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4-1-1997

## In all its purple flurry: Willa Cather's earliest journalism

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In All Its Purple Flurry:  
Willa Cather's Earliest Journalism

A Thesis

Presented to the  
Department of English  
and the  
Faculty of the Graduate College  
University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Doug Barber

April 1997

UMI Number: EP74647

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Thesis acceptance

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate  
College, University of Nebraska, in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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Date April 18, 1997

## Acknowledgements

The idea for this thesis has evolved a great deal since I first decided to undertake it. I knew I wanted to write about Willa Cather and I knew I wanted to concentrate on her Nebraska writing. I had a rather vague idea to study the roles of the minor characters in her Nebraska novels, but when I tried to narrow the concept into a workable thesis, it just didn't seem to work. About a year ago, as I was struggling with a thesis statement, I got the opportunity to teach a journalism class at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. One afternoon I slipped up to the UNK English Department and sought out Dr. Suzanne George, a noted Cather scholar, with plans to ask for her help on the project. That didn't work out, but she said one thing that stuck in my mind.

"You're a newspaper editor," she said. "Why don't you write about Cather's newspaper work?" It turned out to be the only conversation I had with Dr. George and I'm sure she does not even remember it, but it planted the seed that ultimately grew into this thesis. For that I am grateful to her.

I am also grateful to the members of my advisory committee, Dr. John McKenna and Dr. Warren Francke of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, for their guidance as this project developed and was finalized. I am especially grateful to Dr. Bruce Baker, who chaired the committee, and who provided plenty of direction as this developed.

I thank him also for his patience in overcoming the logistics of working with someone who lives 180 miles from campus and does not yet enjoy the advantages of communicating via computer. Thanks are also due Dr. Keith Terry of the UNK Journalism and Mass Communication Department for hiring me sight unseen for that fateful journalism class, for help locating research materials, and for encouragement as the writing progressed.

Mostly, though, I thank my family for their infinite patience in seeing me through this project. It's difficult for a six-year-old boy to understand just why Daddy has to be holed up upstairs all weekend when it's so nice outside or for a 10-year-old to have to keep explaining to her friends just to ignore Dad over there in the corner because he's always working on his dumb old paper. Betsy, Conrad, and little Daniel, I can't restore the lost time to you, but I hope I can make up for it. Plan on extra sledding this winter.

My biggest debt of gratitude is to my wife, Tricia. It's not easy living with someone who works all day (or night in some cases), then disappears upstairs or to the library or to Lincoln all weekend, especially when you have your own job, three kids, a home and all the rest of life to worry about. On top of that, she graciously proofread the drafts as they were completed. My thanks and love for persevering and for maintaining some semblance of normalcy in our lives.

## Abstract

Before she established herself as one of America's foremost novelists, Willa Cather built a reputation as one of America's most promising journalists. She started her professional career writing reviews, feature articles and columns for the newspapers of Lincoln, Nebraska during her years as a student at the University of Nebraska. From there, Cather went to Pittsburgh as a magazine and newspaper editor for several years before moving to New York City, which would become her permanent home, to be a writer and ultimately managing editor of McClure's, widely considered the foremost muckraking magazine of its time in the United States. Cather's journalism career spanned nearly 20 years and not only earned her a reputation for her skills as a writer and editor, but opened many doors and provided the occasion for many acquaintances that had a profound impact on her life and her writing.

But even before she began part-time newspaper work in Lincoln in 1893, young Willa Cather was writing. In the beginning, she was not writing for a large audience, but for the relative handful of readers of the weekly newspapers in Red Cloud, Nebraska. Even then, though, the talented teen-ager displayed an uncanny ability with words and a surprising strength of conviction. Her 1890 high school graduation speech, a passionate defense of scientific investigation, jumps off the pages of the Red Cloud Chief, just as it must have startled the gathering at the Red

Cloud Opera House, where it was delivered.

At age 16, Cather left for Lincoln and a year of preparatory school necessary to enroll at the University of Nebraska. She planned to study medicine. But her plans changed in 1891 when she produced two extraordinary essays, one on Thomas Carlyle and one titled "Shakespeare and Hamlet," that were printed in the Nebraska State Journal. Cather credited the sight of the Carlyle piece in print as the impetus that turned her from medicine to writing.

In between her high school graduation and the two early essays in Lincoln, Cather honed her writing skills and her artistic convictions in several short pieces in the Red Cloud Republican, a short-lived newspaper her father helped start to tell one side of a local political dispute. The untitled, unsigned articles, printed shortly after her high school graduation, bear strong Catherian trademarks and can be attributed to her using the same method Bernice Slote and others use to identify many of Cather's college writings. By themselves, the articles are of little importance, but viewed within the context of Cather's canon, especially her prolific output during 20 years of journalism, they provide a new link in the chain of her work -- and they show that even at 16 she had developed a talent for writing and some very definite views of life and art.



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"I found that newspaper writing did a great deal of good for me in working off the purple flurry of my early writing . . . . I knew even then it was a crime to write like I did, but I had to get the adjectives and the youthful fervor worked off."

--Willa Cather, 1915

## Introduction

During a visit to Lincoln, Nebraska in 1895, Gustave Frohman, one of the impresarios of traveling theatrical productions of his day, commented in an interview that Lincoln's newspapers had become "noted for their honesty in dramatic matters, and it is the best advertisement of intelligence and refinement that a town can have." Frohman noted that both professional and amateur companies were wary of playing in Lincoln and "poor companies begin to tremble long before they get here. That kind of respect is worth something" (Nebraska State Journal 3 February 1895 13).

One of Frohman's interviewers, and one of the critics who had helped earn Lincoln such a reputation, was a 21-year-old senior at the University of Nebraska named Willa Cather. She had come to Lincoln from Red Cloud in Webster County in south-central Nebraska in 1890, with not even enough credits to enroll in the university. But she brought with her a voracious reading appetite, the benefits of "a huge, eclectic consumption of books" (Woodress, A Literary Life 50) and a precocious talent for writing.

The young Cather also came armed with a photographic memory, "a flesh and blood dictograph - eyes in every pore," according to Mildred Bennett. "She absorbed everything" (92). "Once the image was recorded on her brain," Woodress

says, "it never left her" (ALL 39).

Cather's aim was to be a doctor--she was determined to succeed in a man's world--but the first time she saw her name in print, medicine took a back seat to writing. Her first published work in Lincoln actually was printed without her knowledge in 1891, when Cather was still in the university's preparatory school. Professor Ebenezer Hunt gave the Nebraska State Journal a copy of an essay she had written entitled "Some Personal Characteristics of Thomas Carlyle." The newspaper printed it along with an editor's note:

The writer is a young girl of sixteen years of age [she had actually turned 17] who comes from Webster County. A careful reading will convince any student of literature that it is a remarkable production, reflecting not a little credit upon the author and the university (NSJ, 1 March 1891).

"That was the beginning of many troubles for me," Cather wrote 36 years later to Will Owen Jones, the Journal's longtime managing editor, in a letter of congratulations on the newspaper's 60th birthday. "Up to that time I had planned to specialize in science; I thought I would like to study medicine. But what youthful vanity can be unaffected by the sight of itself in print! It had a kind of hypnotic effect" (Bohlke 180-81).

