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Editing Willa Cather: Defining the Territory

SUSAN J. ROSOWSKI

An edition of Cather? Why?" we were asked when we began the project a decade and a half ago. The received wisdom was that (1) prepublication forms of Willa Cather's texts did not exist; (2) with the exception of *The Song of the Lark*, Cather did not significantly revise her texts following their first appearance in book form; (3) she received near-perfect editing from her publishers; (4) the accessibility of her stories made explanatory matter unnecessary. In each case, work on the Cather Edition has revealed something dramatically different.

But before telling about this work, I shall describe the structure of the project, which is collaborative in its conception and design. To ensure high quality and productivity, we have concentrated textual editing at the University of Nebraska. My colleague in the English Department, Charles Mignon, has been with the project from its beginning, and Fred Link, former chair of the English Department and director of University of Nebraska Press, joined the project shortly before he retired and has continued with it as a professor emeritus. Both brought editorial expertise to the project, one editing Edward Taylor, the other Restoration playwrights; both have become expert on editing Cather in the course of this project. Dr. Kari Ronning, assistant editor, serves at the managerial heart of the project, assisting editors in various capacities and becoming a Cather scholar herself in the process. She served as volume editor of *Obscure Destinies*. Cather scholars, often located at other universities, have served as volume editors: David Stouck at Simon Fraser; John Murphy at Brigham Young, and Ann Romines at George Washington, for example.

One of the great contributions of a scholarly edition is that the project serves as a magnet for materials relevant to its author, and ours is no exception. The assumption that there were no manuscripts or typescripts of Cather's texts resulted from Cather's request that all manuscripts

be destroyed; her publisher Alfred A. Knopf's verification of that request and description of returning manuscripts, typescripts, and proofs to Cather for that purpose; and her companion Edith Lewis's account of helping Cather destroy prepublication forms. Before we began work on the edition, Cather scholar Bernice Slote expressed the wisdom of the time when she wrote that "there are unfortunately no manuscripts."¹ The widespread recognition of Cather's stature in the past two decades has heightened awareness of the importance of prepublication forms to scholarship on her. Philip Gerber ended his 1995 survey of the future of Cather studies with the lament that "unless major caches of Cather manuscript materials should come to light . . . the important analysis of Cather's working methods and revision practices will languish."²

By visiting libraries throughout the country and corresponding with libraries throughout the world, by working closely with Cather's family and heirs as well as with other Cather scholars, by following up on announcements by booksellers, and by tracing leads suggested in Cather-related correspondence and publications, we had by the late 1980s discovered and obtained typescripts heavily revised and corrected by Cather of *Shadows on the Rock*, *My Mortal Enemy*, and "A Chance Meeting," as well as similarly revised and corrected galley proofs of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Then—incredibly—in midsummer 1996 we discovered a cache of manuscript materials that scholars recognize as necessary for detailed and substantive critical work on Cather's creative process. In August 1996 we obtained copies of a holograph manuscript plus multiple typescripts of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*; multiple typescripts of stories in *Obscure Destinies*, each heavily revised; and revised typescripts of other stories and essays.

Whereas previously unknown prepublication copies of Cather's texts have enabled us to trace her composing process as well as to establish her intention for her texts, collations of printed versions of her texts demonstrate her ongoing revising hand. In the case of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, for example, Cather made significant corrections to early printings of the first edition, continued to revise for the second edition; rewrote an important passage and made other revisions for the third printing

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of the second edition; rewrote the passage again and made many other changes for the Autograph Edition; undid some previous revisions and made many new revisions for the fifth printing of the second edition; then just before her death the third edition, the one in current use, went back to the second edition, third printing text, adding new errors.

As the editing based at Nebraska is defining the territory of the texts themselves, volume editors are illuminating the texts in other ways. Each historical introduction provides a biography of the individual work, including an account of its genesis and growth, its composition, its publication, and its reception and reputation. Within these broad parameters, emphases differ in essays for different volumes, reflecting different stages of Cather's career. In discussing *O Pioneers!* (1913), volume editor David Stouck traces the accretion of incidents and allusions that worked their way into the composition of the novel, then discusses the various literary influences upon it, most particularly the influence of Russian literature. In his essay on *My Antonia* and mine on *A Lost Lady*, books for which Cather drew still more heavily upon firsthand experience, James Woodress and I have set relevant biographical events against their historical background, then traced the ways in which Cather incorporated her personal memories into her novel.

