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an author  
as a mirror

L. V. JACKS

*Willa Cather and the Southwest*

RUNNING THROUGH MUCH OF WILLA CATHER'S WRITING LIKE A BRIGHT thread catching the light is a note of affection, sometimes tender, sometimes nostalgic and brooding, for our southwestern states. This feeling appears in her earlier writings, it lingers on into her later work. It is not one of the attitudes possessed by facile professional writers, but gives every indication of being an emotion deep in her heart.

If we except *The Affair at Grover Station*, a Wyoming railroad story published in June, 1900, the first time that a remark about the old West appears is in *Alexander's Bridge* (1912) when a character, perhaps referring loosely to southern Colorado, says, "I keep remembering locoed horses I used to see on the range when I was a boy . . ." Personal experience with the Southwest followed soon. In an essay entitled "My First Novels," contained in the book *Willa Cather on Writing*, the author states, "soon after the book (*Alexander's Bridge*) was published, I went for six months to Arizona and New Mexico." That was in April, 1912.

There is reason to believe that this trip had far-reaching consequences and laid the foundation for her lifelong affection for this part of the country. Study of her published certified work shows this exceptional interest, in the case of Tom Outland's story in *The Professor's House*, in the entire Archbishop novel, and in the many instances in *The Song of the Lark*. Then, there are minor references scattered through the rest of her output. For example, in *Coming, Aphrodite*, a painter has a collection of pastels brought from New Mexico. He values them very highly and perhaps with sound reason for the author adds that Remington, "then at the height of his popularity," had seen them and tried to push them on the market. In *One of Ours* a character goes to the Museum at the University to study the Cliff Dweller remains. In *April Twilights* one of the best poems is addressed to Spanish Johnny.

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From the days when Miss Cather first went to Lincoln to attend the University of Nebraska in 1890 and rode around town on a bicycle, affecting short stubby hair cuts and severely tailored garb, to the last days when as a novelist of distinction she drew to the close of her career, straightforward directness was one of her most essential traits. Seriousness, truth, readiness for hard work, high sense of honor, interior spiritual resources were outstanding qualities in her personality. A psychologist and a thinker, she enjoyed probing into recesses of character and looking for hidden meanings behind open and obvious facades. It is logical to believe that her affection for the Southwest may have developed out of emotions and ideas that the country aroused in her.

Of course she responded to physical beauty, and no where in the world could she see more tense and thrilling combinations of color and outline than she would see in that land. Outline is beauty, color spells life, depth indicates endurance. She saw all of this in the landscape of New Mexico, and even more clearly she saw it in the landscapes of the human soul as she observed descendants of the people who had made the territory what it was. After she had published *One of Ours* she grew more and more inclined to retrospection in her novels. Dates, for example, dovetail with this theory: the Archbishop story opens in 1848, *Shadows on the Rock* in 1697, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* in 1857. In *Not Under Forty* she stated her position explicitly. "It is for the backward, and by one of their number, that these sketches were written." She loved permanence: she preferred the old and well tried to the new and glamorous.

Reflecting upon these thoughts, let us examine three major works, *The Song of the Lark*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

In the first novel the Moonstone people are poor. Ottenburg does not enter the story till it is well advanced and Thea has made friends in Chicago, but his entry does not swerve her from her career. Doctor Archie is not comfortably well off till later in life. So hard work was the daily lot of citizens where Thea grew up. The imaginary town was probably not so far from the state line that it might not be included in a consideration of New Mexico. And yet among the Moonstone people who had simple virtues—thrift, kindness, industry, charity—we find also accomplishment, satisfaction in living, generosity, even genius. Thea might never have had a chance at higher musical education but

for the act of a dying man whose life insurance paid her way into that coveted world.

Some of the happiest pages in the story are those in which the author describes Tellamantez, talks of the guitar and the songs, watches the dancers at the Saturday night fiesta, and feels their life throb in her veins also. These people were direct in their reasoning; so was the novelist. They loved beauty; so did she. They had a deep feeling for the pleasure of life and an awareness of the imminence of death. So did she.

"Mexican dances were very much family affairs. The fathers always danced again and again with their little daughters, as well as with their wives. One of the girls came up to greet Thea, her dark cheeks glowing with pleasure and cordiality . . . there was no calling, the conversation was very low, the rhythm of the music was gentle and engaging, the men were graceful and courteous . . . there were three little girls under twelve in their first communion dresses, and one of them had an orange marigold in her black hair just over her ear. They danced with the men, with each other. There was an atmosphere of ease and friendly pleasure in the low, dimly lit room. . . ."