Cather went on to disparage that first essay as "a

splendid example of the kind of writing I most dislike; very florid and full of high-flown figures of speech. . . . Come to think of it, that flowery effusion had only one merit -- it was honest" (Bohlke 181).

Even in her youth, simplicity and honesty were two things Cather considered indispensable in good writing, and her early journalism work helped her hone those attributes. When Cather was named editor of The Hesperian, the university's leading student publication, she promised "plain, unornamented language which anyone can interpret without the aid of a handbook of mythology or a dictionary of similes" (Woodress, ALL 75).

"When I was in college and immediately after graduation, I did newspaper work," Cather told an interviewer in 1915. "I found that newspaper writing did a great deal of good for me in working off the purple flurry of my early writing. . . . It was a painful period in which I overcame my florid, exaggerated, foamy-at-the-mouth, adjective-spreed period. I knew even then it was a crime to write like I did, but I had to get the adjectives and the youthful fervor worked off" (Bohlke 12-13).

Journalism was often an outlet for budding writers and poets of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Bancroft, Nebraska, the editor and publisher of the weekly Bancroft Blade was a young man named John G. Neihardt. Neihardt resigned the position in 1905. "I

was not fashioned for the pleasant and flowery path of a country editor," he wrote in the 20 January 1905 edition. "I cannot bring myself to place an epochal significance upon the fact that Miss Somebody 'went to the next town Saturday,' or that Willie Brightboy 'has been very ill with the mumps.' I concede that this peculiarity amounts to incapacity" (Nebraska Timeline September 1996).

Neihardt was apparently coming to the same realization in small-town Nebraska that Cather came to in New York City a few years later. "None can serve two masters; and I have been guilty of a futile endeavor to disprove this wise old maxim by obeying two at once; one with tireless enthusiasm and the other with a jaded spirit," Neihardt wrote. "Perhaps time can explain this anomaly better than I" (Nebraska Timeline).

There was "never a time when Willa Cather 'started to write,' or even when she 'learned to write,'" notes Bernice Slote. "She was born to language, and she rode its rhythms as a dolphin takes the sea" (KA 10). Cather gained recognition for her journalistic writing in Lincoln, first with two remarkable essays written in the year she turned 18, then for her lively writing of reviews, columns and feature stories during her last two years of college. But Cather was writing for newspapers before she ever got to Lincoln, and not just the high school notes to which her name is attached. Her high school graduation oration,

set down for immortality on the pages of the Red Cloud Chief, was a subject of conversation in town even after Cather was long gone. It has long been recognized as Cather's first real "statement" in print and has been studied for the insights it offers into the psyche of its talented author. It is, indeed, a memorable piece, but it appears it was not the only Cather contribution to local journalism. During her last summer in Red Cloud, Cather appears to have made several contributions to another local weekly, the Red Cloud Republican, a newspaper her father had helped start to tell one side of a political dispute. She may have been making contributions to help out in the absence of her friend, Dr. G.E. McKeeby, who had recently resigned as local editor. But Cather was not just filling space in the paper. She was laying the foundation of the "Kingdom of Art" that she so eloquently built of newsprint and ink during her college years.

The untitled, unsigned articles in the Republican are, on the surface, of no real importance. They are not local news (the main purpose of any weekly community paper). They are not breaking news. They are not even on the front page. In fact, a casual reading would lead one to the conclusion that even a century ago, newspapers were always looking for good "fillers." But a closer look and a comparison with her other writing of that era reveal several Cather trademarks, in content, style and theme.

If the articles do belong to Cather--and further examination should show that they do--they would be important for two reasons.

First, they appear during her "William Cather Jr." period, a time when the adolescent girl adopted a male persona complete with short hair and boy's apparel. It is the part of Cather's life "that is the most exclaimed over today" (Acocella 60). It is studied mostly for the implications and evidence it supposedly offers into her sexual orientation.

The articles are also important because they supply a few more small pieces of the huge puzzle that is Cather's early work. James Woodress estimates that before her first novel was published in 1912, Cather probably "turned out more copy than appears in all of her collected works of the following 35 years" (ALL 89). Into such a large pool of writing, four small articles would make barely a ripple were it not for their timing. They appear after her high school graduation, but before the first essays that were printed in Lincoln the following year. In other words, they are Willa Cather's first "professional" writing (although no one will ever know if she was paid for them).

Most importantly, though, they help form a link in the creative chain of Cather's formative years. As a body of material, her graduation speech, the newly discovered articles in the Republican that bear her trademarks, and



her early essays in Lincoln--all of which appeared on the pages of different newspapers over a span of 18 months--showcase the emerging voice of a truly gifted writer, in all its purple flurry.

## Chapter 1 - Beginnings

By the time she finished her junior year at the University of Nebraska, Willa Cather was working nearly full time as a journalist and "getting her education outside of the classroom" (Woodress, ALL 72). She quickly gained a reputation as "the liveliest and least inhibited reviewer in the Midwest" (Woodress, ALL 92). She was also entertaining Nebraska State Journal readers with her feature writing and columns and was impressing fellow staff members of The Hesperian, the college publication of which she was editor.

After her first novels were published, Cather herself helped perpetuate a myth that she spent a good deal of her childhood "as a sort of wild girl of the West, riding across the prairies and listening openmouthed to the tales of the immigrant settlers" (Shively 15). But the writing talent Cather displayed during her college years probably came as no surprise to people who had known her back in Red Cloud and during her early days in Lincoln.

Even in high school, the young Cather displayed a talent with words--and a disposition toward nonconformity --that set her apart from her schoolmates and even from her friends. "To me, she was never attractive and I remember her mostly for her boyish makeup and the serious stare with which she met you," Elmer Alonzo Thomas remembered. "It was as if she said, 'stay your distance

buddy, I have your number.' Enough, I did" (111).

Her graduation speech, an impassioned plea in favor of scientific investigation and vivisection, must have stunned the audience at the Red Cloud Opera House on June 5, 1890. The address was especially electrifying since it came after the painfully ordinary efforts of her two fellow graduates, both boys. It foreshadowed the force with which Cather would later write both journalism and fiction.

Cather's journalism career actually started, at least in her imagination, as editor of the "Sandy Point News," the paper she invented as part of the play town that the Cathers and other children built in their back yard in 1887. Cather was also elected mayor of the town, which was probably inspired by the real-life events of her father, Charles Cather, that year (Bennett 24).

Mr. Cather was a member of a group known disparagingly as the "Big Eight," established to reform the local Republican Party. The group published the Red Cloud Republican from August 1888-July 1890. Willa Cather's connection with the paper has never been definitively identified, but the History of the Nebraska Press Association says that Charles Cather "installed his bright daughter as editor and business manager" (32). Bennett says Willa Cather "took an avid interest in the whole affair and helped where she could" (24).

No known copies of the Republican exist before 1889, so it may never be known whether Cather did actually work on the paper when it first started. But several articles from the summer of 1890--between Cather's high school graduation and departure for Lincoln and the University of Nebraska--bear strong Catherian trademarks both in content and style. We will look at the Republican articles in more detail in Chapter 2.

Whatever her connection to the Republican, Cather's name did appear in at least two other Red Cloud newspapers during her high school years. (There were, at various times during that period, four or five newspapers in Webster County.)