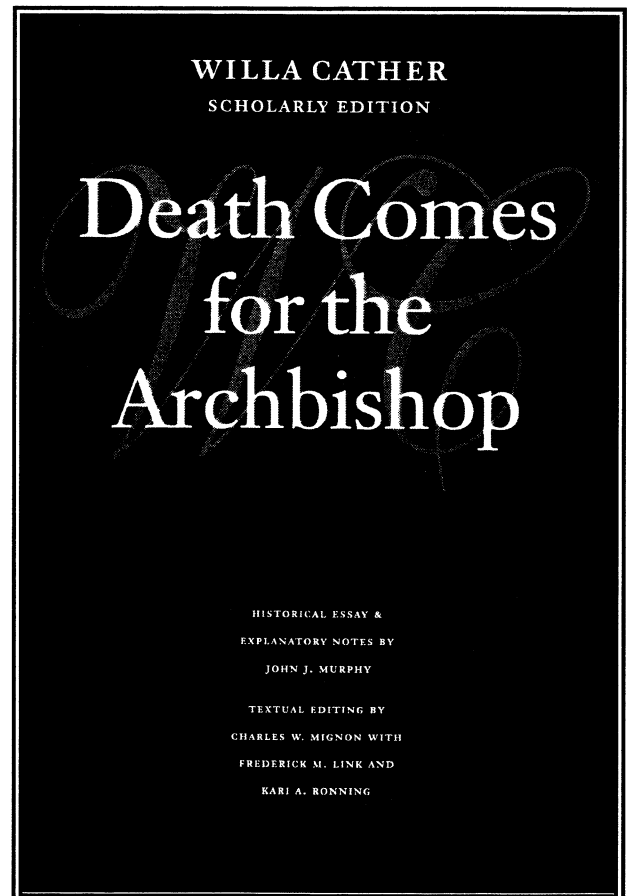
Research on notes for narratives set outside Nebraska presents somewhat different challenges. After working on *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, volume editor John J. Murphy concluded that Cather's southwestern narrative is more than Cather's other texts

a product of research, the fusion of an astounding array of sources that would be disparate if not combined within its text. Included in these sources are U.S. military and political history; Roman Catholic Church history, tradition, and liturgy; Mexican and Indian myth, legend, and history; biography; biblical scriptures; Southwestern flora and geography; accounts of Spanish conquest and exploration of the Americas; philosophy and theology; French history and geography; architecture, and others. [Headnote to "Explanatory Notes," *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 381]

Whatever the setting of the text, editing Cather, a writer who drew extensively upon actual experience, means providing fuller explanatory notes than is customary in editions of fiction. Explanatory notes present "in-

formation relevant to the meaning of the texts . . . for example, the identification of locations, literary references, persons, historical events, and specialized terminology," we rather blithely wrote in our editorial manual, little realizing that preparing these notes would yield their own revelations about particulars and, more frequently still, about the extent of Cather's use of them.

Identification and translations of quotations and allusions from the classics and the Bible appeared at first to be relatively straightforward, but work on *Death Comes for the Archbishop* especially has shown that Cather's use of allusions became increasingly complex as she matured as a writer. Because scholars have long recognized that Cather drew upon Virgil, Shakespeare, and the Bible, we had a head start. Cather characteristically quoted from memory; thus, giving the passages as they originally appeared helps the reader see how she has turned a quotation to her own purposes. The passing of time has made allusions to more ephemeral sources obscure to modern readers: who now has read *St. Elmo*³ or seen engravings of "The House of the Tragic Poet"?⁴ Notes identify and



Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of Death Comes for the Archbishop

briefly describe such references as they relate to Cather's text. In these notes we recognize that geographical distance, too, may pose barriers to understanding. Cather's readers may require clarification of regional details, such as the yucca soap and greasewood plains of New Mexico, the eels and apothecary's remedies in Quebec, the flybrushes and batter-cakes of antebellum Virginia, and the sod houses and corn-shellors of Nebraska. Few readers anywhere realize that sod roots extend at least 2.5 feet on an unbroken prairie—information that gives heightened meaning to “breaking sod.”

The need to clarify the regional setting is complicated for novels set in Quebec, Virginia, and the American Southwest, where the history is longer and the cultural overlays deeper. We have kept in mind the importance of place to Cather when assigning volume editing: as a Canadian, Cather scholar David Stouck is well suited to work on Cather's Canadian novel, *Shadows on the Rock*; and living in Virginia, teaching at George Washington University, situates Cather scholar Ann Romines well to work on Cather's Virginia novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Moreover, volume editors John Murphy and David Stouck have traveled repeatedly to France for their research on Cather's French scenes.