In the latter part of this curiously constructed novel, when Thea went back to the Southwest for a vacation on the Ottenburg ranch, fifty-eight pages were devoted to that episode among mountains, deserts, pine forests. It was so large an interlude that it constitutes a clean break with the general arrangement. Only a powerful emotional pull could cause so accomplished a technician as Willa Cather to interrupt the smooth flow of a novel for an issue so large as to endanger unity. What could it be? Miss Cather did not do love scenes well. She sheered away from them. In *My First Novels* she quotes Heinemann as saying about *The Song of the Lark* that she used a full-blooded method which told everything about everybody. But there is precisely the difficulty: she does not tell everything about everybody. The love affair of Fred Ottenburg and Thea is tepid, meaningless. Perhaps as she approached this passage in Thea's life she strove to compensate, to strengthen a faltering scene by putting it on the finest stage she could conceive, in a locale she admired, so that the setting would release that rush of hot emotion which the characters never generate. If so the effort was a failure.

In *The Professor's House* the tone was subtly altered, but the basic ingredients were there as before. Professor St. Peter was represented as

working on a book about the Spanish adventurers in the Southwest. They were great and brilliant and powerful, and with a shrewdness lacking in other historians of his time St. Peter recognized their good qualities and indeed felt a certain remote spiritual kinship with some of the men. And it is not hard to see in the sketches of the institution called Hamilton some aspects of Willa Cather's own University of Nebraska.

Then into this academic web came a young adventurer, a boy called Tom Outland who was truthful, direct, clear thinking, who loved New Mexico. He was to learn by bitter experience that one cannot put faith in bureaucrats, that Washington is full of delusions, but in the face of all the disappointment and even ironic enlightenment his essential goodness never altered.

Miss Cather was not given to the technique of going backward and forward in time in alternate chapters, and a reader feels astonishment as he sees her narration slanting off into another long tangent. Thus, Tom Outland's story is not woven into the web of St. Peter's world, it is an island in the main stream. Finely written, as a passage will show:

"The bluish rock and the sun tanned grass, under the unusual purple-grey of the sky, gave the whole valley a very soft color, lavender and pale gold, so that the occasional cedars growing beside the boulders looked black that morning. It may have been the hint of snow in the air, but it seemed to me that I had never breathed in anything that tasted so pure as the air in that valley. . . ."

Last of all, the Archbishop. The story has to do with a churchman devoted to a dangerous and arduous task. Yet Bishop Latour was in many respects an epitome of southwestern qualities. If he were not, he would never have won over that region. Self-denial, hard work, persistence, a power of judging character, a generosity that was uncommon, distinguished Jean Latour's personality and these are traits that appear in the writer who celebrated him.

But it was not only Bishop Latour, it was the very country, the landscape that was drawn with such accuracy. Only the eye of love would see so exactly, dwelling upon good points with affectionate care, minimizing faults and weaknesses, and leaving the reader with that breath taking impression of austere beauty that has come upon nearly everyone who has ever taken up the Archbishop's story.

Hardly any incident in the book was more expressive than the building of the cathedral. Like the Romans who gave laws and customs to the lands they ruled, Spanish adventurers in turn brought arts with

them, and none was more stable or more realistic than their architecture, and the need they felt to improve their towns with good churches. So Miss Cather recognized the advantage in having her hero build a fine church.

Anxious to improve upon conditions, Bishop Latour and Father Vaillant in an important scene found the wall of rock: "— not green like the surrounding hills, but yellow, a strong golden ochre, very much like the gold of the sunlight that was now beating upon it . . . after a moment of silence he looked up at the rugged wall gleaming gold above them. 'That hill, Blanchet, is my Cathedral.'"

Even in his last years the Archbishop, like his chronicler, was cool and strong. "In New Mexico he always awoke a young man: not until he rose and began to shave did he realize that he was growing older. His first consciousness was a sense of the light, dry wind blowing in through the windows, with the fragrance of hot sun and sage-brush and sweet clover; a wind that made one's body feel light and one's heart say, 'Today, today,' like a child's."

Once a success has appeared, many are ready to claim a share in its genesis. But the wall that Willa Cather built around herself from early days, and the severity with which she restricted careless approach, make it certain that not many persons had access to her real thinking. One of these persons though was Dr. Julius Tyndale of Lincoln who knew her in University days and with whom she discussed her stories freely.

Dr. Tyndale told me that he had suggested writing the story about the Archbishop. Prior to that he had unsuccessfully urged her to write a story around the career of Charles Camillus de Rudio, one time lieutenant in the 7th U. S. Cavalry. Tyndale, himself once a soldier, then an army doctor, and long time practicing physician in Lincoln, probed considerably into the history of western and southwestern states. Hence his interest in the Archbishop. Dr. Tyndale was eighty-four when he described these events to me in Lincoln in 1927. Miss Cather may have felt under some obligation to him for she gave him a pension in his latter days when he was not well off and was living alone in a small Lincoln hotel.

To sum up: Miss Cather wrote beautifully about New Mexico, in part because she loved the country, in part because it inspired her, in part because she and the land with its people had many spiritual characteristics in common. She felt deeply and wonderfully at home in surroundings that mirrored her own finest qualities and that inspired some of her finest efforts.