Summer 2012

Review of *Portraits of the Prairie: The Land that Inspired Willa Cather* by Richard Schilling

Richard Jussel  
*University of Nebraska at Kearney*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly)

Part of the [American Studies Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly), [Cultural History Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly), and the [United States History Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly)


[http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2793](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2793)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Ultimately, it seems, most Nebraskans seek to return to their roots: to the “home place,” a tree-shaded glen, a favorite swimming hole, or a hilltop view of the old town. Essentially, this is what Richard Schilling returns us to in Portraits of the Prairie: The Land that Inspired Willa Cather. Strolling through Cather’s works, he weds her words to his own sketches and watercolors, although quickly pointing out that his paintings “are not illustrations of Cather’s stories,” but images of the land that an artist sees today. As a result, Schilling creates a work of art that explores the sensitivity of both the writer and the painter as each meets the power of the Nebraska prairie.

Like Cather, Schilling first attacks the land, perhaps “to have it out together.” In the book’s first watercolor he explores the Nebraska prairie’s expanse by revealing cattle on a rolling hillside before an endless horizon. Everything is dwarfed by the land, eventually affecting the artist himself. Rather than commenting on the artistic endeavor—what the artist does to
create—Schilling's observations become those of a historian or biologist. Quite naturally, he then takes his paintings down country roads, over prairie rivers and streams, past weather-shaped trees, to final resting places in the land's churches and cemeteries. In each section he struggles with the land to produce the correct scene. The final watercolor, matched with a quotation from Cather's “Neighbor Rosicky,” masterfully brings together all the elements of Schilling's book: a cemetery covered in snow with headstones protected by a gnarled tree and a weedy fence. The artist places all this before a row of faded pine trees, as if to say only the land will endure all things.

Richard Schilling’s Portrait of the Prairie: The Land that Inspired Willa Cather is a text that speaks both to those who have read Cather and those who seek to return to their roots.

RICHARD JUSSEL
Department of English, Emeritus
University of Nebraska at Kearney

© 2012 Center for Great Plains Studies, University of Nebraska–Lincoln