Cather is listed as editor of a column called High School Items in the Red Cloud Chief on 19 October 1888, 8 February 1889 and 22 February 1889. Her first name is spelled "Wella" in the first column, on which she is listed as joint editor. She is sole editor of the second, and the third spells her last name "Cathers" (Crane 256). Cather's name also appears in the Webster County Argus during high school. Her name first appears, along with that of George Newhouse, as "Editors" of "High School News Items" in the 24 January 1889 issue of the Argus. Cather appears alone as editor of the school news in the 7 February and 21 February issues of the Argus.

Even then, Cather's love of words and her willingness

to give her opinions can be seen. "Prof. Curren has promised in the near future he will organize a class for elocutionary drill. . . . The offer will no doubt be gratefully accepted, as good reading is one of those rare accomplishments that should be cultivated more often than it has been in the past," she writes in the 7 February issue. Also in that issue, Cather writes that "Recess has resumed, as some pupils prefer relaxation from study. Not that their severe application to study necessitates it so much, we presume, as the force of habit calls for it."

While Cather's first works as a prep editor are not remarkable, the oration she delivered at her high school graduation, which was printed in the Red Cloud Chief on 13 June 1890, certainly is. "This discourse . . . is still remembered as a startling dissonant note in a conventional program," E.K. Brown wrote in Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, published in 1953, six years after Cather's death (46). Titled "Investigaton vs. Superstition," the speech was an answer to Red Cloud critics who questioned her dissecting of animals as part of her interest in zoology and in pursuing a career in medicine. While not intended for newspaper publication, the piece jumps off the page of the Chief, much as the words must have echoed through the Red Cloud Opera House as Cather delivered them. The effort must have seemed doubly extraordinary since it came

after the talks of classmates John W. Tulleys and Alexander Bentley (there were only three in the class). Tulleys spoke first on "Self Advertising":

To advertise is to make known. Self advertising is making yourself known, so if a man wishes to become known he must advertise. Then comes the question how shall he advertise? Shall he win his way to success by his real or apparent merits? Shall he put himself into unimportance and pretend to be what he is not or shall he take honesty as his motto and thus raise by slow degrees? The latter, though it may be the safer way, is less apt to lead to success. A man should blow his own trumpet, and the louder and longer he can blow, the deeper impression he will make[;] and the trumpet he uses should be made of brass, and the more brass it contains and the more vigorously it is blown the louder it will sound. Every man starting in business asks himself: shall I aim to be rather than seem to be qualified for my business? Those who aim to be qualified generally aim too high and although a few of them get along fairly well and make what may be called business success, while those who seem to be qualified, puffing themselves up and soon make a fair business record

and some succeed beyond their expectation.

Taking by any means as a motto, a shrewd man will succeed in any business. Take a man who has failed, he has failed simply because he is too honest and generous[;] he attends church more than he attends to his business[;] he gives to the churches and other institutions when he needs all his capital in his business. . . . To puff yourself up is the advice practically given by everyone (moralists excluded) and although this way of putting yourself forward is abused by moralists, they are paid by the ones who do not abuse it. Now and then you find a man who likes to do his work well, but this is decidedly a mistake on his part for while he is taking so much pains he might be doing something more beneficial to him, and in this billsticking world, it would never do to be idle. . . . It is not enough to have real abilities alone, one must have the self assurance to assert his claims before the public. . . . It is said that a barking dog is better than a sleeping lion[;] then a man must bark, not sleep. The Scotch weaver who prayed that he might have a better opinion of himself was not far out of the way. He thought if he had a better opinion

of himself, others would also have a better opinion of him. Then put yourself forward if you would be known. Look up, not down if you would rise to prominence. (Chief 13 June 1890 5)

Then came Bentley, whose address, which displayed a little more creativity than Tulleys', was entitled "New Times Demand New Measures and New Men":

The Human family [is] always progressing. The times are different and demand new men in the changed conditions. Our places could not be filled by men of a hundred years ago. Men must be in training now for future times.

Men are always ready for the new demands. Columbus for his time. Lincoln for his time. Alfred the Great for his time, each one had been trained by his surroundings and by the demand made upon him, so that he was especially fitted for the fulfillment of the duties imposed upon him in the critical times in which he lived.

There are in unconscious training today those who, when an extraordinary demand is made upon them, will be ready, fully prepared for the hour.

The boys of today are the leaders of the future and often those today least promising are tomorrow the men to whom all men look.



Nerve, foresight and moral power are the characteristics of great men, the boys who take advantage of every opportunity to advance in these qualities are our future leaders.

The subject treats of measures as well as of men; new conditions require new laws and old laws are repealed or fall into disuse because the times have changed, but their change of demand makes new laws necessary.

The men and the measures of today are practical: witness Seth Low, president of Columbia College; he is neither teacher, lawyer, nor scientist, but an able writer and a man of business, and of great executive ability. Boys and girls should not make the mistake to think that they are going to school to prepare for life. Their school days are a part of their life and they must remember that the well-performed duty of the day is a preparation for the duties of the next day; that each week's work well done prepares for the next week's work, and that this year is preparation for next year, whether in school, in the shop or on the farm.

All our duties well done day by day makes us the new men demanded by the new times to come.

(Chief 13 June 1890 5)

In these two talks, says Brown, we are "in the world of Bayliss Wheeler in One of Ours, and of Ivy Peters in A Lost Lady" (46). "The Old West had been settled by dreamers, greathearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence . . .," Cather wrote 32 years later in A Lost Lady. "Now all the vast territory they had won was at the mercy of men like Ivy Peters, who had never dared anything, never risked anything (89). "No battlefield or shattered country he had seen was as ugly as this world would be if men like his brother Bayliss controlled it altogether," Claude Wheeler thinks in One of Ours (339). Against this backdrop, Willa Cather's oration must have been especially startling:

It is the most sacred right of man to investigate; we paid dearly for it in Eden; we have been shedding our heart's blood for it ever since. It is ours; we have bought it with a price.

Scientific investigation is the hope of our age, as it must precede all progress; and yet upon every hand we hear the objections to its pursuit. The boy who spends his time among the stones and flowers is a trifler, and if he tries with bungling attempt to pierce the mystery of animal life he is cruel. Of course if he becomes a great anatomist or a brilliant naturalist,

his cruelties are forgotten or forgiven him; the world is very cautious, but it is generally safe to admire a man who has succeeded. We do not withhold from a few great scientists the right of the hospital, the post mortem or experimenting with animal life, but we are prone to think the right of experimenting with life too sacred a thing to be placed in hands of inexperienced persons. Nevertheless, if we bar our novices from advancement, whence shall come our experts?

But to test the question by comparison, would all the life destroyed in experimenting from the beginning of the world until today be as an atom to the life saved by that one grand discovery for which Harvey sacrificed his practice and his reputation, the circulation of the blood? There is no selfishness in this. It came from a higher motive than the desire for personal gain, for it too often brings destitution instead. Of this we have a grand example in the broken-down, care-worn old man who has just returned from the heart of the Dark Continent. But perhaps you still say that I evade the question, has any one a right to destroy life for scientific purposes? Ah, why does life live

upon death throughout the universe?

