events of the Great War. For example, a few select characters have prescient foresight into the agricultural future of the Midwest. One of these characters is Jim's grandfather. Jim recalls that "it took a clear, meditative eye like my grandfather's to foresee that [the farms] would enlarge and multiply until they would be, not the Shimerdas' cornfields, or Mr. Bushy's, but the world's cornfields; that their yield would be one of the great economic facts, like the wheat crop of Russia, which underlie all the activities of men, in peace or war" (*My Ántonia* 132). Cather draws an explicit connection between agriculture and war. The increased demand from Europe for wheat and corn during the war allows the Shimerdas' and Mr. Bushy's cornfields, much the same as many real farms in the Midwest, to become major players in the world economy. To affect the world economy, the "miles of wild grazing



Publicity image for *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, 1936, U.S. Resettlement Administration.

land” (132) between the cornfields had to be plowed up. The tractor enabled farmers to do this. From 1910 to 1930 the labor needed to “plant and harvest the nation’s wheat fell by one-third, while the acreage jumped by almost the same amount” (Worster 89–90). The time-saving nature of the tractor allowed farmers to produce more of their crop, but this increase in production came at an unanticipated, disastrous cost. This increase in demand and profits not only put money in the small farmer’s pocket but also put more tractors in the field. The massive increase in cultivated acreage using much more destructive planting techniques would ultimately produce the Dust Bowl.

Cather never shows us a gas-powered tractor plowing the fields around Black Hawk, but she does leave her reader with an intense feeling of nostalgia for the days of sodbusting behind a team pulling a plow. Joseph Meeker, in his essay “Willa Cather: The Plow and the Pen,” explains that “the instrument of cultivation, and the symbol for human civilization, is the plow” (78). In other words, the plow represents the initial taming of the Great Plains represented in Jim’s westward move and Ántonia’s immigration. If the plow symbolizes nostalgia for an archaic method of cultivation and civilization, then the gas-powered tractor is something almost monstrous. Humans are defined by the technology they use, and the symbol of that technological advancement can outlive its real-world usefulness, replaced by advancing technology and new methods. In the following iconic and cinematic scene of the novel, we see the sun literally set on this type of farming and piece of technology:

Presently we saw a curious thing: There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disk rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes toward it. In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disc; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.

Even while we whispered about it, our vision disappeared; the ball dropped and dropped until the red tip went beneath the earth. The fields below us were dark, the sky was growing pale, and that forgotten plough had sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie. (237–238)

It’s a startling moment. In a span of a few lines, the plow shifts from being the center of this world, “magnified” to highlight its importance, and magnified to the same size as the sun, it too momentarily seems an ultimate source of life, becoming forgotten as it sinks back into its “littleness somewhere on the prairie.” Cather doesn’t need to show her reader tractors moving in formation, as Lorentz does in his documentary, to drive home the point that this way of life is over: that there will be no more new Ántonias to make new civilizations or to love and admire. Because of the changes in farming technology, Jim Burden’s childhood on the vast oceans of grass belongs only to the past and never to the future. That pastoral past of uncultivated grass cannot match the massive tilling capability that will allow the gas-powered tractor to change the face of the American Midwest.

In Pare Lorentz’s documentary, we find images of these oceans of grass that highlight the impact technology had on Jim’s childhood home. Lorentz also engages with the nostalgia for the past, but by the time he produced the film in 1936, the world in which Cather and Jim grew up had vanished. *The Plow that Broke the Plains* covers the settling of the Great Plains starting with the free-ranging cattle of the mid-1800s, then the sodbusters of the late 1800s, up to the blowing dust of the 1930s. Starting at around minute seven of the twenty-eight minute film, we see the type of plow that Cather highlighted in the above quotation. On its own this plow carries an intense feeling of nostalgia for a time before the devastation, before the topsoil took flight, and before war claimed a generation of young men. The film reveals how “progress came to the plains,” with the plow breaking the sod, and the new families racing for cheap and plentiful land. This land bonanza—aided by war-inflated wheat prices and new technology decreasing labor demands—only lasted about twenty years, from about 1915 to 1935 (Worster 89–94). Lorentz’s double entendre in the title of his work, “broke,” refers not only to the plow physically trenching the soil, but also to how that piece of technology destroyed the land and the people who used it.

About a third of the way through the film, Lorentz shows us that a “great day was coming.” Here he draws an explicit visual and aural connection between farming and technology and war and technology. As the accompanying narrative hails the farmers as war heroes, we see images of tractors cut to images of the tanks used to win battles in World War I, and then Lorentz returns his focus to the American farmland. Lorentz pairs these images with a rousing, martial score by Virgil Thomson to help drive home the connection between the fields of wheat and battle. There is no denying how Lorentz feels about the technology of the nineteen-teens and its connection to the blowing dust of the 1930s. Worster writes that Lorentz saw farming technology “as the instrument of



destruction . . . the unbridled, reckless force of modernity—that had made the dust storms” (96). Even if Cather could not have predicted the destructive qualities in advanced farming methods, this unbridled, reckless force of modernity reveals itself through the characters of Jim and *Ántonia*.

Much like Lorentz, Cather deals with the effects of the slow march toward modernity. Both Lorentz and Cather use the currency of nostalgia to express the pain of reengaging with the past. When Jim sees *Ántonia* at the end of the novel, he doesn't just see the shadow of the girl and young woman he used to know. He tells us, “I know so many women who have kept all the things that she had lost, but whose inner glow has faded. Whatever else was gone, *Ántonia* had not lost the fire of life. Her skin, so brown and hardened, had not that look of flabbiness, as if the sap beneath it had been secretly drawn away” (325). *Ántonia*'s “brown and hardened” skin is reflective of the land she and her family work and subsist on. Her body still contains the fire of life, the will to go on even in the face of great hardships.

Ántonia isn't the only character in the novel to be closely related to the land. Urgo writes that “the hired girls are memorable because they literally embody the landscape—their bodies have worked it and it has in turn graced them with figures and spirits that Jim can recall with ease” (53). Like *Ántonia*, the hired girls in *Black Hawk* become conflated in Jim's mind with the prairie that they farmed and shaped. *Ántonia*, much like the other immigrant women who worked closely with the land outside *Black Hawk*, isn't just a person that Jim used to know and love with the fierceness associated with childhood love; she is also the land that Jim loved and left.

If Jim Burden, narrating from a train and representing all that is modern, is our connection to the largely unwelcome advances of technology, *Ántonia*, more than any other character in the novel, is associated with the land and fertility. As the land in human form, *Ántonia* is the one who will sustain life for generations to come. Cather offers *Ántonia*'s children as a metaphor: “they all came running up the steps together, big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown, and flashing little naked legs; a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight” (328). They burst forth from the land itself, full of life, vigor, and diversity, and also full of hope for the future, no matter how dark the past. Jim leaves *Ántonia* with this parting thought, that “she was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races” (342). *Ántonia*, much like the land she represents, is there to be “mined” of the best of her resources. She is there to be captured and developed and tamed not only by society, but by people like Jim.

