Willa Cather: Virginia Girl to Literary Classic

By Anne LeHew Legge

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She has been a member of the Winchester Torch Club since 1983, enjoying the stimulating companionship and the incentive to research such topics as the German apprenticeship system, the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, and the former residents of the Shenandoah National Park land.

Having bred, exhibited, and judged Bloodhounds, she is active in national and regional breed club activities, focusing on member and judges' education. She is an avid reader and birdwatcher, and enjoys a relationship with three children, five grandchildren, and ten Bloodhounds.

"Willa Cather: Local Girl to Literary Classic," which has undergone a slight title change for publication here, was presented to the Winchester Torch Club on December 4, 2013.

In 1987 when a new elementary school was built in the Back Creek district of Frederick County, Virginia, the Board of Supervisors considered naming the school for Willa Cather, the famous American author who was born in the area. The name was rejected for three reasons, according to coverage in the local paper: (1) Cather had left the area at an early age; (2) she did not write for the elementary level; and (3) according to a member of the Board of Supervisors, there were allegations about her sexual leaning. The Board decided on the name Indian Hollow School. One resident of the Back Creek district said that children and most adults don't even know who Cather was. Who was she, anyway?

Whatever else she was—and if sexual "leaning" is a criterion in choosing school names, we are in for an epidemic of school re-naming—Willa Cather was a major American writer who produced a whole shelf of varied and uniquely American works: twelve novels, one book of poems, and dozens of stories and essays. In 1923 she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. In 1930 she received the Howells Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; in 1932 the Prix Femina Americaine for distinguished literary achievement; in 1944 the National Institute gold medal for fiction. She won these honors in competition with some writers you may have heard of: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Frost, and Faulkner. She was awarded honorary degrees from numerous universities and has been the subject of a number of scholarly biographies and critical works.

It is true that Cather rebelled against the limitations of her gender. Named Willela after an aunt, she renamed herself Willa and at times signed herself William. At 14, she walked to the Red Cloud barbershop and had her hair cut like a boy's. At times she wore mannish clothes. She also edited reality by giving herself a new middle name—Sibert—and subtracting three years from her age. However, in maturity, photographs show Cather wearing all the trappings of an elegant woman of the period: brocades, heavy jewelry, furs, and hats trimmed with flowers and feathers.

Although Cather had many male friends, her most intimate lifelong companions were women. In the years she worked in Pittsburgh, her companion was Isabelle McClung, and Willa lived in the home of the McClung family. For forty years she and Edith Lewis shared living accommodations in various locations.

Cather was a very discreet person, almost paranoid about protection of her privacy and control of her work. She guarded her letters and private papers and handled all of her own money matters. She consistently refused offers for "paperback editions, Viking Portables, anthology requests, radio readings, movie deals, play deals. [. . .] She also put a clause in her will barring anyone from quoting in print any of the letters which had escaped her incinerator" (Acocella 63). It is only since her death and the expiration of copyrights that the general public has had an opportunity to see films of her great prairie novels *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia.* In 2013, more than 65 years after Cather's death, Andrew Jewell and

Janis Stout decided that scholars and readers should have access to Cather's correspondence and published *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, despite her prohibition against publication of her letters.

Unquestionably a literary classic, Cather is also a local Virginia girl. The daughter of Charles Fectigue Cather and Mary Virginia Boak Cather, she was born on December 7, 1863, at the home of her grandmother Rachel Boak in Gore, Virginia. Within a year the family settled nearby at "Willowshade," a substantial Federal brick house built by Willa's grandfather William Cather and graced by four large willow trees, hence the name. The house still stands in good condition on the north side of Route 50 just west of Winchester, although the willow trees are gone.

The Cather family were Unionists, Willa's father and his brother George having served in the Union army stationed in nearby West Virginia. Because of their loyalty to the Union, the Cathers thrived during the Reconstruction. The Boak family, however, were loyal to the South; Cather's maternal uncle William Seibert Boak died a Confederate soldier, and when the Cathers moved to Nebraska, Willa's mother brought her brother's sword and Confederate flag.

The political tension in the family may have contributed to the Cathers' decision to move to Nebraska, but there were other factors. Cather family lore says that a family history of tuberculosis, particularly among the women, prompted the move in the hope that the drier Midwest climate would be healthier than the Virginia humidity. (My authority for this view is Dr. Willa Louise Cather, formerly a member of the English faculty at Lord Fairfax Community College.) Also, about the time the family was considering a move, a large sheep barn of theirs caught fire and burned.

