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Yet More Cather-Knopf Correspondence

Melissa J. Homestead | University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Some years ago many of us were excited by the discovery of a cache of Willa Cather's correspondence with publisher Alfred A. Knopf that had been in the hands of Peter Prescott, one of the succession of would-be biographers of Knopf. He died before he completed it. These letters are now held in the Barbara Dobkin Collection in New York City. Before these materials came to light, researchers, including the editors of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition, had relied on a strange and fragmentary "memoir" Knopf wrote of his relationship with Cather based on his correspondence files with her, and on the more narrative essay "Miss Cather" published in *The Art of Willa Cather* (1973), a collection associated with the celebration of the centennial of Cather's birth. The unpublished "memoir" went to the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, but Knopf held back the correspondence files when the Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., corporate archive was donated to the Ransom Center and when he subsequently added some of his personal papers.¹ Cather's correspondence with Blanche Knopf was part of the donated corporate archive, but these letters provided relatively scant information about the composition and publication of Cather's works, documenting more of their social interactions, including gift-giving to and personal services provided for a demanding author.

This characterization of the Cather–Blanche Knopf correspondence at the Ransom Center vastly oversimplifies—there *is* correspondence about the composition and publication of Cather's works—but Cather scholars have nevertheless tended to downplay Blanche's importance while promoting Alfred's. For instance, biographer James Woodress states that "Not only was Knopf her publisher, but both Alfred and Blanche Knopf, and later their son Pat, became close friends" (316). He thus categorizes Alfred as *both* her publisher *and* a friend and Blanche merely as a friend. Cather scholars have not been alone in diminishing Blanche's importance to the publishing firm bearing only her husband's name. As Laura P. Claridge argues in *The Lady with the Borzoi: Blanche Knopf, Literary Tastemaker Extraordinaire*, Alfred Knopf himself, who survived Blanche Knopf by nearly two decades, was largely responsible for the diminishment of his first wife's legacy in publishing.²

Materials I recently surveyed in the Irving Kolodin Papers at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts suggest that Cather scholars should rethink Blanche Knopf's role

in the dissemination of Cather's works. These materials also remind us that we should be attuned to the notable gaps in materials located thus far and be on the lookout for additional correspondence between Cather and both of the Knopfs. Later in this essay, in the context of some remarks about gaps in the Cather-Knopf archive that may yet be filled, I say more about Kolodin, a man who spent most of his life working as a music critic but late in his life was attempting to write a biography of Alfred Knopf. For now, it is enough to note that he died in 1988 and in 1989 his papers were donated to the Music Division of the Library of Performing Arts. His papers were not processed until 2006, however, and it is not clear precisely when the searchable finding aid was published in the NYPL finding aids database. In any event, when I searched this database in December 2016 in preparation for a visit to the NYPL, Kolodin's collection unexpectedly popped up. Notably Cather's name appears in the body of the finding aid but is not featured among names given prominence as "Key Terms" at the top of the finding aid; thus if one were to search WorldCat, which aggregates research library catalog records, for Cather as an author and restrict the search results to archival material, this collection would not appear in the results.

So what Cather materials have been sitting at the Performing Arts Library in Kolodin's papers unnoticed since 1989? Thirty-two Cather letters, notes, and telegrams to Blanche and Alfred Knopf and to staff members at Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.; carbon copies of outgoing letters from Blanche Knopf and her secretary J. Florence Rubin to Cather; and twelve letters from Edith Lewis to Alfred Knopf dating from the period after Cather's death, when she served as literary executor.³ Thirty-one of the Cather-authored communications are new, while one is the handwritten original of a letter long accessible at the Ransom Center in a typed transcription, namely Cather's June 20, 1932, condolence letter to Alfred Knopf on the death of his father (*Selected Letters* 468–469).