Sources for the Nebraska books (seven of thirteen) are more immediate, and one great advantage of the Cather Edition's central location at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln is our ready access to the places and records essential to the exploration of Webster County and Lincoln as Cather knew them, including the personal and local stories that exist outside history books. Contemporary publications from Red Cloud, Lincoln, and the University of Nebraska help to establish a more precise chronology of Cather's life and the experiences on which she drew. The personal columns of the Red Cloud newspapers kept track of the doings of local people and reflected local concerns, enabling the reader even now to participate imaginatively in the life going on around Cather as she absorbed impressions upon which she would later draw in her fiction. Reading these papers closely over a period of several years means that details sometimes flash out with great clarity. For example, in *My Ántonia* Cather describes Mrs. Wick Cutter as paying calls in “rustling, steel-gray brocades” (205); her prototype, Mrs. Matthew Bentley, wore “a handsome steel gray brocaded satin” dress to a wedding, according to the Red Cloud *Chief* (February 8, 1889). Newspaper reports confirm Cather's version of the suicide (*Chief*, February 24, 1881). Other newspaper reports suggest how lives from the larger world touch a parish community. About the time that

Cather was visiting Red Cloud, the *Argus* (May 10, 1912) carried an article saying that the queen of Italy had given up hunting when she had children, just as Jim Burden tells Antonia that she had (332). It is increasingly apparent that Cather's memory was very accurate.

Long after she left Nebraska, Cather stayed in touch with Webster County by subscribing to its newspapers. One of them sparked the writing of *A Lost Lady*. In a 1945 letter, Cather described reading an account of Mrs. Lyra Garber's death in the Webster County *Argus* that had been forwarded to her in Toronto, where she was staying. Later that day, when she arose from a nap, the outline of the story was clear in her mind. We now know that the *Argus* printed a long and detailed description of Mrs. Garber's fortunes after she left Nebraska, written by her second husband and quoting her last words (July 15, 1921). Working with the dates in the newspaper account—Mrs. Garber died in Oregon in early March 1921, but the news did not reach Red Cloud until late June 1921—helps to date the genesis of the novel. More broadly, of course, the account further illuminates Cather's use of source material.

Local maps, photograph collections and census records help to fill in the historical backgrounds. Webster County plat books disclose data about land ownership, revealing that Cather's grandparents were among the largest landholders in the county; that her father owned land adjacent to the Sadileks (prototypes for the Shimerdas in *My Ántonia*); and that the Pavelkas (prototypes of Ántonia and Anton Cuzak and John and Mary Rosicky in “Neighbour Rosicky”), who owned no land in 1900, owned 480 acres several decades later. Insurance maps show the materials, size, shape, and use of every building in downtown Red Cloud in 1886 and 1892, the period of Cather's deepest involvement in the town. Reconstructing Cather's Red Cloud provides background to its fictional reincarnations as Moonstone, Black Hawk, Sweet Water, Haverford, Skyline, and Singleton.

The photographs held by Love Library at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln, the Nebraska State Historical Society (Lincoln), the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation (Red Cloud), the Cather Center of the Nebraska State Historical Society (Red Cloud), and the Webster County Museum (Red Cloud) have yielded images of the places and people upon whom and which Cather drew. A photograph of the university campus recaptures Alexandra Bergson's point of view when in *O Pioneers!* she gazes through the iron fence at the students, wondering whether any had known her brother Emil. A crayon enlargement of Lucille, Annie

Pavelka's first daughter, recalls the portrait of Antonia's baby, Martha, that Jim Burden sees.

Study of the census records for Webster County suggests prototypes when origins, occupations, ages, and family situations match those of Cather's characters. In *My Antonia*, Black Hawk's laundryman, Mr. Jensen, bears many similarities to a Red Cloud laundryman, the Danish-born Peter Hansen, a finding confirmed by Hansen's obituary, which quoted Cather's description of the fictional Jensen and added, "There is no doubt that the inspiration for this sketch came from her acquaintance with Mr. Hansen" (*Argus*, June 21, 1923).

Thus our research has expanded what we know about ways in which Cather drew upon actual persons for her major characters; moreover, it has enabled us to realize that references to actual people, places, and events characteristically extend to minor characters and occasional episodes and settings. As a result, not only an individual's life but also a community's history appears in Cather's writing.