Cather was 9 1/2 years old in 1883 when her parents moved Willa and her three younger siblings to Webster County, Nebraska. The "Willowshade" property—house, outbuildings, and some 300 acres—was sold for $6,000. The furniture was auctioned, and Vic, the family sheepdog, was given to a neighbor. Willa recalled that "just as the family were preparing to board the train, Vic broke loose and came running across the fields, her broken chain dragging behind her. It was one of her saddest memories, wrote Edith Lewis, of a time 'that was all of it tragic for a child of her nature'" (qtd. in Robinson 15).

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Although she left Back Creek at nine, considerable Virginia culture was packed along to Nebraska. Waiting in Webster County were her father's parents and her Uncle George and Aunt Franc. Accompanying the Cathers were Willa's grandmother, Rachel Boak, her cousin Bessie Seymour, and two neighbors from Timber Ridge, Marjorie and Enoch Anderson, who came along to help with the house and farm work. In Nebraska the Cather clan referred to themselves as the Virginia Company and named their post office Catherton. It is not hard to imagine the preservation of family history, Frederick County lore, local stories, and memories of family and friends left behind.

The contrast between Frederick County, Virginia, and the new Nebraska environment was dramatic. Back Creek Valley with its moderate climate and green rolling hills was a serene, secure, and traditional culture. Apparently Willa had the kind of idyllic childhood that helped the intelligent, energetic child grow into a stable and confident adult. At the time of the move, Cather felt that she had been wrenched away from everything familiar and transplanted to a "raw, treeless and nearly waterless land" (qtd. in McDonald 17) with a polyglot mix of ethnicities and temperaments.

In *My Antonia*, Cather's alter ego Jim Burden describes his first glimpse of Nebraska, a reaction that was surely based on Cather's own experience:

> Cautiously I slipped from under the buffalo hide, got up on my knees and peered over the side of the wagon. There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land, not a country at all but the material out of which countries are made. [. . .] I had never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it. I did not believe that my dead father and mother were watching me from up there; they would still be looking for me at the sheep-fold down by the creek or along the white road that led to the mountain pastures. I had left even their spirits behind me. (7-8)

In later life, comparing the determined effort it took to survive on the Nebraska prairie to the life she had known, Cather characterized Southerners as soft and shiftless—today we might say "laid back." She also deplored the Southern tendency to

romanticize their past and present status, and came to prefer Western blunt directness to "the polite conventions and ritual blather of genteel Southern society" (McDonald 1).

Aside from works with specifically Southern settings and characters, a number of characteristics of Southern culture occur in Cather's work.

Although most of Cather's work is set elsewhere—in Nebraska, Colorado, New Mexico, and Quebec—at least five of her short stories include settings and characters from her Virginia experience. "The Elopement of Allen Poole" (1893) is the first published work in which she drew from her Virginia childhood. Set in Back Creek Valley and employing a mountain dialect, the story narrates the rendezvous of a moonshiner (her word was "stiller") with his betrothed. They intend to elope, but Allen, who has been shot by the revenuers, dies in her arms. Speaking of his reluctance to hold a legitimate job, Cather says, "It takes a man of the South to do nothing perfectly and Allen was as skilled in that art as were any of the F.F.V.'s who wore broadcloth" (574).

"A Night at Greenway Court" (1896) is a most un-Cather-like aristocratic melodrama in which the historical land baron Lord Fairfax is a main character and the story ends in a fatal duel. In "The Sentimentality of William Tavenner" (1900), a couple who have migrated from Virginia to Nebraska break through the rigor of their struggle to survive in the Midwest to reminisce about a kinder, gentler life in the past and indulge their children to a rare holiday at the circus. In "The Namesake" (1907), a sculptor in Paris creates a statue of the uncle for whom he is named, who died a heroic death at 14 as a Union color-bearer. One of her last stories, "Old Mrs. Harris" (1932), a study of three generations of women living under the same roof, clearly parallels the experience of Grandmother Boak, Willa's mother Virginia, and the author herself in the Red Cloud home.

After the Cather family left Virginia in 1883, Cather returned to her childhood setting three times. In October 1896 at age 23, she returned to bicycle the area, visiting her old haunts, and was pleased to find that little had changed. The second visit in 1913 with Isabelle McClung was a less positive experience until the two women went hiking in the beautiful mountains near Gore. Her third return in 1938 with Edith Lewis was in conscious preparation for her final novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, published in 1940. Edith Lewis's account of this trip is significant:

