

W.D. 12

A Calendar of the Letters of

Willa Cather

edited by Janis P. Stout

University of Nebraska Press

Lincoln and London



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PROFESSOR STOUT addresses a major need in Cather studies, and she does so with impeccable scholarship and critical acumen.”
—Susan J. Rosowski, author of *Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature*.

An infamous clause in Willa Cather's will, forbidding publication of her letters and other papers, has long caused consternation among Cather scholars. There is a lot to be learned from reading an author's letters. For Cather, a complex and private person who seldom made revelatory public pronouncements, personal letters provide—or would provide—an especially valuable key to understanding. But because of the terms of her will, that key is not readily available. Cather's letters will not come into public domain until the year 2017. Until then, even quotation, let alone publication in full, is prohibited.

Janis P. Stout has gathered over eighteen hundred of Cather's letters—all the letters currently known to be available—and provides a brief summary of each, as well as a biographical directory identifying correspondents and a multisection index of the widely scattered letters by location, by correspondent, and by names and titles mentioned. This book will be an essential resource for Cather scholars.

Janis P. Stout is a professor of English at Texas A & M University. She is the author of numerous books, including *Through the Window, Out the Door: Women's Narratives of Departure, from Austin and Cather to Tyler, Morrison, and Didion*, and *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World*.

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“N,”

To the many scholars interested in the mind
and art of Willa Cather and her resonance of
the times in which she lived, in the hope that
it will facilitate their work

Acknowledgments

WITH WARM THANKS to Ann Romines, Deborah Williams, Bruce Baker, and other Cather scholars who encouraged me in this project, especially Susan Rosowski. Thanks also to John McDermott and Craig Kallendorf, who first suggested that I consider making my work on the letters available in this way; to Robert Thacker, who shared with me his transcriptions of a number of letters; to John Murphy, who saved me from a dreadful blunder; to Mark Madigan, whose work on Cather's "The Profile" and Evelyn Osborne saved me other blunders; to the incomparable Kari Ronning, who greatly enriched the biographical information given here and caught several errors; to Yessica Garces and especially Molly McBride for their research assistance at Texas A&M University, the results of which are evident in the biographical directory, the dating of several undated letters, and various bracketed notes incorporated into the letter summaries themselves; and to Juli Parrish, Mark Heineke, and Alena Amato Ruggerio, who helped with research at Carnegie Mellon University, Georgetown University, and Indiana University, respectively. Special thanks are also owed to Sherrill Harbison, who shared with me in manuscript her listing and summaries of nineteen letters to Sigrid Undset discovered at a private estate in Lillehammer, Norway, in February 1999 and now archived at the Oslo Division of the National Library of Norway; my listing here follows Dr. Harbison's dating, and my summaries are compressions of hers. Special thanks also to Mary Weddle, who allowed me access to letters to Mrs. George P. Cather, through the intermediation of Sue Rosowski.

The identification of George Woodberry, in the biographical dictionary, is from John P. Anders, *Willa Cather's Sexual Aesthetics and the Male Homosexual Literary Tradition* (1999).

Textual and historical information provided in the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition has been helpful in a great variety of ways, ranging from the date of the newspaper story reporting a rumor that the Cathers were hiding Marjorie Anderson (the *Argus*, October 30, 1924, per Kari A. Ronning; "Historical Essay," *Obscure Destinies*) to the first name of Ferris Greenslet's

x Acknowledgments

secretary, Miss Bishop (Helen, per Charles W. Mignon with Kari A. Ronning, "Textual Commentary," *My Ántonia*). Thanks are owed by all Cather scholars, now and in the future, to those who envisioned and have labored to produce these editions.

Introduction

WHEN WILLA CATHER DIED on April 24, 1947, her Last Will and Testament included a provision that has severely hampered the study of her work: a prohibition on publishing her letters, either in whole or in part. Such a prohibition is enforced not only by respect for the author's wishes (which might, after the lapse of more than half a century, be discounted in the interests of scholarship) but by the copyright laws of the United States. Until an unpublished work reverts to the public domain upon the expiration of the copyright period, the copyright (as distinct from the physical document) remains the property of its creator or heirs, as represented by an executor. Cather's executors have steadfastly held to her wishes and refused to grant permission for publication or quotation.

Under the Copyright Act of 1976 the period of protection for unpublished materials was set at fifty years after death, but that provision was not to take effect until January 1, 2003. Cather's letters were scheduled, then, to become part of the public domain (at which time the scholar wishing to quote from them would need only the permission of the library holding the document, not the executor) on January 1, 2003, fifty-five years, eight months, and eight days after her death. But in 1998 Congress passed, and the president subsequently signed, what is commonly known as the Copyright Extension Act, extending the term of protection for unpublished material to seventy years beyond death. That means Cather's letters will not enter the public domain until 2017.