Investigations have styled fanatics those who seek to probe into the mysteries of the unknowable. This is unreasonable. The most aspiring philosopher never hoped to do more than state the problem, he never dreamed of solving it. Newton did not say how or why every particle of matter in the universe attracted every other particle of matter in the universe. He simply said it was so. We can only judge these abstract forces by their effect. Our intellectual swords may cut away a thousand petty spiderwebs woven by superstition across the mind of man, but before the veil of the "Sanctum Sanctorum" we stand confounded, our blades glance and turn and shatter upon the eternal adamant. Microscopic eyes have followed matter to the molecule and fallen blinded. Imagination has gone a step farther and grasped the atom. There, with a towering height above and yawning death below, even this grows sick at soul. For over six thousand years we have shaken fact and fancy in the dice box together and breathlessly awaited the result. But the dice of God are always loaded, and there are two sides which never fall upward, the alpha and omega. Perhaps when we make our final cast

with dark old death we may shape them better.

(Chief, 13 June 1890 5)

Cather's words today seem more than ample evidence of her literary and journalistic prowess, even at 16, but her fellow townspeople apparently could not see the future in the gifted girl. At least the newspaper editor, A.C. Hosmer, could not. He notes that self-advertiser John Tulleys, "is one of our brightest young students and will make his way to fame." Alex Bentley, who had explained how "New Times Demand New Measures and New Men," "is making rapid strides in the educational line and in years to come will show what close application to study in early childhood will do for those who improve the opportunity," the Chief editor writes. Cather's piece, meanwhile, was "a masterpiece of oratory" and "showed at once her knowledge of and familiarity with both the history and classics of ancient and modern times. Her line of thought was well carved out and a great surprise to her many friends . . . ." Kind words, but no prediction of greatness for the most talented--but only female--member of the class.

That Cather was not singled out as having a future, presumably because of her gender, is interesting because it came in the midst of a stage in her life when she adopted a male persona. She had cut her hair as short as, even shorter than, the boys and wore masculine clothing. This lasted into her college days. Bennett says Cather first

cut her hair when her brother James was born and her mother was too ill to comb it, "and the girl went to the barber shop and had it cut short" (177-78).

Some, including Bennett, conjecture that Cather adopted the male alter ego because she wanted to be a doctor and women were basically excluded from that or any other profession. "She was planning to become a surgeon," Bennett writes, "and she wished to dress the part" (178). The name "William" would have been a natural for Cather to adopt, not only because it so closely resembled her real name, but because her grandfather, William Cather, had died in November 1887 at age 64. He had homesteaded in Nebraska 14 years earlier, and the Charles Cather family had lived with them when they first moved to Nebraska in 1883. (Willa Cather later portrayed her grandfather as Grandfather Burden in My Antonia.)

The graduation addresses are ample evidence that it was, indeed, a man's world in 1890. "The boys of today are the leaders of the future," fellow graduate Bentley states, "and often those today least promising are tomorrow the men to whom all men look." ". . . if a man wishes to become known he must advertise," classmate Tulleys advises. "A man should blow his own trumpet . . . a shrewd man will succeed in any business . . . a man must bark, not sleep." Cather herself speaks in a masculine voice, as she would continue to do throughout much of her

journalism career: "It is the most sacred right of man to investigate . . . The boy who spends his time among the stones and flowers is a trifler. . . . "

Some modern critics, most notably Sharon O'Brien, have attached much more emotional and intellectual significance to Cather's self-conversion to "William Cather" during this period. Cather's "cross-dressing" period of her teens "resulted from a complex interplay of social and psychological factors," O'Brien states in her controversial biography Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice (96), which details her assertion that Cather was, in fact, a lesbian who was not able to become a truly great writer until she had come to terms with her identity--hence the 20-year "apprenticeship" between Cather's schooling and her first notable novels.

Much of O'Brien's theory centers on the conflicts between Cather and her mother, Virginia. But she also agrees that Cather adopted a male persona as an adolescent at least partly because "becoming a legitimate inheritor of male-dominated culture seemed to require repudiation of her gender and discontinuity with the female worlds of Willow Shade and the Divide" (75).

Later, "as an ambitious young journalist who thought artists descended from the male heroes of epic and legend," O'Brien writes, ". . . Cather perceived no artistry in women's domestic work, no links between herself and a female

culture" (28).

We need not digress too far into O'Brien's theories, nor into the arguments for or against the possibility of lesbianism. But it is important to at least consider O'Brien's conclusions about Cather's actions and decisions in her high school and college years, even though many people think she has missed the mark by a fair piece.

In attaching the lesbian label to Cather, O'Brien uses Ann Ferguson's definition of a lesbian as "'a woman who has sexual and erotic-emotional ties primarily with women' or who 'sees herself as centrally involved with a community' of such women and who is a 'self-identified lesbian'" (128).

O'Brien uses as her basis for Cather's "self-identification" a "love letter" Cather wrote to Louise Pound in June 1892. The correspondence laments the fact that it "was so unfair that female friendship should be unnatural, but she agreed with Miss De Pue (a classmate) that it was" (O'Brien 131). From that vague remark, O'Brien has inferred a "lesbian 'sense of self' in the late nineteenth century" (128). That homosexuality, however latent, was "a source of great strength and imaginative power to her" (6). Cather's lesbianism "has long been assumed by most readers," O'Brien says, and even Cather's development of her literary theory of "the thing not named" came about because she was "forced to disguise or to conceal



the unnameable emotional source of her fiction, reassuring herself that the reader fills the absence in the text by intuiting the unwritten subtext" (127).

Joan Acocella, writing in The New Yorker, labels O'Brien's conclusions as an attempt to bring Cather into a feminist camp "in which she has no place . . . . She is not one of them, and they know it. That's why they don't like her" (71).

Acocella says the political interpretations of Cather's work have one troubling thing in common: ". . . an obsession with instinctual processes. No tree can grow, no river flow in Cather's landscapes without its being a penis or a menstrual period. . . . What Cather put down on the page is of almost no concern apart from what it supposedly reveals about her unconscious. The subject is not literature but biography, or inferred biography" (70).

Acocella acknowledges that Cather may have been "homosexual in her feelings," though "celibate in her actions." But, she adds, that did not necessarily leave her "with a permanent complex." Many women writers of the nineteenth century led celibate lives. "If Jane Austen and Emily Bronte managed without having sex, why not Cather?" (68).

Even as a teen-ager Cather recognized that an artist would probably not make a very good mate, which is a likely reason she never married, although she had a few offers,

according to her biographers. In her 1891 essay on Thomas Carlyle, discussed in more detail below, the 17-year-old Cather noted of Carlyle's unhappy marriage: "The wife of an artist, if he continues to be an artist, must always be a secondary consideration with him; she should realize that from the outset" (Slote, KA 423).

Even before that, shortly after her graduation from Red Cloud High School--in a short piece in the Red Cloud Republican that we hope to show can be attributed to Cather --she wrote of the recently married actress Mary Anderson "It is to be hoped that Miss Anderson will not quit her chosen profession [sic], as such an action would rob the stage of one of its brightest lights. . . . Great artists belong not to themselves but to the people" (Republican, 20 June 1890 4).