In his essay “Jim Burden and the White Man's Burden: *My Ántonia* and Empire,” Michael Gorman posits this idea and expands



A wheat harvest in western Nebraska, ca. 1912.

it to say that Jim “very literally extracts her (*Ántonia* and the land she personifies) like the resources and profits he draws from his interests in mines, timber, and oil” (49). *Ántonia* as a “mine of life” is nothing more than a narrative resource to be named, extracted, owned, and sold. Gorman also writes that, since Jim is a successful railroad attorney, he would understand that “to procure anything legitimately it must be first recognized and named” (33). This proprietorship is why the only version we get of *Ántonia* is Jim's. He is only satisfied when he changes the title of his story from “*Ántonia*” to “*My Ántonia*” (xiii) because it is in that “*My*” that he takes ownership over her. He is also a man who “loves with a personal passion the great country through which his railway runs and branches. His faith in it and his knowledge of it have played an important part in its development” (xi). Jim lives on and loves the surface of the land, while *Ántonia* and her family exist within it, as a part of it. *Ántonia* isn't concerned about “developing” her land; she's occupied with her trees that she loves “as if they were people” (329). As a person with access to technology, Jim stands apart from the land that he loves and his arid, urban life withers in the face of the profusion of life he finds on the Shimerda farm.

Even as we witness the tension between the future and the past at the end of the novel, Cather has already established that juxtaposition through the ways the land affects these very different characters. Obviously, *Ántonia* and Jim interact with and experience the land and the natural forces that make up the outdoor environment in different ways. *Ántonia* is a part of it, a home for the “early races,” and a member of a society affected by the land's ill-tempered way. Jim's first childhood winter in Nebraska provides an important contrast with *Ántonia*'s. Jim remembers his first winter and “how the world looked from our sitting-room window as I dressed behind the stove that morning” (60). On the Burden farm, he experiences weather from behind panes of glass with the warmth of a stove. Later, he almost completely escapes its vital reality when his family moves into the small town of Black

Hawk. He understands that: “on the farm the weather was the great fact, and men’s affairs went on underneath it, as the streams creep under the ice” (175). In town winter is no longer a “great fact” of life; there, life goes on as relatively normal. On the other hand, the Burdens’ hired hand Otto Fuchs describes Ántonia’s first winter in contrasting terms when he says that the Shimerdas “seem awful scared of cold, and stick in that hole in the bank like badgers” (68). The Shimerdas become animals; they have no way of influencing their environment. They have no panes of glass to separate them from the reality of winter. They experience the weather as a “great fact.” For them, there is no escaping the harsh conditions; they can only survive or succumb, as Mr. Shimerda does when he commits suicide.

Perhaps the profound impact of winter and weather on Mr. Shimerda and the tragedy of his suicide more naturally couples with images of bombs exploding and tanks rolling across the land than we might expect. In fact, Cather’s emphasis on the unforgiving climate is key to understanding the mindset of the people who settled the West, such as the fictional Jim and Ántonia. As Worster notes, only within the last one to two hundred years have people not always needed to adapt to more powerful natural forces. We no longer have a constant “intimate dependence” (94) on the land and weather but believe in the illusion of human autonomy and absolute free will from natural forces. Jim embodies this mindset. Winter isn’t a matter of life and death for the Burdens as it is for the Shimerda family; it simply makes life “shrunken and pinched” (175) for a short period of time. As Worster observes, “the human species . . . stood liberated from a bondage to the earth” (96). Modern innovation made this liberation seem possible.

But “progress” comes at an immense price. Worster and other historians discuss the ecological price paid by the United States during the Dust Bowl. And we learn in history classes that similar prices were paid on the fields of places with names like Verdun and the Somme. Archer Jones writes that, at the beginning of World War I, “the climate of opinion that had given credence to the concept of survival of the fittest had difficulty adapting to the unfit machine guns mowing down the fit” (464). Technology, used in gas-powered tractors and in machine guns, brings a world that challenges perceived order. Using Jim and his memories of Ántonia and a more simple agricultural time, Cather offers a nostalgic glimpse at a time unmarred by the modern reality brought about by tanks, tractors, and machine guns, participating in the literary modernists’ shock at these disruptions to a seemingly fixed social and cultural structure.

My Ántonia allows readers to inhabit a specific and fleeting moment in time. Jim and Ántonia live through an era when farmers used only a steel plow and a pair of horses to break

acres and acres of sod. They experience the movement from sod dugouts to wood-framed homes in Black Hawk to industrialized cities such as Denver and New York. But all this progress came at a cost even beyond Cather’s predictions. While machine guns razed soldiers on European fields, settlers razed the Great Plains into what would become the Dust Bowl, echoing the Anglican burial rite from *The Book of Common Prayer*: “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” Around the world these desolated fields represented destroyed generations and destroyed ecosystems. Cather’s novel allows us to hold these images together and recognize their common cause. She also captures this ephemeral moment just before an unanticipated destruction, allowing us the space to reflect on what is just so “incommunicable” about the past (*My Ántonia* 360). We recognize that, as pleasant as memory can be, nostalgia cannot deny a present or a future where, even though we try, no one can escape the forces of nature; no one can escape the wind; no one can escape the inevitable dust; and no one can escape the terrors of war.

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No Man's Land: The Created Landscapes of West and Cather

Tracy Sanford Tucker | Willa Cather Foundation

Those who study place in literature sometimes refer to “affective landscapes,” those places, either natural or man-made, that cause emotional and deeply personal responses (Berberich and Campbell 1). Just as the idea of affective landscape presumes a human response, noted ecocritic Lawrence Buell broadens the idea of “environmental writing” to any number of works in which the “nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (7–8). In Willa Cather’s *One of Ours* and Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier*, the novels’ landscapes are not only scenery foregrounding the plot but also are critical clues into Claude Wheeler’s and Chris Baldry’s pre-World War I dissatisfactions with modern life.

In 1918, Rebecca West published her first novel, *The Return of the Soldier*. Though initially well-received by critics, the novel languished. Renewed scholarly interest in her debut did not come until near the end of the twentieth century, as researchers began to examine the novel’s notions of masculinity and trauma. In the novel, Chris Baldry returns home to the family estate, Baldry Court, suffering from shell shock. He has no memory of the preceding fifteen years; he has forgotten his wife and instead has asked the war office to notify his past lover—now a middle-aged suburban housewife—of his imminent return. Over the course of the novel we learn of Chris Baldry’s relationship with his parents, his role in the family business, and his summer love affair before his marriage; at the novel’s conclusion, we witness as he is confronted, on the advice of a psychoanalyst, with the clothes and toys of his dead child, an act designed to jolt Chris’s memory and render him fit to return to the front. In the novel’s final scene, Chris’s demeanor tells us he’s “cured” (185).

Cather’s *One of Ours* is shadowed throughout by the Great War, though much of the book is far removed from battle. In it, young Claude Wheeler struggles to find his place within the changing culture of the American West and even within his own family. After unsatisfactory experiences at college, in running his father’s ranch, and in his marriage, Claude enlists and sails for France with the American forces. Amidst the horrors of war, Claude somehow discovers happiness and camaraderie. Though he dreams of settling down to a quiet life on a French farm after the war, Claude ultimately dies in the trenches.

Both *The Return of the Soldier* and *One of Ours* make use of distinct affective landscapes to serve as critiques of modern society. Marcella Soldaini states that the landscapes of *The Return of the Soldier*, though quite different in terrain and aesthetics, are all “pervaded by a haunting feeling of death and violation” (109). The same may be said of many of the settings of *One of Ours*. Soldaini concludes that the war itself causes these feelings, but I contend that Claude and Chris are as much affected by encroaching modernity and the pressures of family, conformity, and prosperity as they are by the Great War. An analysis of both the built and natural environments they inhabit, incorporating theory from several disciplines, can illuminate this argument.