That principle is dramatically evident in the Nebraska novels. A community's history includes that of flora and fauna of the region, and research here, too, has yielded its surprises. Cather learned methods of close observation as a student at the University of Nebraska when Charles E. Bessey, Frederic E. Clements, and Roscoe Pound were doing their pioneering work in botany and ecology there. Her fiction describes flora and fauna in sufficient detail to facilitate the identification of plant and animal species. In *My Antonia*, descriptions of the owls that live in the prairie-dog town, an unlikely sounding species, enable us to identify them as *Athene cuciculana*, the burrowing owl, a Nebraska native species that nests in prairie-dog burrows or badger holes. A description of a ringdove's cry identifies it as *Zenaidura macroura*, the mourning dove that has a blue eye ring. The scrub-oaks growing on the chalk cliffs by the river are the native bur oaks, naturally large trees that become dwarfed when grown in the unfavorable environment that Cather describes. And the shaggy, red grass of the prairie is *Andropogon gerardii*, the big blue stem—a native grass with thick, deep roots and seed stalks from three to eight feet high that turns reddish after a frost. In such research the Cather Edition has the advantage of ready access to the work of early naturalists, who described conditions as Cather would have known them. It gives the researcher a particular pleasure to see that a plant mentioned by Cather is listed in the University of Nebraska herbarium as being collected in Webster County and that another specimen in that herbarium was collected by Cather herself.

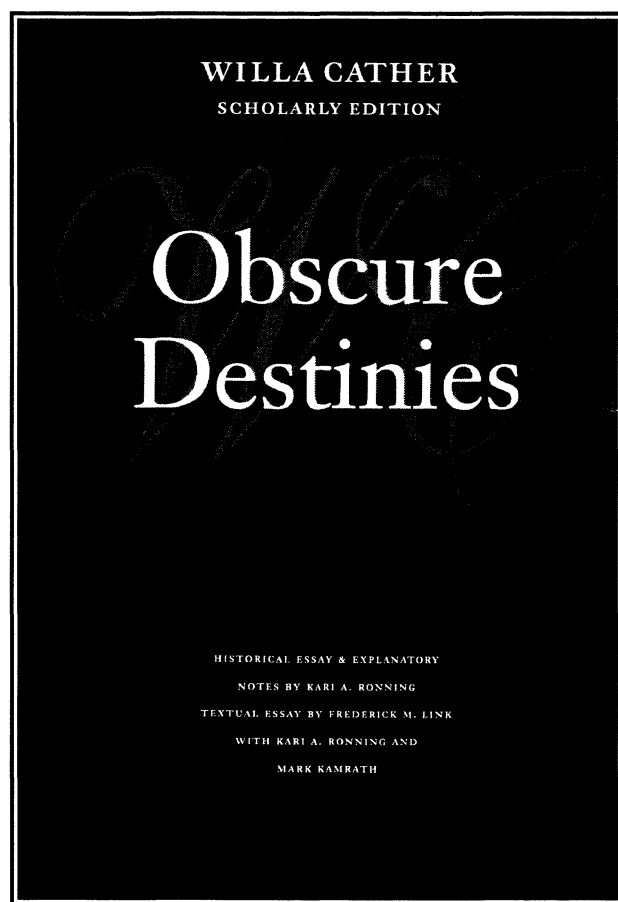
An important resource available to us is more difficult to document: working in Lincoln on the university campus and traveling to Red Cloud and Webster County. Cather's childhood home—the model for the homes of the Kronborgs in *The Song of the Lark*, the Templetons in "Old Mrs. Harris," and the Fergussons in "The Best Years"—is now a museum that still gives a sense of the crowded life that went on there. The open prairie and the rich farmland still spread themselves under the great dome of the sky, just as they did for Cather. And among the students with whom we now read Cather at the university are descendants of the people whom Cather knew and wrote about. Under such circumstances, preparing a scholarly edition becomes a living and profoundly human enterprise.

There has been the deep satisfaction of watching Cather take her place among the greats. In 1990 the *Encyclopedia Britannica* published its latest "Great Books" list of the western world: 130 titles ranging from Homer and Plato to Einstein and Whitehead, including writers from all fields—philosophers, historians, scientists, economists, and theologians as well as poets and novelists. For the first time women's names appeared on that list—four women (yes, it's shameful), only one of whom was an American. Willa Cather was that writer, and *A Lost Lady* was the book chosen. And when in July 1998 Masterpiece Theater announced its American series, they announced also that Cather's *The Song of the Lark* will open the series.