In a paradox to which I shall return, the bulk of the Cather-authored communications are to Blanche Knopf rather than Alfred. How these letters became separated from Blanche Knopf's correspondence files that went to the Ransom Center is not clear. Notably, even though there are more than sixty Cather-authored communications in the Blanche Knopf series in Texas, that series does contain significant chronological gaps



into which these new materials fit. In the Kolodin papers are a full set of both sides of their correspondence in 1932, a similar set documenting the latter half of 1936, and variable coverage in the years spanning 1937 through 1940. After 1940, coverage in the Kolodin papers leans even more heavily toward outgoing carbons than earlier—Cather spent more time in New York at this period and could easily have responded to brief letters by telephone. As this description of chronology suggests, the publication of *Obscure Destinies* (1932) is well-documented, as are Cather’s long and much-interrupted labors on *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940).

All of the Cather-authored communications will be published in due course on the Willa Cather Archive (cather.unl.edu) as part of the *Complete Letters of Willa Cather*, but I review highlights here, including information provided by outgoing carbons that will not be part of that publication. These carbons sometimes provide information that is not reflected in any Cather-authored communications, such as a December 11, 1940,

letter in which Blanche describes arrangements for Cather’s first in-person meeting with Sigrid Undset. And certainly there are many letters that are largely social. Cather thanks Blanche more than once for flowers, and also for a bright-colored bath robe that is fine enough to “wear to the opera! I wear it, and shall very likely take to working in it because I feel so cocky in it” (letter received December 28, 1926).⁴ Responding to a long December 29, 1931, letter from Blanche reporting Myra Hess’s U.S. performance itinerary from January through April 1932,⁵ Cather explained on January 14, 1932, that she was sorry to miss both Hess and Yehudi Menuhin but would be remaining in Red Cloud until early February to enjoy the “lovely snow storms” and to take her nephew Charles “coasting,” which made her feel “just about twelve years old.” In a letter directed to both Alfred and Blanche Knopf and received in their offices on December 12, 1938, Cather thanks them for their birthday greetings and reports receiving a “very nice letter” from their

son Pat. Again, addressing the two of them jointly in a letter received September 18, 1945, Cather thanks them for their letters of condolence about the death of her brother Roscoe. And in a letter that eludes a firm date (although she locates herself at 570 Park Avenue, so 1932 or later), she gushes over an “exceptional” Knopf Christmas party that featured “a kind of glow over things.”

However, many letters focus more on business, including documenting Cather’s close attention to the design and marketing of her books. In a letter received April 13, 1932, she

forwarded catalog copy for *Obscure Destinies*, protesting that she wished it “were better, but I think it will do.” In response on April 14 Blanche called it “grand, and we shall put it right into the works.” Writing to Blanche from Grand Manan on July 24, 1932, Cather praised the design of *Obscure Destinies*, calling it “a very handsome volume” and praising the title page produced by George M. Stimson of the Knopf production department: “I love

Mr. Stimson’s title page. I hope he will feel like doing one for my next book.”⁶ The letter also locates the beginning of her composition of *Lucy Gayheart* on Grand Manan during that summer. She tantalizes Blanche with the prospect of “a new book” begun “just as an experiment.” “It’s about a young thing, this time,” she elaborates; “If I finish it, I’ll call it simply by her name, ‘Lucy Gayheart.’” This reference decisively moves back the date that Cather began composition of the novel a year from the previously established date of 1933.⁷ Mixing the personal with the professional, in the same letter she expands on her feelings about the death of Alfred Knopf’s father, reporting that she is “utterly unreconciled to his death” and that she has “been trying to follow the last advice he gave me, and to live for the present, not the future”—perhaps a surprising statement for an author who has so often been described as living in and for the past. Cather’s remarks to Blanche in a letter dated September 22, 1932, are perhaps more characteristic.



