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Book Review: The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather

Mary R. Ryder

South Dakota State University

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The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather. Edited by Marilee Lindemann. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xx + 299 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$75.00 cloth, \$24.99 paper.

In this collection of thirteen essays Lindemann successfully meets her goal of offering recent criticism that recenters Cather as a writer who responded fully to the “changing social and demographic conditions” of her time. The essays indeed encourage reading “against the grain of Cather’s escapism” in a range of “interpretative possibilities.” Particularly useful are essays exploring little-examined areas of Cather scholarship, including the late Susan Rosowski’s study of the comic sense of self in Cather’s works and Lisa Marcus’s discussion of Cather and the “geography of Jewishness.” Rosowski resituates Claude Wheeler’s yearning for something splendid in *One of Ours* within

the comedic tradition of the optimistic sacred fool who is hardly a tragic figure. Marcus's essay, though overlooking subtle tones and sarcasm that might clarify Cather's ambivalence toward Jewishness, provides excellent background on the Jewish culture of New York in Cather's day and elucidates the dual roles Jews play in Cather's works, that is, the "embodiment of American industry" and "excessive perversion of the American ideal." One regrets, however, that this essay begins with pointed criticism of Joan Acocella's *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* (2000) and inadvertently becomes a precursor to Jonathan Goldberg's vitriolic attack on Acocella in the subsequent essay. Goldberg, while well delineating variant critical responses to Cather's sexual politics, detracts from his otherwise cogent argument by devolving into a multi-page and scathing "review" of Acocella.

Essays placing Cather within the political milieu are more balanced. Guy Reynolds, in discussing Cather's Progressivism, frees her from the confines of Great Plains Populist thought, placing her within the more "radical vision" of reform and satire on Midwestern life. Reynolds bolsters his argument with clear cultural and historical references that shaped Cather's memory of Nebraska in the 1890s. John Swift's work on *The Professor's House* also is noteworthy in confirming that Cather was "deeply engaged" with the political issues of her day. Citing "liberty of contract" as a prevailing issue in American culture and the judicial system of the time, Swift argues convincingly that both Professor St. Peter's and Tom Outland's experiences and reactions are shaped by ideas and ideals of contract and possession.

Coupled with these cultural and new historical studies, Joseph Urgo's and Leona Sevick's essays focus upon empire and migration as themes central to Cather's works about the Great Plains and the Southwest. Arguing that movement from west to east is too little noted in Cather's texts but critical to understanding her ideas of empire, Urgo remarks that Cather's own eastward movement from Nebraska demonstrates the paradox that cultural develop-

ment is not a product of rootedness but of mobility. Likewise, Sevick sheds new light on *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, arguing that Bishop Latour's desire to reestablish the church in New Mexico is at once complicit with the material interests of American expansionism and a protest against the modernity and capitalism accompanying that expansion.

New biographical approaches include Janis Stout's detailed study of Cather's interests in artistic performance and stage presence as evidenced in characters like Thea Kronborg and Alexandra Bergson whose disciplined sense of life and art redeems them from the shabbiness and small-mindedness of frontier and village life. Sharon O' Brien adds to our knowledge of the private Cather by exploring depression as an identifiable and disabling factor in the writer's life, and Ann Romines's fine essay on *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* resurrects the issue of Cather's response to her Southern heritage. Romines posits that one can go home again in "a successfully negotiated return," something Cather perhaps strove to do in her final novel.

Those essays concerned with genre are interesting but less cutting-edge. While Richard Millington's definition of Cather as a modern is excellent in attention to her subject, characters, and plots, his speculation about her exposure to Boasian anthropology is less convincing. Mark Madigan's essay on the importance of Cather's short fiction provides a helpful overview for beginning readers but offers little new for established scholars, and the shifting focus of Anne Goldman's essay on rereading *My Ántonia* makes difficult deciphering how the narrative subverts "any simple political reading of 'pioneer life.'"

In spite of some annoying editing issues (e.g., the misspelling of Niel Herbert's name throughout the Reynolds essay), the volume is well conceived and should prove useful for both those new to Cather studies and to more seasoned scholars.

MARY R. RYDER
Department of English
South Dakota State University