In a 2009 article, Simon Estok chastised fellow ecocritics for focusing solely on positive interactions with and interpretations of nature, insisting that we must recognize “contempt for the natural world [as] a definable and recognizable discourse” (204). Indeed, Edward O. Wilson’s principle of biophilia, an innate emotional connection to the living world, assumes Estok’s and Theodore Roszak’s principle of biophobia, a revulsion toward the landscape. We must, then, consider the landscapes at both Baldry Court and



No Man's Land, Flanders Field, France, 1919, by W. L. King. Library of Congress.



the Wheeler ranch and study our protagonists' responses to them in order to understand their responses to the Great War and "No Man's Land."

West does not allow Chris Baldry to describe his experiences at war; his amnesia prevents it. Cather, on the other hand, allows Claude to give us his direct impressions of the trenches. Despite the dangers and horrors of No Man's Land, one of the first vignettes we see is Claude and his fellow soldiers bathing in a shell hole and disturbing German graves at its bottom. Despite the gruesomeness of the scene, Claude and the others unexpectedly respond philosophically, even attempting humor. In a later scene, a member of Claude's unit, Willy Katz, along with an old woman and a little girl, is killed by a sniper, and Claude's commanding officer Captain Maxey loses his leg. Willy Katz, Claude tells us, takes a bullet "in his brain, through one of his blue eyes" (568), and Claude dispatches the German officer responsible for these deaths. Immediately, however, Claude's thoughts turn from his comrades to the way he's regarded by them:

Claude noticed that David looked at him as if he were very much pleased with him,—looked, indeed, as if something pleasant had happened in this room; where, God knew, nothing had. . . . Was it because he had gone in with Willy? Had David doubted his nerve? (570)

Both examples show us the way Claude interacts with his comrades, rather than how he responds to the landscape particularly; for Claude, the two are difficult to separate. The way Claude privileges the esteem of his colleagues above all else informs our understanding of his reaction to the battlefield landscape and stems from his Nebraska experiences.

Claude is a typical Nebraska farm boy, the hapless middle son of a wealthy farmer. He feels burdened by comparisons with his mechanically gifted younger brother and his business-minded older brother; he feels incapable of proving himself in the family business and feels like an outsider in his own home. Claude seems lost within modern society as well. He often rejects the admonitions of his "old-fashioned" mother against "dangerous pastimes" and liberal education (42). At the same time, he is dissatisfied with his relationship with Enid, a coolly efficient modern woman with a "mind full of other plans" (209). He harbors within himself "the conviction there was something splendid about life," though everything he encounters falls short (147). Perhaps most pernicious is Claude's conflict between what he believes his pioneer ancestors to have been and what their descendants have become in the twentieth century. The Homestead Act of 1862 was marketed on the idea of a nation of small, self-sufficient yeoman farmers, as defined by Thomas Jefferson much earlier.

Claude cannot reconcile that ideal with his father and men like him, modern farmers who acquire land and material property far in excess of what they can use. Claude reflects:

Yet, as for him, he often felt that he would rather go out into the world and earn his bread among strangers than sweat under this half-responsibility for acres and crops that were not his own. He knew that his father was sometimes called a "land hog" by the country people, and he himself had begun to feel that it was not right they should have so much land,—to farm, or to rent, or to leave idle, as they chose. It was strange that in all the centuries the world had been going, the question of property had not been better adjusted. The people who had it were slaves to it, and the people who didn't have it were slaves to them. (116)



"On the Somme Front — The taking of Cantigny by American troops, supported by French tanks."

The result of modern agriculture and its solitary goal of monetary wealth is "callousness," Claude concludes (144). He remembers when early settlers had pride in their homes and farms and orchards; now, he believes, the desire for prosperity has erased these more noble qualities.

Claude suffers through numerous setbacks in his farming, but his one successful innovation is his unconventional wheat planting. This proves advantageous when war breaks out in Europe, with Mr. Wheeler telling Claude, "I see this war scare in Europe has hit the market. Wheat's taken a jump. They're paying eighty-eight cents in Chicago. We might as well get rid of a few hundred bushel before it drops again" (217). When Claude reads the war news in the newspaper that night, he can make nothing of the accounts and is unfamiliar with the geography. All he does know is that the war in Europe somehow equates to



a windfall for the Wheeler ranch and a small personal success for himself.

With this background, we can begin to understand Claude's response to the battlefield. Claude was "born with a love of order" (52), but the life of a farmer is anything but orderly, as evidenced later by Claude's livestock failures and his accident with the mules. Because of this, Claude feels strangely at home in the army, despite the ugliness he witnesses; he makes friends and finds purpose. His time in war-torn France is a regrettable episode, most notable—for Claude—for its destruction of the French landscape and hardship for the civilians. While lunching with Olive de Courcy, she asks Claude, "They must love their country so much, don't you think, when they endure such poverty to come back to it? . . . Even the old ones do not often complain about their dear things—their linen, and their china, and their beds. If they have the ground, and hope, all that they can make again. This war has taught us all how little the made things matter. Only the feeling matters" (509). This is only one of several times during this visit when Claude experiences "the feeling of being completely understood, of being no longer a stranger" (515). Claude's esteem for these French villagers only grows as he learns about their perseverance in the face of prolonged misery. For Claude, the landscape of war is strangely positive, due to these social associations.

As we consider Chris Baldry in *No Man's Land*, we know only that he has served "Somewhere in France," as he has once told his wife Kitty (3). In fact we hear nothing of *No Man's Land* from Chris himself, and we cannot be sure that Chris was ever in that expanse between enemy trenches; instead, Chris is placed there through this mediated image from his cousin Jenny:

By nights I saw Chris running across the brown rottenness of No-Man's-Land, starting back here because he trod upon a hand, not even looking there because of the awfulness of an unburied head, and not till my dream was packed full of horror did I see him pitch forward on his knees as he reached safety, if it was that. For on the war-films I have seen men slip down as softly from the trench-parapet, and none but the grimmer philosophers could say that they had reached safety by their fall. And when I escaped into wakefulness it was only to lie stiff and think of stories I had heard in the boyish voice of the modern subaltern, which rings indomitable, yet has most of its gay notes flattened: "We were all of us in a barn one night, and a shell came along. My pal sang out, 'Help me, old man; I've got no legs!' and I had to answer, 'I can't, old man; I've got no hands!'" Well, such are the dreams of English-women to-day. (7–8)

Jenny's reference to "the war-films" indicates that she was likely one of the eighty percent of British citizens who viewed the British military film *The Battle of the Somme* in 1916 (Soldaini 110–111). Historian Simon Schama explains that in modern culture, landscape can be perceived only through images (12).



Prise de Cantigny (Somme) par les troupes américaines soutenues par les chars d'assaut français.

"Taking of Cantigny (Somme) by American troops, supported by French tanks."