Blanche Knopf and Alfred A. Knopf, 1932, by Carl Van Vechten. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



Reduced Copy

Copies
Return to
Book
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THE CHIEF THEME of this novel is the subtle persecution of a beautiful mulatto slave girl by her jealous mistress. The period is 1856, and the setting is the beautiful Virginia countryside. The narrative is peopled with unusual characters; the mountain folk, grim disapproving "Republicans", and Sapphira's African slaves who are, and were doubtless meant to be, the most interesting figures in the book. . . . The theme is moving and dramatic; and it is treated with the sensitiveness and imagination of a master. Here again is the calm dignity of Willa Cather's beautiful style—matchless among that of writers of today—and a story that is ^{intense} moving and satisfying. It is indeed a proud privilege to round off my first quarter century with so memorable a novel.
\$2.50

First Proof....Alfred A. Knopf....CR 10861....11-22-40

Dear Blanche; I have suggested a slight change which seems to me to suggest the spirit of what is cut out. I like "intense" better than "satisfying," if it is all right with you
Yours W.C.C.

Cather's note to Blanche Knopf on a proof of proposed jacket copy. Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Protesting that she does not want to fulfill an engagement in Chicago, which she refers to as "that hen-party,"⁸ she combines praise for the success of her publishers in marketing her books with a dismissal of readers not up to her standards: "I am getting such a lot of low-brows and square-heads in my drag-net that I sometimes wonder whether I am any good at all as a writer. I try to think that this wide-spreadness is due to

the effective methods of my publisher and the enthusiasm of a few friends, and not to a perfectly commonplace mind and sentimental persuasiveness in me!"

When the correspondence in the Kolodin papers resumes in the summer of 1936, Cather was managing the final stages of production of *Not Under Forty* from Grand Manan Island. Having received a proof of the title page, she hastily handwrote a letter to Blanche Knopf on July 31 that opens, "Mercy upon us! We'll have to ask Mr. Dwiggins to change this splendid title page. The columnists in the New York dailies would have too much room for wit—I'm afraid I'd wince under it. This is one case when the title must come before the author's name, not after." Her missive reached New York soon enough for the change—the book appeared with the title page reading *Not Under Forty* by Willa Cather rather than *Willa Cather Not Under Forty*. On August 9, 1936, she asked Blanche to reprove the manufacturing department for sending proofs of the entire volume by express, with a valuation of \$500, rather than by post as commercial papers, explaining the two-week-circuitous journey the

proofs took to Grand Manan rather than the three or four days they would have taken by ordinary post.

Her letters to Blanche Knopf from 1937 through 1940 document her work on *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, including periods of writing on Grand Manan and in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. When she was in New York City, she would have had no need to write letters to communicate with the Knopf



offices, and, indeed, several of her letters to Blanche Knopf and many outgoing carbons document attempts to coordinate schedules for lunch or tea. Perhaps the biggest surprise of the letters concerning *Sapphira* is the revelation of Cather's earlier working title. Based on Alfred Knopf's memoir Cather scholars long knew that *Claude* was Cather's early title for *One of Ours*, and the correspondence in the Barbara Dobkin Collection now confirms this (Harris). Who would have expected, however, that Cather originally intended to call her novel of the nineteenth-century South *The Old Folks at Home*? From Grand Manan on August 16, 1939, she wrote Blanche, "As the Virginia story progressed, the first title seems too dull and resigned, so I have discarded 'The Old Folks at Home.' I have a new title which I think more true and interesting, but I will think it over for awhile and then see how it strikes you." Cather's working title evidently had its origins in Stephen Foster's hugely popular "Old Folks at Home, Ethiopian Melody" (1851), which Foster allowed to be credited to Edward P. Christy and which was performed in blackface by his Christy's Minstrels troupe. The relationship of the song to discourses of slavery and abolition in the 1850s, the period of Cather's novel, is complex. The eye-dialect words (nonstandard spellings to suggest colloquial usage or pronunciation) are in the voice of a black man longing for the "old plantation" and the "old folks at home"; however, it is not clear whether he is enslaved or free at the moment he sings the lyrics. The song has a potentially abolitionist meaning. It was sung in many stage versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by the title character when he has been sold South from Kentucky to Louisiana, separating him from his wife and children, and is working on the plantation of the cruel Simon Legree—Harriet Beecher Stowe herself incorporated the song into the authorized version for stage reading of her novel, *The Christian Slave* (1855). However, the song also might seem to imply that a former slave longs to return South to slavery (Railton; Shaftel). In any event, Cather let her original title go. On August 23, 1939, Blanche Knopf wrote to ask whether the firm might announce the novel as forthcoming in 1940, giving no title, to which Cather agreed. "It may not be ready, but announcing it will do no harm," she wrote on August 27, 1939, and she reported "tak[ing] real pleasure" in her work on it that summer.⁹