What is to be done in the meantime to satisfy the demand for knowledge generated by the flourishing state of Cather scholarship? The usual answer is paraphrase, which is both permissible under the law and customary according to normal standards of scholarly ethics. Paraphrase, of course, carries its own problems: How is one to steer between the Scylla of coming too close, thereby violating the prohibition on quoting, and the Charybdis of giving too wide a berth, thus failing to represent accurately? But how can even a very close paraphrase ever convey the full meaning of a writer's own words? After all, words are not interchangeable tokens.

Mark Twain long ago derided tone-deaf writers who do not care whether they use the right word or its second cousin. Then there is the problem of subjectivity: Since the words of a paraphrase are chosen by individual human beings with their own interpretive purposes, how can even the most scrupulous of writers be sure they are not distorting the author's meaning in favor of their own? If the scholar attempts to provide a precise rendition by intermingling some of Cather's own words into the paraphrase, readers cannot know which words are whose. Present Cather scholarship, citing the letters more and more often, provides evidence of all of these problems.

Even before one can face the problem of paraphrase, however, one must face the problem of access. If we choose to go read the letters themselves, so as to know exactly what Cather said even if we cannot quote it, we face a costly and time-consuming project. Indeed, how do we even know where to go? Since Cather did not want her letters to be read, she did not donate them to any library. There is no single or even principal collection of the papers of Willa Cather. Instead, there is a scattering of the papers of various correspondents, including sometimes one, sometimes two, or in some cases a treasure-trove of the precious letters. To know where these are we must rely on lists of references in various publications, on word of mouth, or on guesswork. Margaret Anne O'Connor's article "A Guide to the Letters of Willa Cather," *Resources for American Literary Study* 4 (1974): 145-72, is a good starting place, but additional letters have continued to come to light since it was published. As recently as 1999 Georgetown University discovered a letter (listed here as no. 918) between the pages of a book in its collection. Six letters to Louise Imogen Guiney at the College of the Holy Cross are presently unavailable because misplaced. Surely they will be located! A group of letters to Stephen Tennant was purchased by a private collector when the Tennant estate was sold at Sotheby's and was then resold to a dealer. Perhaps these letters are even now in cataloging at some university's library. There may be many such stories, and in truth, a compilation such as this one can never be said with confidence to be complete.

This calendar of letters, representing an effort of collection extending over a period of several years, will go at least some distance toward solving these problems.

Certainly Cather scholars before me consulted and transcribed various of Cather's letters. But my efforts, unlike those of most of my predecessors, were facilitated by the use of a laptop computer, a tool that has transformed archival research. Until only a decade or so ago scholars undertaking research in unpublished manuscripts went armed with pencils and pads of paper. A laptop makes all the difference, both in the time required to collect a large quantity of material and in the accessibility of information, through search processes, once it is collected. Traveling to libraries with Cather holdings, I transcribed letters on site word for word, that is, to the extent that I could read them, for as anyone who has ever tried knows, Cather's handwriting is far from easy to read. A few libraries (actually, only two that I know of) prohibit even hand-transcription, an understandable if extreme stance, since different libraries' lawyers will naturally read the will's prohibition on publication differently and define "publication" differently. Some libraries are glad to provide photocopies (for a price), obviating the need to go there physically in order to make transcriptions. Even when I was able to obtain photocopies, however, I transcribed them into the computer in order to be able to search them and in order to construct a chronological sequence. My files include the full texts of all letters listed here except for a few that I have only in paraphrase because of library restrictions.

Which returns us to the problem of how to make an accurate paraphrase without coming too close. I have struggled with it as best I could.

Another problem is chronology. Many of Cather's letters, even business letters, bear only partial dates or none at all. Like many of us, she often headed her letters only by day of week ("Wednesday") or month and day without year ("June 13"). In such cases the scholar becomes a detective, following whatever clues present themselves. It is easier when a letter is headed, say, "Wednesday, June 13," since a perpetual calendar, available in standard almanacs, reduces the range of possibilities by telling us the years in which June 13 fell on a Wednesday. Internal evidence provides additional clues. To take an easy example, a letter written on stationery printed "Number Five Bank Street" was almost certainly written between January 1913 and August 1927, the period when Cather lived at that address. (The scholar knows this because she or he has, of course, compiled a chronology of known dates, partly on the basis of letters that are dated.) Or