For much of the world, the mediated war image—via film and photographic images—was the only available image of the battles and their aftermath, making readers and viewers everywhere the perfect audience for the propaganda of war. Chris Baldry, with his shattered memory, recalls nothing of the front until he is "cured" at the novel's end. His demeanor after recovering his memory suggests that scenes such as those described by his Cousin Jenny fill his mind:

He walked not loose-limbed like a boy, as he had done that very afternoon, but with the soldier's hard tread upon the heel. It recalled to me that, bad as we were, we were yet not the worst circumstance of his return. When we had lifted the yoke of our embraces from his shoulders he would go back to that flooded trench in Flanders, under that sky more full of flying death than clouds, to that No-Man's-Land where bullets fall like rain on the rotting faces of the dead. (184)

Though the words are Jenny's, Chris's demeanor tells us that he knows what he returns to—industrial-scale, mechanized modern warfare. *No Man's Land*, then, is an affective landscape, one that causes fear and revulsion—Roszak's biophobia. It is also a created landscape, a direct result of industrialization, commerce, and colonialization.

Nicole Rizzuto, in her 2015 book *Insurgent Testimonies: Witnessing Colonial Trauma in Modern and Anglophone Literature*, explains that both Chris Baldry and his father, in order

to become and remain English gentlemen, exploit the mineral resources and people of Mexico, where large foreign landholdings led to civil unrest. This “quasi-imperialism,” she states, has caused the trauma to Chris Baldry *before* he ever confronts No Man’s Land (95). I contend, however, that while Chris was “dulled by care” participating in his father’s business, true trauma occurs as Baldry realizes how his family’s wealth and industry contributed to the war (West 104). West, a Fabian socialist who, in late life, wrote *Survivors in Mexico*, a sweeping history of a country plagued by centuries of imperialism stretching back to the Aztec Empire, would have been both aware and critical of the elder Baldry’s business model (Schweizer). By positioning Chris at this juncture of modern history and politics, West reaffirms England as a perfect pastoral state, wholly reliant on resources derived from foreign soil and foreign labor. Baldry Court, with its “miles of emerald pasture-land lying wet and brilliant under a westward line of sleek hills, blue with distance and distant woods,” and its “suave decorum of the lawn and the Lebanon cedar,” is the very image of the type of estate that distinguishes Baldry’s class (6–7). Chris finds no solace there, we read, and even his family represents to him the sorrowful entanglements of the family business. We should note, too, that this image of Baldry Court is a mediated image, as cousin Jenny is the one describing it. She believes it to be idyllic; Chris Baldry has learned it is not.

But to be able to recognize these reactions to landscape as a reaction against modernity and industry, it’s necessary to examine their counterpoints. Both Baldry and Wheeler show us an Edenic version of their “place”—Chris Baldry with Monkey Island and Claude Wheeler at Madame Joubert’s home. Though Claude seldom complains of the conditions at the front, he does emphasize the comfort and peace of the Jouberts’ household in contrast. The hot and hearty food, the lavender-scented pillowcases, and the fresh towels are the comforts of home that Claude never before thought to treasure. Spending a week with the Jouberts and celebrating his twenty-fifth birthday, Claude muses that he has “often thought that the period of happy ‘youth,’ about which his old friend Mrs. Erlich used to talk, and which he had never experienced, was being made up to him now. He was having his youth in France. He knew that nothing like this would ever come again” (541). French village life, Claude thinks, is immune to the greater cultural pressures of the Wheelers’ American farm. As he toys with the idea of buying a little French farm, he realizes, “There was no chance for the kind of life he wanted at home, where people were always buying and selling, building and pulling down. He had begun to believe that the Americans were a people of shallow emotions” (534–535). By the time of his death, Claude is thoroughly disillusioned with his Nebraska life.

One of the most interesting aspects of Claude’s preference for the landscape of the French countryside is the presence of David Gerhardt. Gerhardt negotiates the cultural landscape as well as he navigates the physical landscapes of the battlefield and the village. An educated musician *and* a capable soldier, David Gerhardt embodies Claude’s ideal. When he and Claude talk about the purpose of the war, Gerhardt reinforces Claude’s own misgivings about the war and modernity: “The war was put up to our generation. I don’t know what for; the sins of our fathers, probably. Certainly not to make the world safe for Democracy, or any rhetoric of that sort” (539). Claude’s affection for Gerhardt and his ideas extends to this place they both love.

When Chris Baldry falls victim to amnesia, he retreats fifteen years to a summer love affair that largely took place on Monkey Island, the home of his lover Margaret. One might make the case that Baldry Court represents imperialism, commerce, and consumerism; Monkey Island, on the other hand, is far different. Since one of the protagonists of the novel is a soldier, descriptions of Monkey Island might allude to Greek mythology’s Elysian Fields, generally portrayed as a light place surrounded by the dark, where Dante’s “Virtuous Heathens,” including soldiers, remain on the threshold of Hades. Baldry describes the “black waters” of the Thames which surrounds Monkey Island, the “white hawthorn,” and the “night as brilliant as the day” (71, 64, 77).



Prise de Cantigny (Somme) par les troupes américaines accompagnées de troupes spéciales françaises.
 “Taking of Cantigny (Somme) by American troops, accompanied by special French troops.”

A Greek temple, abandoned to the wild part of the island, is flooded with moonlight when Chris lifts Margaret into the niche about the altar (78). It must also be pointed out that the inn at Monkey Island, Margaret’s home, originally was built “for a ‘folly’” by the third Duke of Marlborough, best known for his attack on St. Malo during the Seven Years’ War, a nod to



British militarism (West 65). Elements of the Judeo-Christian Eden also apply: the animals, the significance of the single white hawthorn tree as a parallel to the Tree of Knowledge, and the lovers' expulsion from Monkey Island certainly support Edenic or Arcadian symbolism. Monkey Island is not altogether free of modernity—Margaret's father raises ducks and grows vegetables there, though the reader is assured that it "didn't pay," thereby eliminating profit as a motive (98). By contrast, Baldry Court, with its surrounding pasture lands and sprawling farms, does represent commerce and modernity. Cultural historian Friedrich Meinecke tells us that the forces of modernity—militarism, nationalism and capitalism—are the forces that ultimately beget the wars that create No Man's Land, with its miles of shelled, barren earth, strewn with bodies, munitions, puddles of water, and abandoned equipment (421). These become representative of the detritus left behind in the name of Progress.

As Schama explains in an interview, "There is a difference between land, which is earth, and landscape, which signifies a kind of jurisdiction. It always meant the framing of an image" (Gussow). This description corroborates Buell's assertion that human and natural histories are intertwined and validates an interdisciplinary analysis of landscape in fiction. For these authors, landscape serves to situate our characters not simply in a physical space but to triangulate them in a particular moment in time, space, and culture. As we consider these novels against a context of No Man's Land, the land and landscape are necessarily important reflections of their protagonists' internal struggles. Claude, pressed into military service by his many failures in Nebraska and his rejection of the industrial and capitalistic ideals around him, soon embraced the "Quixotic ideas" shared by many soldiers, causing them to enlist (332); the result is that Claude finds himself in France, a landscape that he associates with the romantic images of Jeanne d'Arc. Claude's love of army life, his respect for David Gerhardt and others like him, and his love for the French people make France a highly affective landscape for him, one that confirms his prejudices against modern American life. Chris Baldry, on the other hand, sees in France evidence of the industrialism and imperialism of which he has been a part, and the horror of this realization sends Baldry reeling toward a safe haven—an amnesiac episode that leaves him with no memory of his ties to No Man's Land, to Mexico, to Meinecke's forces of modernity. Though Chris Baldry and Claude Wheeler are differently affected by the landscapes of No Man's Land itself, they share an aversion to those aspects of modernity that have placed them there.

