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Review of *Alexander's Bridge*. By Willa Cather

Elizabeth Ammons
Tufts University

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Alexander's Bridge. By Willa Cather. Historical essay and explanatory notes by Tom Quirk. Textual essay and editing by Frederick M. Link. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. xii + 303 pp. Illustrations, maps. $75.00.

Willa Cather tried to disown *Alexander's Bridge* (1912). In her 1922 preface reprinted in this impressive scholarly edition, she compared her first novel invidiously to her second, *O Pioneers!* (1913): "The difference in quality in the two books is an illustration of the fact that it is not always easy for the inexperienced writer to distinguish between his own material and that which he would like to make his own." Whereas most of Cather's long fiction would concentrate on the Great Plains, the region she knew best and loved most deeply, this first novel takes place in Boston, England, and Canada; and it does mimic work by others, particularly Edith Wharton and Henry James. Cather was right that she found herself as a novelist in *O Pioneers!*, not *Alexander's Bridge*.

Yet this eighth volume in the University of Nebraska Press's prestigious and meticulously produced Cather Edition nevertheless makes an important contribution to both Cather Studies and Great Plains Studies. While most of the novel is set in Boston and London, the energy of the principal character, the bridge-building engineer Bartley Alexander, comes from the Plains. Born and raised there, Alexander represents a study in what Cather clearly perceived as Western genius, sexual magnetism, and irrepressible rebellion against social convention. As the bridge builder struggles to stay content in his cool marriage to a lovely, elegant Bostonian, and cannot end an adulterous affair with an Irish actress that consumes him with guilt, Cather's transplanted Westerner—a man in the prime of life with all the markers of success: money, professional fame, a rich wife, a beautiful mistress—deconstructs psychologically. So too the triumph of his engineering acumen, a huge cantilever bridge in Canada, collapses, taking with it the lives of many workingmen. If the book lacks the power of Cather's western fiction, it also contains the seeds of that work, the class and regional affinities and the emotional values that would animate her later writing.

This scholarly edition does justice to Cather's notoriously particular production requirements. The material and editorial quality of the book meets very high standards, with the paper, the visual presentation of the words on the page, the rigor of the editing and proofreading, the

thoroughness of the notes, and the detailed explanation of editorial decisions all illustrating impeccable scholarship. The historical essay and the illustrations provide useful information, especially about the bridge disaster that Cather drew on, the crash of the Quebec Bridge in 1907 that killed almost eighty workers, and the Irish actress who inspired her fictitious one, Maire O'Neill. The notes to the text of the novel and the Historical Essay contain much of the same material, creating a lot of redundancy. In a scholarly edition it should be assumed, I think, that readers will not need information repeated, or at least not in detail. Otherwise, this volume stands as a model of scrupulous, indeed loving, scholarship. It offers a fully elaborated, beautiful text that even Cather, despite her effort to bury the book, might be proud to acknowledge.

ELIZABETH AMMONS
Harriet H. Professor of Literature
Tufts University