In the spring of 1940, they discussed the novel over tea, and Blanche Knopf followed up on their in-person conversation and her apparent fear that Cather may have unintentionally duplicated a name from a work by British novelist Elizabeth Bowen. Bowen's first novel published in the U.S. by the Knopf firm was *To the North* in 1933, which had been published the previous year in London. Bowen was likely signed as a Knopf

author as a result of Blanche Knopf's trip to Europe in 1931 or 1932, and the two women became close friends as well as author and publisher.¹⁰ In January 1936 Blanche Knopf sent Cather a copy of *The House in Paris* (1935 London, 1936 New York), the second Bowen novel Knopf published, for which Cather promptly thanked her, reporting that it "begins interestingly" and calling the dust jacket "grand!" ([Jan. 1936]).¹¹ On December 27, 1938, Blanche Knopf sent Cather an advance copy of the third Bowen novel the Knopf firm published firm, *The Death of the Heart* (1938 London, 1939 New York), apologizing for her "temerity" in sending Cather a book and making clear she was not demanding that Cather read it. She nevertheless proclaimed herself "extremely enthusiastic" about Bowen and the novel. On April 3, 1940, Blanche Knopf wrote to Willa Cather with evident relief, "The name of the governess housekeeper in THE DEATH OF THE HEART is Matchett not Matchem as I thought" (in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Mrs. Matchem is the British housekeeper who trains Till, Nancy's mother, to be a housekeeper).

In a letter received June 25, 1940, Cather reported on the progress she was making writing at the Shattuck Inn.¹² By early September, Blanche had read the complete novel and reported on September 9 that she thought it was "magnificent," giving her as a reader an "extraordinary experience" and making her feel "grateful" to Cather. She particular praised *Sapphira's* death as "perfect" and Till as "tremendously real." She concluded her praise, "I think it is one of the most beautiful of many extraordinary books of yours and I feel no guilt at all at urging you to do it but deep gratitude to you." When did this "urging" take place? Correspondence in Blanche Knopf's files at the Harry Ransom Center makes clear that she and Cather had talked about a "Virginia novel" as far back as 1931. Cather wrote Blanche Knopf on April 28, 1931, suggesting she read "something of mine in the May Atlantic you might like to see, as it's old Virginia in tone." On May 4, 1931, Blanche Knopf wrote back reporting she found Cather's poem "Poor Marty" in the *Atlantic* "delightful. I hope it means," she continued, "that you are seriously thinking about doing the Virginia book."¹³ All evidence points to Cather finally beginning composition of the novel in 1936, but many interruptions of the late 1930s, such as the deaths of Douglass Cather and Isabelle McClung Hamburg, nearly derailed the book—perhaps Blanche Knopf urged her on at this later stage as well. Although the details of their many conversations over tea are unrecoverable, the incomplete evidence of the letters nevertheless makes clear that Blanche Knopf was an important audience for and supporter of Cather as she struggled through to the end of her last published novel.



As Amy Root Clements observes in *The Art of Prestige: The Formative Years at Knopf, 1915–1929*, the internal feud between Alfred and Blanche Knopf for control over authors became legendary, but “Willa Cather perhaps represents one of the exceptions to [the] rule” that authors could work only with one Knopf but not both (166). Clements does not reference the letters in the Kolodin papers, but they substantiate this claim and the importance of Blanche Knopf for Cather as an author.¹⁴