the range of possibilities may be reduced because of known biographical data about the person being addressed; thus a particular letter couldn't have been written after such-and-such year because I know from the *New York Times* obituaries that so-and-so died then. Or there may be continuities with other letters. Especially if one has both sides of a correspondence (which is true of much of the correspondence with Ferris Greenslet, at the Houghton Library, Harvard, but generally not otherwise) one can track query and response. Or the same statement, couched in much the same terms, may appear in several letters, presumably written about the same time. Here again the computer makes all the difference. With some eighteen hundred letters to examine, a large portion of them undated, the scholar-detective would have to be very astute indeed to make such linkages on the strength of memory and persistence alone.

Through a combination of these techniques, I have been able to establish dates or approximate dates for most of the undated letters. Those that remain undated are listed in a separate section at the end of the calendar. Perhaps readers will notice clues that will establish dates for some of these, or additional letters may become available that will provide the missing clues. Probably some will always remain undated. Fortunately, most of the intransigently undated ones are short and trivial notes that could have been written almost anytime, and it probably does not matter much.

In some ways the most interesting of Cather's letters are the earliest ones. The child's mind, so important to what it grows into, is the most inaccessible to us. We can be glad that Mrs. Helen Stowell, about whom we know very little (but see the biographical directory), kept three letters written by the fifteen- and sixteen-year-old Willa, or "William," Cather. The only earlier document written by Cather that I have seen is not a letter at all but a little composition on the subject of dogs, apparently done while she was being home-schooled. (It is signed "William" in what would appear to be a preadolescent hand, contrary to theories that she began to call herself William in adolescence.) We can be doubly glad that Mariel Gere, whom Cather met when she went to Lincoln to attend a preparatory year at the Latin School before matriculating in the University of Nebraska proper, kept so many of the letters written to her by her friend, who emerges from these pages as having been notably mercurial, especially in her youth.

As the years go on we can trace Cather's struggles to find a vocation, a career, and establish herself in it. We see the beginning, the quick blossoming, and the sad end of her acquaintance with Sarah Orne Jewett, a mentor whose influence had profound effects on what came after. We see the early traces of Cather's major works and her subsequent reflections on them. One of the most interesting of these traces, to me, was the discovery that the first visible germ of *One of Ours* came while Cather was still working intently on *My Ántonia*. To what extent did the Great War weigh on her mind and imagination while she produced that richly nurturant book, often taken as her defining work? The concern with the Great War becomes, indeed, one of the most important ongoing threads in the letters, extending far beyond the Armistice, tying into her foreboding over the coming of World War II and her keen distress and then weariness with that even greater war.

Another important theme in the letters is Cather's involvement in the production side and business side of her work. Susan Rosowski, especially, has studied these matters, through the correspondence with Alfred A. Knopf and the significance of that interaction. The even longer correspondence with Ferris Greenslet, Cather's editor at Houghton Mifflin, is more various but equally enlightening, not least in what it shows us about the making of *My Ántonia* as a visual text. Another theme, this one launched even before Cather left Nebraska for Pittsburgh to begin her career in journalism, is religion. In this, as in other respects, the letters are interesting both for what they say and for what they do not say.

In some ways Cather's letters are disappointingly inexpressive. She knows Mrs. Franz Boas but never says a word about her husband's profoundly influential anthropological work, or for that matter about his brilliant student Elsie Clews Parsons, who went to the Southwest the same year Cather did, 1912, knew some of the same people Cather knew, including Mabel Dodge Luhan, and was a much talked-of presence in New York during at least three decades of Cather's residence there, but never makes an appearance in the letters. Nor does Georgia O'Keeffe, despite their conspicuously shared interests and the fact that Cather (who was in New York when the Armory Show burst on the art world but never mentions it) took a real interest in the visual arts. It is puzzling.

Another major theme in the letters is, of course, Nebraska and, inter-

twined with Nebraska, the idea of home itself. We see Cather telling her friends that she can never be really happy living anywhere else while she goes on living in New York and traveling to Europe. We see, too, her surprising absence from Nebraska during the last fifteen years of her life and the shifting reasons she gives for that absence. Again and again she tells Carrie Miner Sherwood, her very first friend in Red Cloud and a faithful one, that she will be there for Christmas or at some other specified time, only to write and say she can't come. Usually she cites illness, but sometimes the reasons are transparent dodges and must have struck Carrie that way, especially the time Cather writes that she has returned from summer vacation and found the apartment very dusty, so she must stay and clean house, as if she couldn't simply let it stay dusty a little longer. Finally the letters give the real reason: that she was suffering from emotional debilitation and any emotional strain, even of happiness, caused her to lapse into uncontrollable weeping. The condition was so severe that she sought medical advice. She admitted to fearing both the powerful emotions that might be aroused by a visit to Red Cloud and the possibility that people she knew there, many of whom she had come to regard as enemies, would see her weakness and make insulting conjectures about it.