The idea that great artists must sacrifice their personal life for their work echoes throughout Cather's writing. In a 27 January 1895 article in the Nebraska State Journal, in commenting on the impending marriage of Helena von Doenhoff of the Tavery Opera Company to William Warren Shaw, Cather writes:

If she has cared only for success she finds out by that time that success is empty and unsatisfying, there is only one thing that can save her, and that is if she loves art better than success . . . We only know that in art it

is only the player who stakes all who wins, and that complete self-abnegation is the one step between brilliancy and greatness, between promise and fulfilment [sic] . . . Not only is it true that married nightingales seldom sing, but this nightingale will even retire from the stage (13).

Twenty years later, Cather, the well-known novelist, writes in The Song of the Lark, ". . . I don't see why anybody wants to marry an artist, anyhow. I remember Ray Kennedy used to say he didn't see how any woman could marry a gambler, for she would only be marrying what the game left. Who marries who is a small matter, after all . . . I've only a few friends left, but I can lose every one of them, if it has to be" (401). The speaker in this case is Thea Kronborg, who has sacrificed her personal life to become a great opera singer, speaking to Fred Ottenburg, who has loved her for many years, but it reinforces those views of marriage that Cather espoused even as a teen-ager.

Instances where some critics and scholars see signs of lesbianism, especially in adolescence, may simply have been Cather displaying the strength of conviction and ideas that characterized her entire life. "She was naturally a very fearless person," writes Edith Lewis, Cather's longtime friend, "fearless in matters of thought, of social convention; people never intimidated her" (xiv).

There is little question that Cather liked to be

different. It is likely that developed at a young age. "Not only did Cather make her work her life; she decided she had the right to, and therefore wasted no energy protesting against the forces that might have stood in her way. She just opened the door and walked through it," Acocella says. "For this lordly action, she has been made to pay, mostly by women" (56).

Acocella also points out that too much is probably made of the "William Cather Jr." period. "What Cather did is not so remarkable. Her male impersonation began and ended with adolescence, the period in which, at that time, females were taught their proper place. How surprising is it that a brilliant and ambitious girl should have rejected the lesson?" (60). Whatever her motivation, there is little question that Cather possessed a remarkable talent for writing, even as a high schooler. Journalism provided her main outlet for that talent.

## Chapter 2 - The Republican

Charles Cather's reluctant involvement in The Red Cloud Publishing Company, which published the Red Cloud Republican during Willa's high school years, 1888-1890, appears to have given his daughter her first opportunity to publish her writing after high school. The Republican was started to help the committee on which Charles Cather sat tell its side in a feud over charges the county treasurer was accepting interest on county funds for his own use. "The tensions soon flamed into open hostility between those known as the 'Big Eight' and the friends of the exploiters of the county treasury, which at that time handled a considerable amount of money," according to Bennett. Charles Cather "started editing a paper on their behalf. He liked neither the publicity nor the conflict, however, and the 'Big Eight' soon imported a newspaper man named Metzger from Omaha to handle their publicity" (24).

Some historians have noted that Cather worked as editor and business manager of the paper for its first six months, but because no issues from 1888 have survived, and because historians differ in their versions of her experience there, it may never be known what the 14-year-old's exact role was at the paper when it started.

The Story of the Nebraska Press Association notes that Cather "worked at her father's Red Cloud Republican

several months before enrolling at the University of Nebraska," but gives no details or dates.

Ella W. Peattie, writing in 1895, notes that when Cather was 15 years old, "her father came into possession of a newspaper 'The Red Cloud Republican', and he installed his bright daughter as editor and business manager. After six months work on the paper she entered the state university from which she graduated in 1895" (Nebraska Press History 32).

Obviously, the dates don't agree. With a two-year gap between the beginning of the Republican and Cather's departure for Lincoln, she could not possibly have been "installed as editor and business manager" when Charles Cather started the paper and then left after six months to attend the university. But she certainly could have contributed to the paper during her last six months in Red Cloud.

It may be impossible to pinpoint Cather's tenure at the Republican, but it is possible to attribute articles during the paper's last summer of 1890 to Cather. In fact, at least four short pieces bear strong Catherian trademarks both in content and style. Granted, they are not especially significant in and of themselves, but they indicate that Cather probably did write for the Republican. They would also be Cather's earliest published post-high school writing and would show that she was honing her artistic principles

even then.

Establishing such attribution uses Bernice Slote's test of three elements, all of which must be present: 1) Circumstance - the writer must be at hand, in a logical position to be doing the work; 2) style; and 3) reference - the work must relate to other writing by direct statement, repetition, or a variation on the content (KA 457).

Cather would certainly have been in a logical circumstance to contribute to the paper. She had graduated from high school a few weeks earlier and was spending the summer in Red Cloud before leaving for the University of Nebraska in August. The newspaper could also have used the help because the 20 June 1890 edition announced that Fred McKeeby, "who for the better part of the past year has been at the head of the local department of this paper has resigned his position" (8). McKeeby, of course, was the Cather family physician and a close friend of both Charles and Willa Cather. McKeeby was one of the "Big Eight" and had been mayor of Red Cloud when the feud over the county treasurer began. McKeeby was instrumental in inspiring Willa to want to be a doctor. She often accompanied him on his rounds and discussed cases with him. McKeeby's resignation from the Republican came just a few weeks after his daughter Lucile died "after a long illness" (Webster County Argus 12 June 1890 4). Lucile McKeeby was 16, the same age as Willa Cather. The

Republican noted that McKeeby and his wife planned to spend time away from Red Cloud after Lucile's death, which means the paper could probably have used Cather's help during the summer.

This short, untitled piece, printed exactly as it appeared (including spelling) in the 20 June 1890 edition of the Republican displays several characteristics of Cather's style:

The great actress married. Mary Anderson, the great American actress was married in London on June 17th to a man who is known simply as Mr. Antonio Navarro. The great actress is to be congratulated that she did not have the silly ambition of so many American girls, and insist that married happiness is only found in wedding some foreign profligate whose only claim to recognition is that he has some title of nobility prefixed to his name.

It is to be hoped that Miss Anderson will not quit her chosen profession, as such an action would rob the stage of one of its brightest lights, equaled only by "Divine Sara," the sinking star of France. Great artists belong not to themselves but to the people. Such is the price of fame, self renunciation. (Republican 20 June 1890 4)



Self renunciation was, of course, a recurring theme throughout Cather's writing, both journalism and fiction. Nearly five years later, in comments in the Nebraska State Journal on the impending marriage of opera singer Helena von Doenhoff, Cather demonstrates her credo that art demands everything the artist has to give. "It is the crucial test of an artist's uncertainty when the lonely and homesick time of life comes on. If she has cared only for success, she finds out by that time that success is empty and unsatisfying, there is only one thing that can save her, and that is if she loves art better than success" (NSJ 27 January 1895 13).

Anderson did, indeed, retire and in 1895 was writing her memoirs. In comments on Anderson in the Journal, Cather echoes the theme of renunciation, this time in admiration of the actress's ability to leave the stage: "Having won the best the world has to give, then to quietly put away all the glamour and brightness and intoxication of it because there is still a higher life unfilled, to have been a queen and then to be merely a woman, that is indeed greatness. It was Anderson's greatest creation" (KA 155).