Cather’s letters to Blanche Knopf about *Sapphira* once it was in production demonstrate yet again her control over marketing of her novels. Indeed, a missing piece of an exchange between author and publisher partially recovered by David Porter in *On the Divide: The Many Lives of Willa Cather* is in the Kolodin papers, giving a fuller picture of Cather’s control over the presentation of her persona to the public that is the subject of Porter’s book.¹⁵ Porter acquired for his private collection two typed pages constituting an exchange about the jacket copy for *Sapphira* (*On the Divide*, figures 7 and 8). Two paragraphs of proposed jacket copy provided by the Knopf offices constitute the first page, while the second page consists of Cather’s typed paragraph she proposed substituting for the middle section with a handwritten, initialed note identifying it as such. In the Kolodin papers there is a November 25, 1940, letter from Blanche Knopf to Cather enclosing a shortened version of the revised text Cather had supplied and which had been configured into three paragraphs for the jacket copy. Blanche Knopf sent a version in which the first paragraph had been omitted “to fit into the place allotted for advertising,” and she was seeking Cather’s approval for this change. Cather returned the edited version with a note written on it approving the omission and changing a single word from the third paragraph of the text the Knopfs had originally provided. This third paragraph had described the novel as “moving and satisfying,” but she marked it for revision to “intense and moving” (see image on page 4). Notably, the Knopfs did not put this change into effect in the jacket copy, although perhaps the jacket had already been printed.



This exchange about the jacket copy of *Sapphira*, strangely divided between two collections, returns us to the Kolodin papers as the home for part of this exchange and lingering questions about the dispersal of this archive. So how did Irving Kolodin become an aspiring Knopf biographer and how did he come to possess Knopf-Cather files, including significant portions of Blanche Knopf’s files? Kolodin was a prominent music critic in mid-twentieth-century New York City. Trained at the Institute of Musical Arts, which merged into the Julliard School, he taught there from 1929 to 1931. From 1931 on he



Irving Kolodin, 1946–1948, by William P. Gottlieb. Ira and Leonore S. Gershwin Fund Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.

worked as a music critic at a succession of newspapers—the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, *New York Sun*, and *New York World-Telegram*—before becoming an editor at the *Saturday Review of Literature* in 1947. He was also, later in his career, a Knopf author. Cather scholars who have done research on Olive Fremstad as a prototype for Thea Kronborg and *The Song of the Lark* (1915) may recognize his name as the author of the standard history of the Metropolitan Opera. Under the title *The Metropolitan Opera, 1883–1935*, the book first appeared in 1936 under the imprint of Oxford University Press. Kolodin periodically revised and expanded it, slightly adjusting the title, and the 1953 update, *The Story of the Metropolitan Opera, 1883–1950: A Candid History*, was Kolodin’s first book published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Kolodin’s early correspondence with Alfred Knopf, both sides of which are preserved in Kolodin’s papers, is formal, but fairly quickly they shifted from addressing each other as “Mr.” to a first-name basis.

Unlike Peter Prescott, the failed Alfred Knopf biographer who had possession of the correspondence now in the Barbara Dobkin Collection, Kolodin had the cooperation of his biographical subject while he was still living. In fact, he stepped

into the void left when Susan Sheehan, a writer of nonfiction published by Knopf, decided after several years of working with Alfred Knopf that she did not want to write the planned biography that he was anxious for her to write. In a July 10, 1984, letter to British journalist and novelist Storm Jameson, which Kolodin retained in photocopy, he explains the genesis and nature of his own work on a biography:

Going back over a year and a half during which I would visit [Alfred Knopf] regularly in early 1983, I produced a compilation of a Knopf Library of Music with two purposes: one was with the idea of recalling its hundred and fifty titles, plus, into a commentary of how it came about. That was hardly for profit, as many were of an intellectual value that transcended such a sale. The other intent was to absorb him in a concentration, in his ninetieth year, on a life-giving, sense-stirring recollection. When I showed him the finished product, his first impulse was to compliment me on the worthiness of the venture, then to say: "Why don't you enlarge this survey to take in what I was doing from the start to establish an identity as a publisher?" What I grasped, as we continued to talk, was the telling of a tale rarely related: how he left college about 1911, served an apprenticeship with Doubleday and Kennerley, then went into business in 1915—but also why. In the early months of 1983 when he was in relatively good health, we covered a good share of the subject conversationally in Purchase. Of great help to me was his loan of a memoir which he had produced years ago (1960, or so). From it I derived a starting point. . . . Our agreed objective was to concentrate on a narrative of about 250 (typed) pages, working up to the death of his father, in 1932. Despite this dismal happening, it was my conviction that it should proceed through the difficulties of the Depression, to the turn around in 1935, through the productivity of Clarence Day's *Life with Father* and Willa Cather's *Lucy Gayheart*, following, of course, your input that produced Charles Morgan's *The Fountain*. Taken all together, they were an outgrowth of associations dating to the early '20s, taking much of what had been started twenty years before 1935, when the firm was founded in 1915.