In these and other ways, the letters help us understand this writer whose art is so elusive and so rich that it continues to elicit study, criticism, and devotion. A calendar of the letters is a poor substitute for the letters themselves, but it may help to fill the gap caused by their unavailability for publication, giving readers at least a sense of what they say and serving as a guide to further research.

Format of Entries and List of Abbreviations

THE FORMAT of all listings is this: name of person to whom addressed (with missing first or last names supplied where possible), date (with any surmised or supplied elements shown in brackets), sometimes the place from which written, description of the document (such as "postcard"), and the collection in which the letter was found. The paraphrased text of the letter follows, with only a minimum of bracketed amplification or information supplied. The mode of signature used by Cather is indicated, and summaries of any postscripts follow the signature.

Repositories are referred to using the following short forms.

AAAL	American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York
Allegheny	Pelletier Library, Allegheny College, Meadville, Pa.
Amherst	Amherst College, Amherst, Mass.
Arkansas	University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Ark.
Baltimore	Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore, Md.
Beinecke	Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.
Berkeley	The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Calif. (copies; originals at the Masaryk Institute in Prague)
BPL	Boston Public Library, Boston, Mass.
Bryn Mawr	Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pa.
Buffalo	Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, Buffalo, N.Y.
BYU	L. Tom Perry Special Collections Library, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah
Chicago	The University of Chicago Library, Chicago, Ill.
CMU	Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pa.
Colby	Miller Library, Colby College, Waterville, Maine
Columbia	Columbia University, New York
Cornell	Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y.
Dartmouth	Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H.
Duke	Duke University, Durham, N.C.
Emporia	Emporia State College, Emporia, Kans.

xviii *Format and Abbreviations*

First Church	First Church of Christ, Scientist, Boston, Mass.
GU	Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.
Harvard	Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
HRC	Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Tex.
HSNeb	Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebr.
HSW	Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisc.
Huntington	Huntington Library, San Marino, Ca.
Indiana	Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind.
Jaffrey	Jaffrey, N.H., Public Library
Kentucky	Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Ky.
Knox	Seymour Library, Knox College, Galesburg, Ill.
LC	Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
LincCity	Lincoln, Nebr. City Libraries, Jane Pope Geske Heritage Room of Nebraska Authors
Manhat	Manhattanville College, Purchase, N.Y.
Michigan	Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich.
Middlebury	Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vt.
Mills	Mills College, Oakland, Calif.
Newark	Newark Public Library, Newark, New Jersey
Newberry	Newberry Library, Chicago
NHHS	New Hampshire Historical Society, Concord, N.H.
Notre Dame	University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Ind.
NYPL	New York Public Library
Oslo	National Library of Norway, Oslo Division
Penn	Van Pelt-Dietrich Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa.
Penn. State	Pennsylvania State University, State College, Pa.
Phil-Ex	Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, N.H.
PM	Pierpont Morgan Library, New York [Note: Photocopies of most of the letters to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant located at the PM are held at Alderman Library, University of Virginia.]
Princeton	Firestone Library, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.
Richmond	Boatwright Memorial Library, University of Richmond, Richmond, Va.

Stanford	Stanford University, Stanford, Calif.
Sweet Briar	Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, Va.
TWU	Texas Woman's University, Denton, Tex.
UNC	University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.
UNH	University of New Hampshire, Durham, N.H.
UNL	Love Library, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
USC	University of Southern California, Los Angeles, Calif.
UVa	Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va.
UVt	Bailey-Howe Library, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vt.
VTech	Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Vt.
WCPM	Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, Red Cloud, Nebr.
Weddle	Private Collection of Mary Weddle
Wellesley	Margaret Clapp Library, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Mass.
WRHS	Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio
Yale	University Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.
Yongue	Private Collection of Patricia Lee Yongue

Postmark is abbreviated as pm.

A few short inscriptions have been quoted in full, and longer letters paraphrased, from published sources, referenced as follows.

Bohlke	Brent Bohlke, ed. <i>Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters</i> . Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1986.
Butcher	Fannie Butcher, <i>Many Lives One Love</i> . New York: Harper & Row, 1972.
O'Brien	Sharon O'Brien, <i>Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice</i> . New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987.

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