In an article in 1896, Cather also freely applies the term "great" to Anderson: "Yet Mary Anderson was a great woman; one must be great to achieve her success and greater still -- how much greater -- to renounce it" (KA 158). In the same piece, Cather again draws a comparison

to Sarah Bernhardt, as she had done in the Republican: "[Mary Anderson] was a very great actress; she brought to the Americans only dignity and honor and no reproach of any kind . . . when she left her work she was only thirty. Bernhardt was never at her best before her fortieth year" (KA 157). In another piece in the Journal in 1894, Cather refers to Bernhardt as "the old Frenchwoman" (KA 117); she had called her "the sinking star of France" four years earlier in the Republican.

On 27 June 1890, a week after the Anderson piece was published, this short article appeared in the Republican:

A prominent author states that he can neither dictate or use the typewriter with any satisfaction in his literary work. They are both convenient methods in business, but in literature thought must be worked out alone with the pen. This is a peculiar feature of the arts, modern improvements cannot touch them, they are as changeless and as eternal as truth itself. Our best modern painters use brushes like those which Rubens used and with which Murrillo created his "Immaculate Conception;" the sculptor uses chisels like those of with which the pyramids were graven; the plans of the architect are but imitations of those of the Goth or of those classic structures of the Greeks and Romans and

the temples which lie sleeping on the Nile. The author must labor with his pen just as Homer did with his stylus. The advancing lights of civilization may give us great improvements in many respects, but they cannot give us better artists, they belonged to the fresh warmth and enthusiasm of the world's youth. All things change but we burn no strange fire on the altars of the Gods, those still cast their soft light upon the present and future[, ] modulating the shadows of the past and when the last faint sparks expires[, ] with their ashes shall rest those of man. (4)

This piece also bears Cather trademarks, both in content and style. In fact, it echoes two themes that run through all of Cather's writing: that art, and the artists who create it, are above the realm of man, that great artists are not of this world; and that anything worth doing, including writing, requires commitment and hard work (something that also echoes through the piece discussed next). It also demonstrates the 16-year-old Cather's knowledge and admiration of classical literature and of ancient history, something that permeated her writing all her life.

By the time she graduated from high school, Cather was well versed in the classics, so references to Homer

or Greek and Roman architecture would certainly have been within her realm of knowledge. In addition to her formal education, Cather as a teen-ager read Latin and Greek with William Ducker, "an Englishman of about sixty, a classical scholar who had somehow drifted out to Red Cloud," Edith Lewis writes in Willa Cather Living. Ducker was considered a failure by most people in town, but Cather valued him as a scholar of the classics and spent many hours with him reading Virgil, Ovid, the Iliad and many others (Lewis 19-23).

Cather's harkening back to ancient times as somehow better than modern times in artistic terms can be found in several places in her writings. In an 1894 comment after the staging of scenes from classical plays for the university's Charter Day, Cather wrote: "One thing that the scenes from the Greek plays did bring out was the immense distance, not only of time, but of nature, of emotional habit, that divides us from the Greeks." The Greeks valued restraint, while "We want people to weep, to sob, to throw their arms about, and to faint gracefully backwards." Today's "heated drama" would be as out of place in ancient Greece "as the antique is behind our glaring footlights. . . . As it was, the antique was exhibited only as a curiosity, like the whale that is carried about in a freight car, and it was just as much out of element. It is not our day or generation. Whether

for better or for worse the world has changed, and changed irrevocably" (KA 221).

The notion that modern technological and mechanical advances, like the typewriter of the nineteenth century, are not all necessarily good for art--or for humanity in general--is also a recurrent theme in Cather's writing. In her 1891 essay on Shakespeare, the 17-year-old Cather asks: "When was it that the gods left Rome? Was it when it was sacked and pillaged, and bought and sold? Ah, no; but when the first locomotive rumbled across the trestle bridge over the Tiber. The railroad did what time, and fire, and steel could not do, made Rome like other cities (KA 434).

In an 1895 Journal piece, Cather noted sarcastically that:

Monsieurs Binet and Lund have invented a machine which will register on paper an entire performance, the duration of notes, vibration of touch and everything. Now we will have some criticisms that cannot be disputed. This is becoming such a terribly mechanical age that pretty soon we may have a little ticker that will keep correct count of our deeds done in the body and estimate the exact state of our souls and save St. Peter the trouble" (KA 224-25).

In One of Ours, Cather's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel

of 1922, Claude Wheeler ponders the fact that American farmers, who grow the best crops and livestock in the world, got, in return "manufactured articles of poor quality; showy furniture that went to pieces, carpets and draperies that faded, clothes that made a handsome man look like a clown. Most of his money was paid out for machinery,--and that, too, went to pieces. A steam thrasher didn't last long; a horse outlived three automobiles" (84-85).

And in 1925, Arthur G. Staples, editor of the Lewiston (Maine) Evening Journal reported that in a speech at The Institute of Modern Literature at Bowdoin College, Cather reiterated her philosophy that machines were not all advancements for mankind: "Machine labor has done old-fashioned thoroughness to the death. The man who made a perfect shoe or a perfect chair was an artist. He put self into it--and that is what makes the artist of the novel. Machine made shoes, machine made chairs, machine made art or machine made novels are not aesthetic" (Bohlke 162).

In 1927, in Death Comes for the Archbishop, Eusabio, an old Navajo, tells the dying archbishop of his trip to Santa Fe: "I come on the cars, Padre. I get on the cars at Gallup, and the same day I am here. You remember when we come together once to Santa Fe from my country? How long it take us? Two weeks, pretty near. Men travel faster now, but I do not know if they go to better things." "We

must not try to know the future, Eusabio," the archbishop answers. "It is better not" (289).

The historical and literary references in the Republican article are also echoed throughout Cather's work. Even at 16 she was widely read and well schooled in the classics and in ancient history. "Willa Cather's formal education does not explain how she happened to know what she did," Slote says. ". . . books and reading were among the most personal and necessary things in her life" (KA 37). Besides learning the ancient classics with Ducker, Cather had, by the time she was in high school, read translations of Continental literature and had been introduced to both French and German classics by a Red Cloud couple. She also apparently got many of her modern favorites, like Anna Karenina, from a drugstore in Red Cloud "long before she went to Lincoln" (Slote, KA 38).

"When Orpheus sings popular ballads upon the street corners," Cather says in her noted 1891 essay on Thomas Carlyle (examined further in Chapter 3), "he is a street singer, nothing more." The same essay contains references to "Ygdrasil, the tree of life, which the Norns water day and night," "the old Anchorites of the Theibaid," and "the chants of Ossian among the Druid pines" (KA 423-25). In the Courier, writing of Edgar Allen Poe in 1895, Cather writes of "stories as poetic and delicately beautiful as the golden lace work chased upon an Etruscan ring. He fitted

his words together as the Byzantine jewelers fitted priceless stones" (KA 383). Later in the piece, in reference to Poe's drinking, Cather wrote: "For Bacchus is the kindest of the gods after all. When Aphrodite has fooled us and left us and Athene had betrayed us in battle, then poor tipsy Bacchus . . . holds out his cup and says, 'Forget.' It's poor consolation, but he means it well" (KA 386).