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The Meaning of Names in Red Cloud

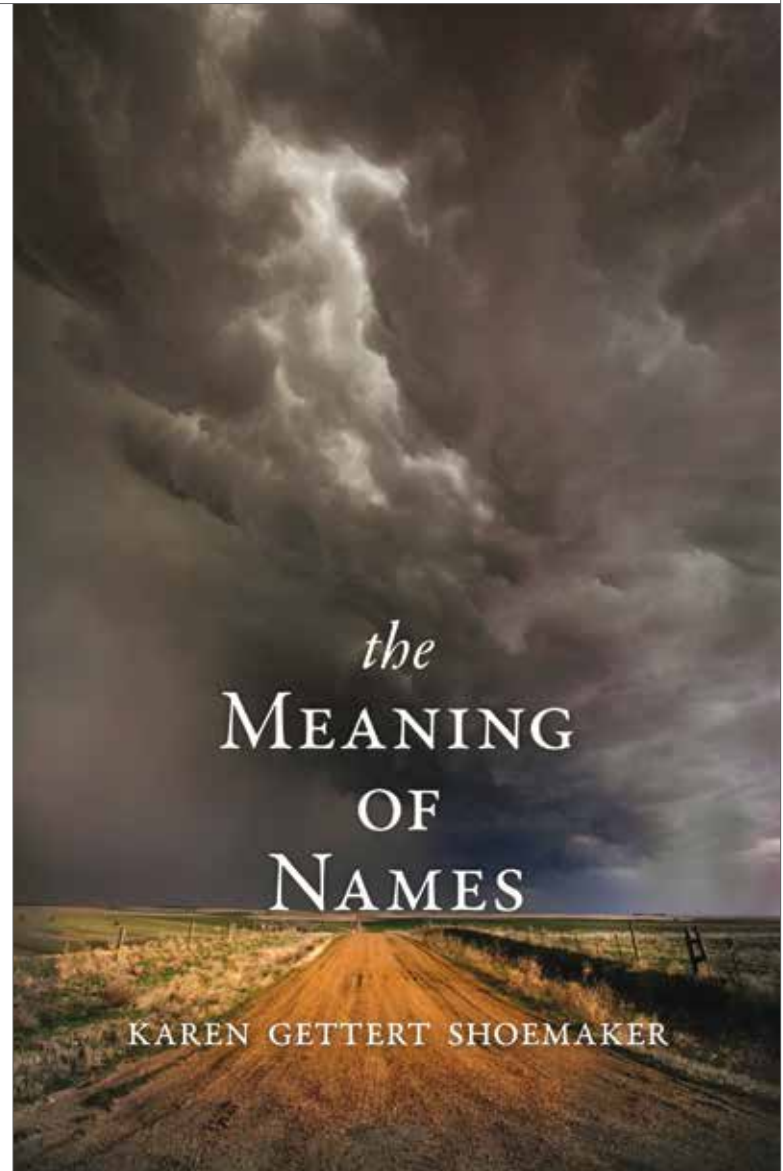
Becky Faber | University of Nebraska–Lincoln

One of the highlights of the 2016 Cather Spring Conference was Karen Gettert Shoemaker's reading from her novel *The Meaning of Names*, the 2016 One Book One Nebraska selection. Karen is a native Nebraskan who approached the story of Gerda Vogel by way of her training as a journalist, her family history, and her upbringing in rural north-central Nebraska, where the novel is set. *The Meaning of Names* explores the issues of military service during World War I, the 1918 influenza pandemic, and the strong strains of anti-German sentiment of the war years. Gerda, the main character, is a farm wife of German descent and the mother of four children (with another on the way). Against her father's wishes, she married a farmer, also of German descent, who struggles to provide for his family. As World War I intensifies and more young men in their area are called to service, the Vogels encounter anti-German hostility in their community as well as the growing likelihood that Fritz Vogel will have to leave his family when his draft number is called.

I sat down with Karen a few weeks after the Spring Conference and talked with her about the novel, which is loosely based on the lives of her grandparents, and her experience of presenting to the enthusiastic audience in Red Cloud.

Her reaction to the warm response to her reading and talk? "I was wowed!" She had read Cather, but "I did not want to channel Willa Cather, least of all *One of Ours*. In some ways, knowing *One of Ours* made writing this novel harder. I had to pull back from Cather's novel and write my own story."

While Cather explores a broader movement into World War I, tracing Claude Wheeler's life (and disillusionment) in Nebraska to his war service in France and eventual death in battle, the geographic and thematic focus of *The Meaning of Names* is narrower. Both novels explore anti-German feelings in rural Nebraska settings (in widely separated areas of the state). In the years before World War I, almost thirty percent of Nebraskans were of German origin or descent. In rural Nebraska, assimilation was slow, particularly with language, thus providing a breeding ground for suspicions felt by non-Germans. *One of Ours* depicts this issue primarily through two situations: the scene at the railway diner where Claude confronts boys harassing Mrs. Voigt, the diner's German proprietor, and the courtroom scene in which two German farmers are charged with making disloyal statements. *The Meaning of Names* focuses more squarely on this anti-German feeling than Cather's novel does; it forms the



Red Hen Press

basis of many interactions and conflicts in the rural communities depicted in the story.

I asked Karen to share how she developed the intricacies of her story. "I had a rural childhood, with no television. We had a large garden and we would often work in it together. Something would spark a memory. We would pass the memory around and a story would take shape. This just happens when you work closely together." At the heart of many of these memorable family stories were first-hand accounts of the World War I era, most specifically regarding the influenza pandemic—the novel's flu episodes were built on "oral tradition from family." Details about the spread of the flu were



critical to the novel because Karen's grandmother, like Gerda, fell ill during this epidemic. Family journals gave Karen solid details. Her more formal research came from reading Nebraska newspapers, journals at the Nebraska State Historical Society, and books about World War I. When *The Meaning of Names* had taken shape, members of Karen's writing group—including Mary Pipher, Marge Saiser, Twyla Hansen, and Pam Barger—read the novel and provided important feedback. Karen's niece also read the manuscript, providing insight from the family's perspective.

There are many deaths in the book, two of which, falling at the very outset of the story, are particularly striking. The novel's opening lines tell of the death during childbirth of Elizabeth, Gerda's older sister: "When Gerda was five, her older sister came home to die. No, not to die, to give birth, but dying is what she did."

"I wanted to make the point early on," Karen said, "that women faced their own dangers, and childbirth was a common one." Later when Gerda travels by rail with her sons to visit her parents, a man of German origin is assaulted and thrown from the train by three young men, in a shocking example of the anti-German hysteria of the time. This scene is more graphic than Cather's anti-German scenes in *One of Ours*; the source for the incident was an account in a Nebraska newspaper. As the anti-German sentiment escalates in the community, turning citizens against each other, Karen brings another historically accurate detail into her story—the Spanish influenza, which infected one person in five worldwide (including members of Karen's family). The 1918 pandemic is estimated to have killed fifty to one hundred million people worldwide. One of the beauties of this book is its vivid portrait of enduring humanity against such a grim backdrop.