Kolodin wrote Jameson asking her to confirm Alfred Knopf's account of her role in the firm becoming American publisher for British author Charles Morgan's World War I novel *The Fountain* (1932). Kolodin also claimed to have a complete draft

of the biographical narrative, which merely needed recasting, but he also noted that Knopf's health prevented him from continuing as an interview subject.¹⁶

In fact, Knopf did more than cooperate as an interview subject. In April 1983 Kolodin and Knopf had entered into a sort of contract, drafted in a strange impressionistic style by Kolodin himself and sent to him on April 17, 1983, in which Knopf agreed to pay Kolodin a \$5,000 advance in installments and to cover Kolodin's expenses, including travel from New York City to Purchase, New York, to interview Knopf and to read his correspondence files he kept in his home, and travel to the Ransom Center to read the materials there.¹⁷

Much of this relationship between Kolodin and Alfred Knopf is, of course, of no particular interest to Cather scholars, but it is important to consider the nature of Kolodin's access to Knopf's files and how he gained possession of original Cather letters. Kolodin and Knopf's correspondence about a moment of friction in their collaboration gives a clue. On September 8, 1983, Knopf wrote to Kolodin protesting his treatment of some of his files:

I remember that, with very few exceptions indeed, I have let you take on loan any document or piece of paper for which you asked. Only last week I remarked that I did this because you would, I knew, return it. Please imagine my shock and amazement when I opened the drawer in which you had dumped all of my 1912 letters! You had not even put each in its own envelope.

Responding on September 14, 1983, Kolodin apologized, explaining that he had been anxious to get the letters back safely to their original location, and that he knew he would return to the drawer of letters for "checking" as he revised the manuscript. He also described his "hardly . . . ideal" working conditions "upstairs" at Knopf's house typing up extracts from letters. During this period of access, it seems that Kolodin also removed Knopf correspondence with Joseph Hergesheimer and H. L. Mencken, both Knopf authors and personal friends, but the quantity of materials Kolodin removed concerning these men is smaller than for Cather.

Alfred Knopf died in August 1984. Irving Kolodin suffered a stroke in 1987 and died in April 1988, his biography of Knopf also uncompleted. In September 1987, as documented by Robert Thacker in his essay about "Finding Cather's Correspondence with Alfred A. Knopf," Alfred Knopf's second wife, Helen, permitted Peter Prescott to carry away from her house in Oregon her late husband's correspondence with Cather.



Precisely how and when these letters associated with Blanche Knopf and her staff were separated from the rest of her Cather files is not clear—although some of the letters are particularly significant, many of them are short and associated with one another only by chronological proximity. Nor is it clear what use Irving Kolodin intended to make of these letters in writing a biography of *Alfred Knopf*, although perhaps the references to concerts and musical figures, including in Blanche Knopf's outgoing carbons, were of interest to him as documenting, by implication, Alfred's interactions with these figures. And, certainly, a close reading of Laura Claridge's footnotes for her biography of Blanche Knopf reveals that both Susan Sheehan and Peter Prescott as Alfred Knopf biographers came into possession of a great deal of Blanche Knopf material. The letters addressed to Blanche and Alfred jointly might have been separated out as more personal and social as they are generally letters of thanks. Similarly, the letters from Edith Lewis to Alfred Knopf are letters in which she thanks and praises Knopf for his work as a publisher. These Lewis letters stand out from many of the 150 others at the Ransom Center, which often have to do with mundane technical matters of administering Cather's literary estate, so it seems plausible that Alfred Knopf had set them aside from his business files. Certainly the original of Cather's four-page hand-written letter of condolence to Alfred on the death of his father and her telegram preceding it were treasured personal objects. Finally, when Cather mailed a note on June 7, 1939, thanking Alfred Knopf for his praise of her story "The Old Beauty," which remained unpublished during her lifetime, she even wrote "personal" on the outside of the envelope. "Now that Isabelle is no longer here," she wrote, "I would rather please you than anyone else."