In My Antonia, Jim Burden's study of Virgil provides Cather the opportunity to outline two of her recurring themes:

I propped my book open and stared listless at the page of the Georgics where to-morrow's lesson began. It opened with the melancholy reflection that, in the lives of mortals, the best days are the first to flee. "Optima dies . . . prima fugit." I turned back to the beginning of the third book, which we had read in class that morning. "Primus ego in patriam mecum . . . deducam Musas"; "for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country." (MA 169)

Jim Burden's years at the University of Nebraska, of course, reflect Cather's own college days in which she continued her classical studies. She had read Virgil with Ducker in Red Cloud, so such references would have certainly



been within her sphere of knowledge. The two phrases were important philosophies in Cather's life. Even from the time she left college, she was lamenting the passing of the old days and thought the part of her life already lived better than the present.

The closing sentence of My Antonia--"Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past" (238)--sums up Cather's feeling that the past is better than the present. In a well-known 1921 interview that appeared in the Bookman, Cather noted that "I think that most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen. That's the important period . . ." (Bohlke 20).

Cather was also anxious to bring the Muse into her country, even as a youngster. She was not afraid to follow her own drummer, no matter what others thought or did. "From the time her family first came to live in Red Cloud, legends seem to have gathered about Willa Cather," says Edith Lewis. ". . . perhaps because she was more fearless, less inhibited than the generality of young people . . . she did not shrink from--it may be rather enjoyed--challenging public opinion" (26-27).

Cather was, indeed, the first to bring the Muse into her country. "I think no one had ever found Nebraska beautiful until Willa Cather wrote about it," Lewis says. "A new convention had to be created for it. . . . It had

not the austerity of the desert nor the majesty of mountains and rivers. There it lay; and it was as new, as unknown to art as it was to the pioneer" (17).

Throughout her life, Cather attributed success to hard work and sacrifice and even as an adolescent seemed to understand the kind of commitment and individuality that any significant accomplishment required. She admired people who devoted their lives to the pursuit of excellence, be they farmers, housewives or classical musicians. In her essay on Shakespeare that appeared in the Nebraska State Journal in November 1891 (examined further in Chapter 3), Cather, the 17 year-old college freshman, wrote: "Today all artists see too much of the world, they are alone too little. He who walks with the crowd is drawn to its level. . . . If an artist does any good work he must do it alone. . . . He must go off alone with his own soul and they two must labor and suffer together, with none seeing but the stars" (KA 434-35).

In a 1915 interview in the Lincoln Sunday Star, Cather the 42-year-old novelist said: "The business of writing is a personal problem and must be worked out in an individual way." Later in the interview, Cather elaborates:

. . . it is the longest distance in the world between the artist and the near artist. It is up to the writer and no one else. He must spend thousands of uncounted hours at work. He must

strive untiringly while others eat and sleep and play . . . Writing has to be gone at like any other trade. One trouble is that people aren't honest with themselves; they are awfully unfrank about sizing themselves up. They have such queer ways of keeping half-done things stored by and inconsistently saying to themselves that they will finish them after a while, and never admitting they shrink from that work because they are not qualified for it (Bohlke 14).

Those two thoughts--stated a quarter of a century apart--echo the idea from the Republican piece that "in literature thought must be worked out alone with the pen." The idea of hard labor is another recurring theme of Cather's life. In the 18 July 1890 edition of the Republican, another untitled, unsigned article that can be attributed to Cather reiterates (or perhaps more accurately, originates) that theme:

It is a well-known fact that no object is attained without labor[;] it might also be added that no worthy object is attained without constant labor. The majority of the schools and colleges have been making a great blunder in advocating the idea that vacation is a period to be wholly wasted, that if a pupil does his work well in school it is not essential that he should make

any effort outside. It would be just as logical to say that a man need only work when he is driven to it, as a result eighty percent of the students which are turned out upon the world forget their knowledge of different branches before they make any use of them, and it is very natural that if a student is in the habit of leaving all his scholastic labors and their results behind him when he closes the school room door that he will not take much with him when he goes out into life. Is it likely that Longfellow only studied literature when at college? that Webster worked at oratory only in his class? If so "Excelcior" had never been written and Hayne had never received a reply. The work done in school is all very well, but it is in vacation that a student makes his life. It is their work done alone, unforced for the pure love of the subject that we call genius. It is a process of assimilation in which the arts and sciences are not merely a part of our duty or the school routine, but a part of ourselves, as much our own as a hand or arms. Ingersoll, the prince of orators, said no one of his orations was the work of a few days or even weeks, but the work of years, the result of following fancy after

fancy, thought after thought, upon the train, at his meals, under all circumstances and at all times. Horace said he never wrote a poem that he had not composed while working in his garden. The abstract essence of thought, the thing which makes a man worthy of his name, can labor always and if it ever amounts to anything does. Coleridge even wrote in his sleep. Said a great man, "if I have any genius it is that of good hard work." (4)

There is no doubt Cather admired and espoused "good hard work" all her life, and there is no doubt that Cather continued and applied her education when class was not in session. Edith Lewis says that Red Cloud educators Mr. and Mrs. A.K. Goudy were first drawn to Cather, "so unlike the run of Red Cloud boys and girls," partly because of "her astonishing familiarity with classical English literature . . . her actual love of Latin, and the great gaps in her knowledge of ordinary things every grade school child knew" (20). Lewis notes that it was in the summer that Cather often read Latin and Greek with William Ducker. Even as a teen-ager, Cather possessed a keen work ethic that Lewis calls a "power of intense application" (30).

Classroom work (except math) seemed to come easily for Cather, but her education was so much more than what she learned in class. "It was her pattern to study for

herself and not for assignment, to take in omniverously whatever captured her imagination. The evidence in her early writing is that she read enormously more of almost everything than one might expect" (KA 38).

Viola Roseboro, a fellow McClure's magazine employee, said that "if Willa Cather had been a scrub-woman, she would have scrubbed much harder than other scrub-women" (Lewis 30). Indeed, Cather's writing is filled with admiration of hard work and the pursuit of artistic goals. "Genius," Cather wrote in 1894, "means relentless labor and passionate excitement from the hour one is born until the hour one dies" (Curtin 50). "The business of an artist's life," Cather wrote during her college years, "is not Bohemianism for or against, but ceaseless and unremitting labor. The man who writes of great men's feats has little time to set at them, and what with hunting for rhymes and polishing his verses a poet has little time to gather violets for his chere amie" (KA 413). In an 1896 column criticizing Anthony Hope's novel Phroso, which was being serialized in McClure's, Cather says: "With the mass of readers workmanship does not count, interest is everything. But the fact is that work poorly done is very seldom interesting" (KA 322).

In her novels, Cather gave her memorable characters a large capacity for work and sacrifice. "All that spring and summer she did the work of a man on the farm," the

Widow Steavens tells Jim Burden of Antonia. ". . . Folks respected her industry and tried to treat her as if nothing had happened" (MA 202). Later, when Jim and Antonia are reunited after 20 years, Antonia brags that "I feel just as young as I used to, and I can do as much work" (MA 216). In Death Comes for the Archbishop, the bishop missionary who seeks the post in New Mexico for Father Latour says, "He will eat dried buffalo meat and frijoles with chili, and he will be glad to drink water when he can get it. He will have no easy life, your Eminence. That country will drink up his youth and strength as it does the rain. He will be called upon for every sacrifice, quite possibly for martyrdom" (9).