Karen has travelled extensively throughout Nebraska, presenting on *The Meaning of Names* in venues and localities of all sizes. I asked her what she had learned about Nebraska in the course of promoting her book. "Nebraskans are delighted to have a book about themselves," she said, expressing delight at the number of people who come to hear her speak. "This book has to do with ways in which Nebraska is Nebraska." She continued, "The book isn't really mine anymore, but it is a shared experience."

She sees the novel as "timely," so much so that her initial title for it was *This Is Now*. Karen feels that the novel has certain parallels in current times; as she was writing, the "freedom fries" coinage was floated in the United States as a substitute for "french fries" in response to France's refusal to support the Iraq War. She made use of this notion (with its historical antecedents) in a conversation Fritz Vogel has with one of his neighbors, regarding

a local restaurant: "They quit serving sauerkraut," Aloys Baum tells Fritz. "And hamburgers. . . 'Liberty cabbage' and 'ground beef sandwiches' is what they got on the menu now."

When her publisher asked her to change the title, she chose *The Meaning of Names* for its evocation of the duality of German and English meanings in the novel. Karen illustrated this point by noting a scene in the book where the mail deliveryman comments that Gerda is "a fine sign of spring," looking like "some great bird coming toward me down the lane." Gerda responds, "That's what my name means, you know—in German 'Vogel' means 'bird.'" Karen said, "When I started, I couldn't possibly believe that we [Nebraskans] could turn on the Germans." When asked about the themes of the book, she emphasized that a major one is that we "can have varying thoughts about the war and still get along." She has appreciated that many of those who come to hear her speak "understand the book was about alienation."

Karen dedicated *The Meaning of Names* to her mother, Christina Margaretha Vogel Gettert, who was born in 1918 during the flu pandemic. She was the model for the Vogel baby born at the end of the novel when the family is suffering from the flu. As Karen described during her talk in Red Cloud, the doctor who delivered her mother pronounced her mother and grandmother "miracles"—flu-stricken pregnant women typically did not survive, nor did their babies. Karen's mother passed away in May 2011 before the novel was published, but Karen read the novel to her when her mother was in hospice. "She watched intently as I read to her, as if she didn't want to miss a word. At the point in the novel where Gerda feels the baby move in her womb, my mom said, 'That was me!'"

Through the many presentations that Karen has given across Nebraska, people have asked her to write a sequel to *The Meaning of Names*. And she has ideas about doing so. Currently her travels and teaching obligations prevent her from focused writing.

Readers of *One of Ours* will find that *The Meaning of Names* is a good companion piece despite the fact that they were published almost a century apart. I found interesting correlations between the two books as they relate to the response on the Plains to the "war to end all wars."

Throughout Nebraska and beyond—even to London—Karen Gettert Shoemaker has been engaging audiences in conversations about World War I, family stories, and Nebraska's history. Musing on the many responses to her story that readers have shared with her, Karen shared this thought: "Because of the book's inclusion in the 'Nebraska 150 Books' reading list, and the interest and support from so many groups like the Cather Foundation, I think the book will outlive me. And that makes me very happy."



Remembering Elsa Nettels (1931–2016)

Julie Olin-Ammentorp | Le Moyne College



Elsa Nettels at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, alongside John Singer Sargent's *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*. Photograph by Henri Cole.

Members of the Cather community were saddened to learn that Elsa Nettels, an important scholar of the work of Willa Cather and a central presence at Cather conferences for many years, passed away on December 30, 2016, in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Elsa was born in Madison, Wisconsin, to Elsie P. Nettels and Curtis P. Nettels; her mother had a master's degree in history and her father, who held a doctorate in history, taught at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and later at Cornell University. Elsa earned her bachelor's degree in history from Cornell and her M.A. and Ph.D. in English from the University of Wisconsin. After teaching at Mt. Holyoke College, she joined the faculty of the College of William and Mary in 1967. As the Mildred and J. B. Hickman Professor of English and Humanities, she taught at William and Mary for thirty years, receiving the Phi Beta Kappa Faculty Award for the Advancement of Scholarship in 1973. Upon her retirement in 1997, she received the Thomas Ashley Graves, Jr. Award for Sustained Excellence in Teaching. Her student Bob Evans recalled, "Dr. Nettels was my first introduction to looking at literature as a scholar. That she enabled me to think about a piece of writing this way, and still not ruin the experience of being a reader, is something that I will always be grateful for. She was truly a gift to her students." To Henri Cole, she was "my beloved teacher who taught an unread young man to love James, Conrad, Forster, Woolf, Cather and so much more."

Elsa published three books: *James and Conrad* (1977), the winner of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association Award; *Language, Race, and Social Class in Howells's America* (1988); and *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells's, James, Wharton, and Cather* (1997). Her work appears in several volumes of *Cather Studies*, including essays on Cather and A. E. Housman; on Cather as a cultural icon; on "the disadvantages of a prairie childhood" in *One of Ours*; and, most recently, on Cather and "the example of Henry James." Other publications analyzed authors as diverse as Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Louisa May Alcott, and Virginia Woolf, and topics as varied as narrative technique, gender issues, the gothic, the influence of Calvinism, the role of the woman artist, and even indigestion. The breadth and depth of her knowledge were remarkable, as was her ability to translate her insights into meticulously researched essays that were elegantly developed and eloquently articulated. Elsa was an enthusiastic conference-goer, organizing panels and giving papers at many conferences, including those sponsored by the Willa Cather Foundation.

Another major contribution Elsa made to scholarship is harder to quantify. Elsa had a central role in nearly every group of scholars she was a part of, maintaining many long-term friendships while also welcoming newcomers into the profession, making them feel at home and becoming a mentor to many of them. In Willa Cather's great short story, "Neighbour Rosicky," the title character is described as having "a special gift for loving people, something that was like an ear for music or an eye for colour. It was quiet, unobtrusive; it was merely there. You saw it in his eyes,—perhaps that was why they were merry." Elsa often had the same merry eyes; and she had a gift for friendship that brought many people together. Like Rosicky, she also knew how to enjoy life, including not only literature, ideas, and the arts, but conversation and food, and had a special fondness for chocolate desserts (no nuts). And she had a fine sense of humor. All those who were lucky enough to know her will miss her greatly.



Contributors to this Issue

Daniel Clayton is professor of history at Regis University and Founding Director of the Regis University Center for the Study of War Experience. Drawing on the large collection of personal war narratives housed in the Center's archive, Clayton's research and publications focus on the study of war and memory. He is the son of a World War II combat veteran.

Jeanne Collins is now retired from her teaching career at Aurora (Colorado) Central High School and the University of Northern Colorado. She is the owner of Wordsworth Writing, Editing, & Narration and has previously published in this journal. Her paper on World War I songs at the 2016 Spring Conference was one of the inspirations for the feature on World War I songs in this issue.

Becky Faber is a senior career advisor in the Career Services office at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Her interest in the literature of Nebraska extends beyond her research relating to Cather, which has concentrated especially on *One of Ours*. She serves as a board member for the Nebraska Center for the Book and is also a Fellow for the Center for Great Plains Studies.

Max Frazier holds the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and is associate professor of English and Senior Military Faculty member at the U.S. Air Force Academy. She studies the role of memory in identity formation and specializes in autobiography and women's writing from the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, as well as war literature. She is a member of the Willa Cather Foundation Board of Governors.