The letters in the Kolodin papers also, however, draw attention to continuing gaps in the record of Cather's relationship with her publishers during the second half of her career. Although Peter Prescott believed that no Cather biographer had access to the Alfred Knopf–Willa Cather files that he carried away in 1987, it seems that Doris Grumbach, who failed to complete a biography of Cather, may have read the files now in the Barbara Dobkin Collection and may have read other letters not in that tranche. In an excerpt from her journals published in the *American Scholar* in 2001, Grumbach describes a meeting with Alfred Knopf in 1982 during which she told him, "I had read his letters and telegrams to [Cather] after he received each new ms. Sounded as though he liked everything she ever wrote. Did he?" (134). Grumbach was not very fond of *Sapphira* or *Lucy Gayheart* and was irked at his response that he liked "even" them. She

also describes Knopf proffering "the original" of the jacket copy Cather wrote for *Sapphira* as proof that she "very often wrote her own advertising and jacket copy" (133). "Knopf gives me the original copy," she writes. "Nice to have it in my file, typed with purple ribbon and signed with her initials." In a more recently published excerpt from her memoirs-in-progress, Grumbach tells a slightly different version of this story. "When I remarked that he seemed always ready to do everything his star author wanted done, he agreed, hesitantly, and then showed me a file of letters that contained one from her. In it, she complained about the planned copy for the jacket blurb of her last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Clipped to the letter was the text she preferred, typed with her customary purple ribbon."¹⁸ As yet, however, there is no sign of the letter from the Knopf offices transmitting the draft jacket copy for *Sapphira* to her in the first instance, nor is there a letter in which Cather complains about it (although there is the hand-written note on the substitute paragraph she sent in typescript). And, indeed, in the letters now in the Barbara Dobkin Collection documenting primarily Alfred Knopf's correspondence with Cather, the 1939–1940 file is notably sparse. There are other notable gaps in Alfred Knopf's correspondence with Cather, most strikingly the beginning of Cather's career as a Knopf author in 1919–1920. In July 1919 Cather wrote Alfred Knopf twice from Toronto, where she was visiting the Hambourgs, and in a December 28, 1919, letter to Ferris Greenslet at Houghton Mifflin she mentions her agreement to let Knopf reissue *The Troll Garden* (*Selected Letters* 285–86). However, even if Cather's presence in New York may have somewhat obviated the need for letter writing, there must have been at least *some* correspondence between Cather and the Knopf offices about *Youth and the Bright Medusa* and about her essay "The Art of Fiction" published in *The Borzoi* 1920. But where is it?

I suspect those files may be somewhere, either in private hands or in an unprocessed collection in a library. They are not in Kolodin's papers, but nevertheless more Cather nuggets may be lurking in the chaotic hundreds of pages of Kolodin's notes and drafts for the Knopf biography and his associated research materials. For example, although Alfred Knopf read "Miss Cather" at the centennial celebration in 1973 and published it in *The Art of Willa Cather* in 1974 with a postscript about Lewis as Cather's executor, a carbon of an earlier version of this essay, which corresponds fairly closely to much of the 1974 published text, is in Kolodin's papers. Notably, it is accompanied by Alfred Knopf's cover memo dated November 4, 1964, which explains, "This is a free-wheeling draft. It may be that I have paraphrased

Cather's letters more than our lawyer will permit." He also notes his intention, fulfilled a decade later, to add the postscript about Lewis as executor.¹⁹ I leave it to others, however, to dive into these depths.