We are now planning to complete the project as we originally envisioned it, to include all the novels plus *Obscure Destinies* and *Youth and the Bright Medusa* with their stories. Five scholars have signed on as volume editors: Richard Harris working on *One of Ours*, Ann Moseley with Evelyn Funda on *The Song of the Lark*, Tom Quirk on *Alexander's Bridge*, and Mark Madigan on *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. Noel Polk is joining us as textual editor of *The Song of the Lark* and Judy Boss as textual editor of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*.

Each editorial project offers the joys of discovery, and I began by mentioning some examples from the Cather Edition. I'd like to close by describing another of the project's unexpected dimensions, that made possible by computer technology. Last year we began work on the Cather Archive at "www.unl.edu/Cather" as an electronic complement to the print version of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. Joe Steinbach, electronic text editor at University of Nebraska Press, is working with editors on the Scholarly Edition and research assistants to create a website that incorporates the wide-ranging interdisciplinary dimensions of Cather's text. "From its conception,

the website was interdisciplinary in its design and implementation, a collaboration of the University Libraries, the Nebraska State Historical Society, NET in Lincoln, with the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation and the Webster County Museum in Red Cloud. The prototype model features the text of *My Antonia* with apparatus prepared by the Scholarly Edition, as well as essays on Cather and ancillary materials prepared specifically for the website.”⁵ Scanned images of letters, photographs, maps, newspaper articles and other forms of evidence will provide historical and cultural contexts to Cather’s text. In addition, the Cather Archive will maintain a calendar of letters by Cather and her correspondents, a bibliography of research on Cather’s life, writing, and related subjects, and information about upcoming Cather-related activities; it will also contain a curricular component and provide links to related websites.



Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of Obscure Destinies.

Notes

This paper was presented at the twentieth anniversary meeting of the Association for Documentary Editing in St. Louis, October 8, 1998. Portions of this essay were drawn from Susan J. Rosowski, Charles Mignon, Kari Ronning, and Frederick M. Link, “Editing Cather,” *Studies in the Novel* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 387-400. Included here with permission. Preparation of volumes is made possible in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, an independent federal agency.

1. “Willa Cather,” in *Sixteen Modern American Authors: A Survey of Research and Criticism*, ed. Jackson R. Bryer (New York: Norton, 1973), 29-73.

2. Philip Gerber, *Willa Cather* (New York: Twayne, 1995), 124.

3. From *A Lost Lady*, 270: “First published in 1866, this novel by Augusta J. Evans was popular for many years. It chronicles the adventures of the pious, erudite, and beautiful Edna Earl, whose love reforms the wealthy, profligate, and cynical St. Elmo Murray.”

4. From *A Lost Lady*, 276: “The House of the Tragic Poet was the name popularly given to one of the more famous of the buildings of Pompeii, based on a fresco found within showing a man reading from a scroll to a small audience. Bulwer-Lytton described the house in his novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). Many nineteenth-century artists and illustrators attempted to portray Pompeii in its glory, often basing their work on the descriptions and engravings of the archaeologist Sir William Gell.”

5. Michael Schueth and Kari Birnley, “The Cather Archive: A Scholarly Website in Progress,” *The Mower’s Tree: The Newsletter of the Cather Colloquium*, Department of English, University of Nebraska, Spring, 1999, pp. 1, 4.

Citations

Cather, Willa. From the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. Susan J. Rosowski, General Editor. University of Nebraska Press.

A Lost Lady. Historical editing by Susan J. Rosowski with Kari A. Ronning; explanatory notes by Kari A. Ronning. Textual editing by Charles W. Mignon and Frederick M. Link with Kari A. Ronning. 1997.

Death Comes for the Archbishop. Historical essay and explanatory notes by John J. Murphy. Textual editing by Charles W. Mignon with Frederick M. Link and Kari A. Ronning. 1999.

My Antonia. Historical essay by James Woodress; explanatory notes by James Woodress with Kari Ronning. Textual editing by Charles Mignon with Kari Ronning. 1994.

O Pioneers! Historical essay and explanatory notes by David Stouck; textual essay by Susan J. Rosowski and Charles W. Mignon with Kathleen Danker. 1992.

Obscure Destinies. Historical essay and explanatory notes by Kari A. Ronning. Textual editing by Frederick M. Link with Kari A. Ronning and Mark Kamruth. 1998.