> It was as memorable an experience, as intense and thrilling in its way, as those journeys to New Mexico when she was writing the Archbishop. . . . The countryside was very much changed. But she refused to look at its appearance; she looked through it and through it, as if it were transparent, to what she knew as its reality. Willowshade, her old home, had been bought by a man who had always borne a sort of grudge against the place; he chopped down the great willow trees that gave Willowshade its name, and destroyed the high box hedges that had always seemed so wonderful to Willa when she was a child. The house itself had become so ruinous and forlorn that she did not go into it, only stood and looked down at it from a distance. All these transformations, instead of disheartening her, seemed to light a fierce inner flame that illumined all her pictures of the past. (qtd. in Brown 309-310)

Cather set *Sapphira*, her only Virginia novel, in Back Creek Valley, but made the setting in time 1856, when her grandmothers were young women. Cather biographer Phyllis Robinson states that Willa told a friend, "Not much of the book was really fiction. In fact, it was so largely made up of old family stories and neighborhood tales, she hardly knew where her own contribution began" (13). E.K. Brown speculates that "The deaths of her father and mother and her own approach to old age led her to dwell with ever increasing pleasure and preoccupation on small incidents in the life of her childhood and on the stories she had heard so often" (308).

Sapphira and the Slave Girl is driven by nostalgia for a way of life that was gone forever, and Cather lovingly catalogs the details of antebellum daily life: the peacock feather fly brush, the fabric scraps, cut into strips, dyed, and woven into carpets, the light bread and snow ice cream, the mountain laurel bank at the double S curve. Critic Henry Seidel Canby observes, "Cather is not writing a melodrama of slavery and seduction, but recreating, with subtle selection of incident, a concurrence." In a strange postscript ending, Cather puts herself into the novel as a five year old who witnesses Nancy's return and reunion with her old mother twenty-five years later. In a letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher (1940), Cather states, "That meeting between Nancy and Aunt Till, which took place just as I tell it, was one of the most moving things that ever happened to me when I was little" (*Selected Letters* 592).

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example, Southerners of Cather's day lived by a shared code of behavior stemming from the chivalric and plantation traditions. Traditional ideals of courage, honor, and decorum dictated behavior. Even when they are not Southerners, the people of Cather's fiction live by such a code of behavior, and when Paul of "Paul's Case" and Thea Kronberg of *The Song of the Lark* depart from the code, they are fully aware of the breach and its consequences. Sapphira Colbert, even when ill, refused to lower her standards.

Cather's treatment of the relationship between character, setting, and history is very Southern. Even when the ingredients are Southwestern or Midwestern, the result is similar to the synthesis of people, place, and tradition in the work of Porter, Welty, and Faulkner. Sapphira brings an aristocratic lifestyle to the Back Creek Valley; she fights an ongoing battle to preserve the decorum in her household that depends on the labor of slaves. Reacting in different ways to the same setting and tradition, Sapphira's husband, her daughter, and the slaves are all inseparable from the ambiance. The immigrant Nebraska farmers in their sod houses held onto relics of their past—a sack of dried mushrooms, a violin—grafting their ethnic traditions onto the new setting. The Southwest Indians, the prairie farmers, the transplanted Parisians of Quebec, and the Virginia farmers are all inseparable from their environment. Writing about her travels with Cather, Edith Lewis said that they "saw the country not as pure landscape but filled with a human significance, lightened or darkened by the play of human feeling" (Lewis 23).

Yes, Virginia was a considerable influence on the life and writing of Willa Cather, In a 1928 letter to Stringfellow Barr, she wrote, "I always feel very deeply that I am a Virginian. My mother and father, though they went West long ago, were always Winchester people, not Nebraskans" (*Selected Letters* 413). That her attitude toward Southern culture was sometimes negative hardly diminishes its power in her imagination. Even though only a few of her works were specifically set in the South, Southern influence is apparent in the values which inform her life and her work: decorum and tradition, family and friends, responsibility and integrity, independence and individuality, unstinting hard work to attain a goal, and respect for the natural world.

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In her essay "Cather and the Academy," published in *The New Yorker*, Joan Acocella points out that the literary establishment—academics and critics—has never been able to decide what to make of Willa Cather.

> The parade of American literature goes by, float after float: realism, naturalism, psychological novel, political novel. Cather belongs with none of them, which means either that she is left out or, if she is desperately needed, that she is forced at gunpoint to put on a paper hat and join a group in which she has no place. Hence her uneasy standing with the feminists. She is not one of them, and they know it. That's why they don't like her.

But two groups, Acocella writes, have always acknowledged Cather as a literary classic. One is that of her fellow writers; she has been praised by (among many others) Rebecca West, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Sinclair Lewis, William Faulkner, and Wallace Stevens. "The other group that has consistently admired Cather," Acocella tells us, is the reading public. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* sells more than twenty thousand copies a year. Perhaps it is time for Cather to become a non-topic again, for the professional critics to give up and leave her books to those who care about them—her readers. (71)

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