Richard C. Harris, John J. McMullen Professor of Humanities and Assistant Dean at Webb Institute, has published extensively on Willa Cather in a number of journals including *Cather Studies*, *Studies in American Fiction*, *The Journal of Narrative Theory*, and the *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review*. He was volume editor for the Scholarly Edition of *One of Ours* and is a member of the Willa Cather Foundation Board of Governors.

Jessica Hellmann holds the rank of Captain and is a second year instructor at the U.S. Air Force Academy. She earned her M.A. at Colorado State University. In her teaching and scholarship, she focuses on the environment and literature of the American West. This is her first publication on Willa Cather.

Andrew Jewell is a professor in the University Libraries, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, and director of the *Willa Cather Archive* (cather.unl.edu). He is coeditor of *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* and the forthcoming *Complete Letters of Willa Cather* digital scholarly edition. Since 2008, he has been a member of the Willa Cather Foundation Board of Governors.

Charles Johanningsmeier is professor of American literature at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, where he holds the Ralph Wardle Chair of the College of Arts and Sciences and teaches a graduate seminar on Willa Cather. Recent publications about Cather deal with implications of her fan mail and German translations and reprints of her work. He is a member of the Willa Cather Foundation Board of Governors.

Julie Olin-Ammentorp is professor of English at Le Moyne College. She is the author of *Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War* and of many articles on Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, and other authors. Her book in progress, *Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and the Place of Culture*, is forthcoming from the University of Nebraska Press. She is a member of the Willa Cather Foundation Board of Governors.

Elaine Smith teaches English and American literature at the University of South Florida, Tampa. She has published previously in the *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review* and has a recent essay on Cather in *Literature d'Amerique* (2016).

Kelsey Squire is assistant professor of English at Ohio Dominican University. Her research interests include the study of American regional writers, print culture, and reception. She has published essays on Cather's fiction in *Cather Studies 9* and *Great Plains Quarterly*.

Tracy Tucker has been the Willa Cather Foundation's education director and archivist since 2012. In addition to presenting and publishing on topics related to Cather, Great Plains literature, and the environment, she has recently published poetry and nonfiction in *Old Northwest Review*, *Midwestern Gothic*, and *Prairie Fire*.

Sarah Young is associate professor of English at Benedictine College. Her research focuses on Marilynne Robinson, music and literature, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, modernism, and literature of World War I. She performs regularly as an opera and musical theater singer, and her performance of World War I songs at the 2016 Spring Conference was an inspiration for the feature on such songs in this issue.

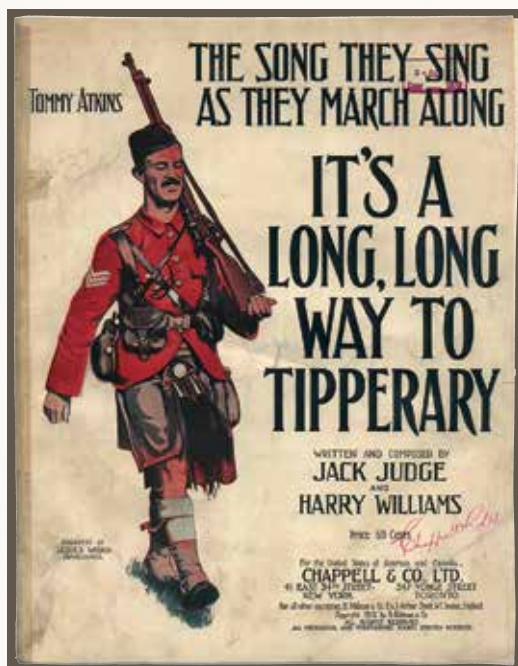


Popular Music of the Great War

The World War I years saw a great flowering of popular song. In addition to providing entertainment on the home front and in the battlefield, popular music served as an effective medium for spreading messages—encouraging patriotism, supporting morale, inspiring national pride, and demonizing the enemy. These songs circulated in the form of sheet music, to be played by the town

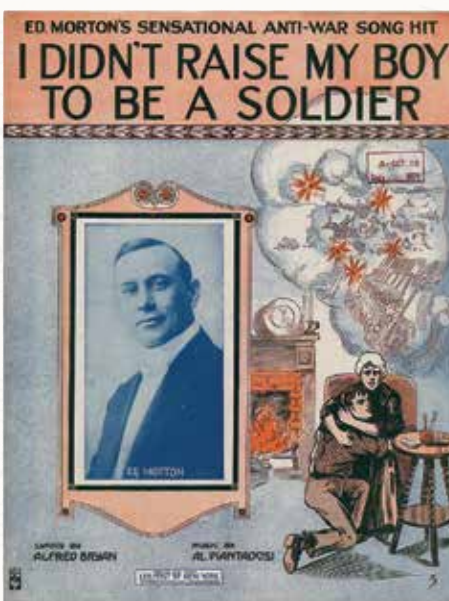
band or the pianist in the front parlor or saloon, or performed by vaudeville and music hall performers. During last year's Spring Conference, scholars Sarah Young and Jeanne Collins made engaging and informative presentations on the songs of the World War I era, from which the material on these pages is adapted.

The Editors



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"It's a Long Way to Tipperary," based on an earlier music hall tune, was released in 1914, soon after Britain entered the war. The favorite marching song of the British military became popular worldwide. (When originally published, it was a long, long way to Tipperary.)



Library of Congress

In the first years of the war, American resistance to joining a "European war" led to titles like "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier," a hugely popular song set to the hymn tune "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." It focused on a mother's fears: "I brought him up to be my pride and joy; / Who dares to place a musket on his shoulder / To shoot some other mother's darling boy?" But after the U.S. entered the war in 1917, this musical call for neutrality was swept aside, replaced with parody titles encouraging enlistment and patriotism, like "I Tried to Raise My Boy to Be a Hero" and "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Slacker."





Levy Collection, Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University

The image of the mother in these popular songs is usually a sentimental one. She's often elderly, proud of her boy in service but heavy of heart, praying for his safe return. As the war progressed, popular music recognized the new tradition of small service flags displayed in the windows of families with members in the military. The red-bordered flags bore a blue star for each member serving; if the service member died, the blue star was replaced with a gold one. Numerous songs reflected these traditions, including "There's a Battlefield in Every Mother's Heart" and "When the Little Blue Star in the Window Has Turned to Gold," both from 1918.



Library of Congress

Women were generally, but not always, depicted as mothers and wives and sweethearts. "Don't Forget the Red Cross Nurse" reminds us that "She may be someone's wife / Still she's willing to give up her life." (And we are free to note that willingness to sacrifice for a just cause is heroic even if we are not "someone's wife.")



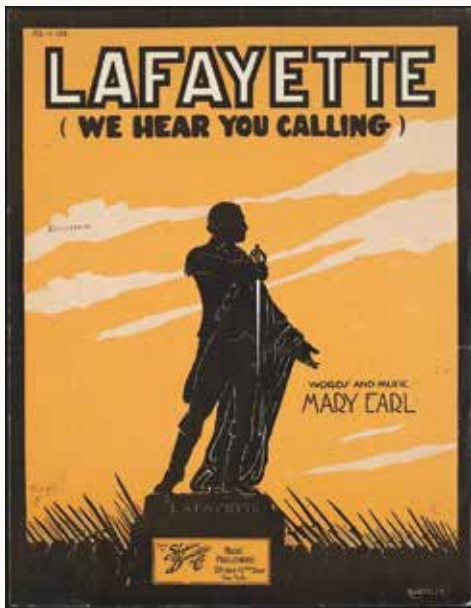
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History

Civilian sacrifices during wartime got the music-hall treatment: "Mary" tells "John" all the things she can do without—sugar, sleep, light, meat, wheat—but draws the line at love (and her "new spring hat").