NOTES

1. On the complex, multi-staged delivery of the Knopf-related materials to the Harry Ransom Center and the many gaps in the collections (most author files were not retained when the firm moved offices in 1945), see the finding aid and Henderson and Oram's "Preface." On Alfred Knopf's draft memoir materials, see the same and Alfred Knopf, *Those Damned Reminiscences*.

2. Claridge's biography is not without its own problems, including her claims about Cather. She does not seem to have read the Blanche Knopf–Willa Cather correspondence at the Ransom Center and makes a number of clearly erroneous statements without documentation. Nevertheless, her claims about the diminishment of Blanche Knopf by her husband and more broadly by a sexist culture are persuasive.

3. The Cather correspondence is in Box 4, Folders 11–14, and the Lewis in Box 5, Folder 9.

4. Cather often fails to date her handwritten letters, but the Knopf offices date-stamped incoming mail, so for undated letters I provide this receipt date.

5. This carbon is actually at the Ransom Center (Box 689, Folder 4), attesting to the arbitrary nature of the division of these files.

6. The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition volume of *Obscure Destinies*, which was relatively early in the edition, had very little to work with to establish compositional chronology, and there is a great deal of material in the Dobkin letters as well.

7. Based on *Willa Cather Living* and other letters, the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition located Cather's earliest compositional activity in spring 1933, with additional work during the summer on Grand Manan (411–412).

8. There is no reference to this Chicago engagement in L. Brent Bohllke's *Willa Cather in Person* (1986). However, the occasion appears to be the award of a "medallion of herself made by Chicago artist Robert Delson" at a luncheon of the Chicago Women's Club ("Meetings and Lectures"). See also Cather to Weisz.

9. This letter is not dated or receipt-stamped by the Knopf offices but is headed "Sunday" and obviously comes between Blanche Knopf's letters of August 23 and 30, 1939.

10. See "Elizabeth Bowen" in Henderson and Oram (82–101).

11. No carbon transmitting the book to Cather has been located, and Cather's note is undated. However, the note is clearly part of a sequence with a carbon at the Ransom Center, Blanche Knopf to Willa Cather, January 13, 1936 (Box 689, Folder 4), in which Blanche provides contact information for Beveridge Webster, which Cather acknowledges in the undated note in the Kolodin papers.

12. These letters largely confirm the compositional chronology in the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition volume, which was produced before the discovery of the letters now in the Barbara Dobkin Collection and which relies on Cather's correspondence with family and friends and with Ferris Greenslet. However, Cather's correspondence with Alfred Knopf would not have added much in this case.

13. Both letters are in Box 68, Folder 4. Thanks to Robert Thacker for reminding me of this exchange and its significance here.

14. Indeed, Clements says that Cather "request[ed] Alfred from the beginning as her editor but nonetheless correspond[ed] with Blanche profusely" (161)—whatever may be true of the beginning of Cather's time as a Knopf author, the balance in the second half of her career with them would now, based on available evidence, suggest that Blanche took the lead.

15. Although these letters substantiate the Knopf firm's deference to Cather, they do not confirm Porter's claim that Cather and only Cather *wrote* materials such as the drastically revised second paragraph of the *Sapphira* jacket copy. Porter dismisses Alfred Knopf's observation in "Miss Cather" that he had "always suspected the hand of her friend Edith Lewis in much of the copy she supplied about her books from time to time" (Knopf 211, Porter 34). In the Barbara Dobkin Collection correspondence, to which Porter did not have access, Cather explicitly credits Lewis with writing the copy for *One of Ours* (*Selected Letters* 308), and although she does not credit Lewis when she sends later copy, it seems likely that as a professional advertising copywriter, Lewis would have participated in the creation of these materials.

16. Box 5, Folder 7.

17. Box 5, Folder 7—the letters discussed below are also in this folder.

18. Notably, Grumbach did not deposit her journals from the years that she was most actively researching the Cather biography at the New York Public Library, and some of her claims do not match the evidence in other parts of her papers.