Library of Congress

The deep racial divide in America and the minstrel traditions of the American music hall gave rise to many songs in which the lyrics (and generally the cover art) were overtly stereotypical if not blatantly racist—even though these songs were created to recruit African Americans into service. "He Draws No Color Line" opens with "Dear old colored mammy talking to her boy / Knows he's going over, bids farewell to joy."



Library of Congress

Historical events and figures were often pressed into service to inspire Americans to support the war. “Lafayette (We Hear You Calling)” reminded people of the French hero of the American Revolution. The founding fathers, Paul Revere, and the Liberty Bell also made appearances in wartime songs.



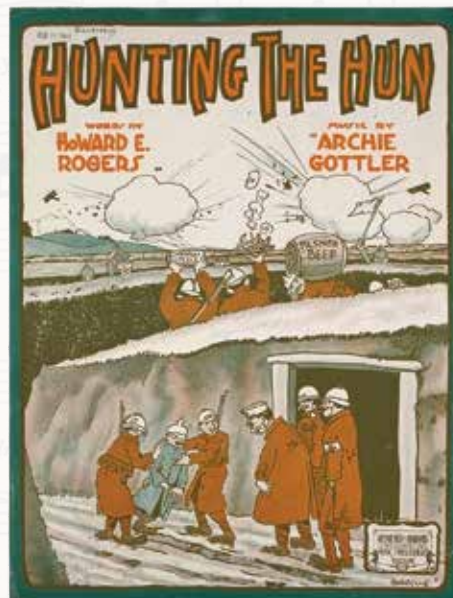
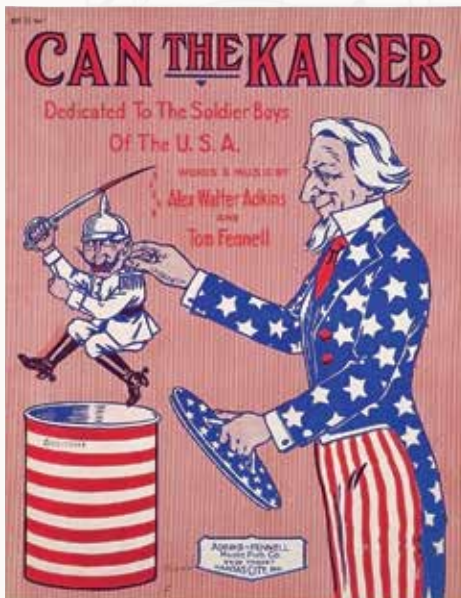
Levy Collection, Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University

“La Madelon” was one of the best-known French songs to become popular among American troops. “The Americans were the first to bring ‘Madelon’ to Beaufort,” Cather writes in *One of Ours*. “The children stood round begging for it, ‘Chantez-nous la Madelon!’”



Library of Congress

The song that typifies the spirit of patriotism in this country, perhaps better than any, is “Over There,” written by George M. Cohan very shortly after President Wilson signed the declaration of war against Germany on April 6, 1917. First recorded by Nora Bayes, popular wartime recordings were also made by Enrico Caruso, Billy Murray, and Arthur Fields.



Library of Congress

The German cultural whitewashing taking place across America in 1917 and 1918 played out in songs dehumanizing the enemy, like “Hunting the Hun” and “Can the Kaiser.”



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The *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review* welcomes scholarly essays, notes, news items, and letters. Scholarly essays should generally not exceed 5,000 words, although longer essays may be considered; they should be submitted in Microsoft Word as email attachments and should follow current MLA guidelines as articulated in the *MLA Handbook*.

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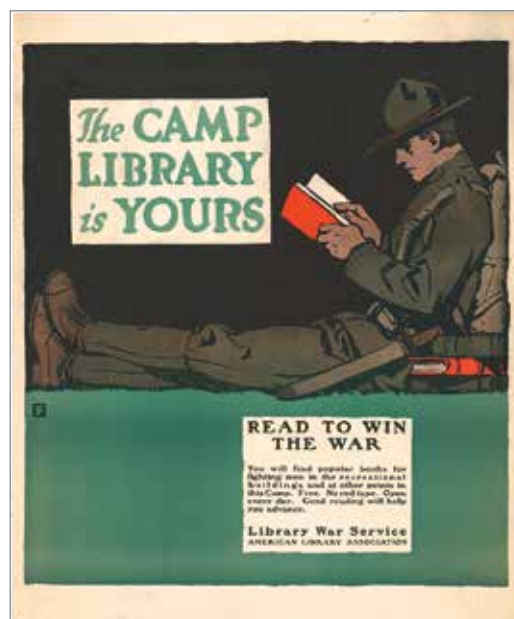
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New to the Collection

Upstairs in the National Willa Cather Center's brand new study room and archive, our collection of rare books, photographs, and Willa Cather's personal items continues to grow. Thanks to two generous donors, more than two hundred individual pieces have been added to our archive. One of these items, a tall Eastlake slant-front secretary, now welcomes guests to the study room. Still bearing its original shipping label ("C. F. Cather, Red Cloud, Ne."), the desk belonged to Willa Cather and has been passed down through the Cather family. We are delighted to have it back in Webster County.

Other pieces now at home in Red Cloud are gift items given by Willa Cather to her nieces as well as Cather's own elaborately embroidered sea green silk blouse and a sequined lace fan. A large collection of Cather family books also came along with the secretary, including several volumes inscribed from Cather to family members.

The archive also received forty-eight new Cather letters sent to her Webster County farm manager, I. W. Crowell, covering the years 1938–1946. They detail Cather's acquisition of the properties and general farm management decisions; they also speak of her travels and her fond feeling for old friends such as the Crowells, and provide hints about Cather's other business—writing.

We are deeply thankful to the Elizabeth Shannon family and a generous anonymous donor for these gifts.



Cather's secretary, from the "St. Louis Furniture Workers Association."



A selection from the newly acquired Cather letters.

This hand-colored photograph of Cather's and Edith Lewis's cabin on Grand Manin is labeled, in Cather's hand, "This is our little house."



A detail of the embroidery work on a blouse that belonged to Cather, bearing a label from Babani, Paris.



The National Willa Cather Center

A LIVING MEMORIAL

Archive ■ Museum ■ Art Gallery ■ Bookstore ■ Study Center



The Cather Legacy Society

SUSTAINING THE DREAM

It is your support that has allowed our dreams to become exciting and inspiring realities. Your commitment to our mission has taken us far, but there is much more we can achieve together. Will you help us in our pursuit to popularize Cather and her work around the world? A charitable bequest is an excellent way for you to leave a legacy and help further our mission. A bequest is also one of the easiest gifts you can make. Your estate planning attorney can



Anne Dupont Studio, New York City

help you include a provision in your will that leaves a lasting gift to us: a specific asset, a dollar amount, or a percentage of your estate. A bequest can also be made from the residue of your estate or what is left after all gifts have been made to your heirs. The Cather Legacy Society was created to recognize individuals who make charitable gift arrangements to benefit the Willa Cather Foundation beyond their lifetime. Please contact us to learn more.

“There are always dreamers on the frontier.”

– O Pioneers!



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