The references to specific people in the Republican articles would also certainly have been within Cather's realm of knowledge. In later articles, Cather specifically mentions several times Robert Ingersoll, the noted freethinker and atheist. In her 1891 essay "Shakespeare and Hamlet," Cather writes: "Ingersoll says he is glad that Shakespeare never went to Oxford, and took a degree, and became a fellow, and taught Alpha, Beta to the young Englishmen" (NSJ, 8 November 1891 11). In February 1896, she says of Ingersoll: "His magnificent talents as an orator have really been greatly against him, for they have made him popular and that is the greatest calamity that can befall a man of bold and original thought" (KA 211).

In these early pieces Cather is setting up her Kingdom of Art, including the royalty that ruled it. That she referred to Ingersoll as "the prince of orators" makes sense in light of future references to Shakespeare and Thackeray as the "two King Williams," to Henry Irving as a knight, to Campanini as "a prince of artists," and to the cast of a play as "spurred knights" and "crowned kings" (KA 44).

In light of her teen-age reading of the classics, Cather would also have been familiar with Horace. In fact, two years later she published in the Hesperian, her own translation of Horace's Ode XXXVIII (Shively 112).

It seems obvious from these many comparisons of themes and philosophies and from her circumstances that Cather certainly could have been the author of the short pieces in the Republican during that summer of 1890. But what about style, the other of Slote's three requirements for inclusion in Cather's vast body of writing? It is certainly more difficult to pinpoint specific points of style, but when one has read enough of Cather's work, one develops an ear for her style. "In the early journalistic writings, it seems to me, one is most of all aware of a voice," Curtin says of Cather (xxi). Cather herself says in the 1915 interview in Lincoln that "No one without a good ear can write good fiction. . . . The successful writer must also be sensitive to accomplishment in others" (Bohkle 14).



That, in essence, is what helps identify a recurrence of style in different pieces of the same author's writing. One comes to recognize her voice. In each case, simply stated, it just sounds like Cather.

But in order to complete the three requirements, let us try to identify some specific patterns of style that could link the Republican pieces to Cather. One recurring pattern is to begin a paragraph, often the lead paragraph, with "It is . . ." and to construct the sentences, or the parts of sentences in a similiar way. "It is a well-known fact that no object is obtained without labor . . ." one of the Republican articles begins. "It is to be hoped that Miss Anderson will not quit her chosen profersion [sic] . . ." another states. Another piece from the Republican that bears Catherian trademarks and that is included in the appendix, begins: "It is a noticable feature of the times that America is growing careless about celebrating her national holiday . . ." Compare those with this sentence from the 1891 essay on Carlyle: "It is well known that Carlyle's married life was not strictly a happy one. . . ." And consider the lead sentence of Cather's 1891 essay "Shakespeare and Hamlet": "It is generally conceded that into no other of his plays did Willam Shakespeare put so much of himself and of his own soul's life as into Hamlet."

Granted, using "It is . . ." to begin a paragraph,

even a lead paragraph, is not unique, but a pattern emerges from these pieces, all written within 18 months of each other, that suggests a common author.

The writing in the Republican comes at a time that Cather, in a 1915 interview, describes as "the purple flurry of my early writing . . . my florid, exaggerated foamy-at-the-mouth, adjective-spree period" (Bohlke 12).

In her 1927 letter to Will Owen Jones, the longtime managing editor of the Nebraska State Journal, Cather recalls her essay on Thomas Carlyle, published in March 1891, as "very florid and full of high-flown figures of speech." But she also remembers that "even very stupid young people addicted to cheap rhetoric are yet capable of perceiving fineness, of feeling it very poignantly" (Bohlke 181).

In her high school and early college years, Cather was, indeed, full of "high-stepping rhetoric." In fact, it was so characteristic of her style of that period, that similar sentence structures and patterns can be identified that tie together not only her known works, but the contributions to the Republican. A good place to start such a style comparison is with a sentence from the 1891 essay on Thomas Carlyle that introduced Nebraska State Journal readers to Cather. It was so "high-flown" that professor Ebenezer Hunt copied it on the blackboard for Cather's entire Latin School "Second Prep" class to see:

"Like the lone survivor of some extinct species, the last of the mammoths, tortured and harassed beyond all endurance by the smaller though perhaps more perfectly organized offspring of the world's maturer years, this great Titan, the son of her passionate youth, a youth of volcanoes and earthquakes and great unsystematized forces, rushed off into the desert to suffer alone" (KA 424-25).

None of the pieces printed in the Republican the preceding summer can match that sentence for sheer length, but a few show a similar style. This sentence concludes the 27 June 1890 piece: "All things change but we burn no strange fire on the altars of the Gods, those still cast their soft light upon the present and future[, ] modulating the shadows of the past, and when the last faint sparks expires[, ] with their ashes shall rest those of man" (4). This sentence shows up earlier in the same article: "Our best modern painters use brushes like those which Rubens used and with which Murrillo created his "Immaculate Conception;" the sculptor uses chisels like those with which the pyramids were graven; the plans of the architect are but imitations of those of the Goth or of those classic structures of the Greeks and Romans and the temples which lie sleeping on the Nile" (4).

Both of those sentences also echo the Carlyle sentence in their looks backwards to the days when, in the young Cather's mind, the world's truly great artists were made.

This long sentence in the Republican article on Independence day (which is printed in full in the appendix) starts out as a question, but winds up a statement: "How many of the brave heroes of the civil war who dared all, risked all and many of them lost all, owe their patriotism to the time when on the long looked for day went into town and their hearts swelled and beat faster in the jeans jacket as they listened to the patriotic speeches and songs, and felt the instinct of love for their native land as they heard the muskets rattle" (Republican 4 July 1890 4).

Cather, of course, grew to disdain the writings of her youth. They contained "faults which . . . she found hardest to forgive in herself," Lewis says. "They were crude, rhetorical, overwritten, unrestrainedly emotional." But they also made it obvious that the writer was no ordinary adolescent. Her early writing displayed "the first awkward, undisciplined movements of an unusual power and richness of individuality, trying to find its way into expression," Lewis adds (32-33). Her high school graduation speech and the remarkable essays on Carlyle and Shakespeare are documented evidence of that power and individuality. The Red Cloud Republican articles from the intervening summer should also be included, because they demonstrate the same style, the same themes, and the same promise.

### Chapter 3 - Carlyle and Shakespeare

In August 1890, 16-year-old Willa Cather left Red Cloud for Lincoln and the University of Nebraska's Latin School, where many students from small towns attended for one or two years to make up for the academic deficiencies in their high school educations. Most of the classes were taught by the university faculty. Red Cloud High School, then only two years old, was especially weak in scientific instruction and Cather entered the Latin School as a "Second Prep," meaning she had to take one year of preparatory courses before she could begin her college instruction (Brown 49).

In the winter of 1890, Professor Ebenezer Hunt, who taught Cather's English class, assigned an essay on the topic: "The Personal Characteristics of Thomas Carlyle." He had wanted to use Thomas Paine as the subject, but substituted Carlyle after friends and colleagues expressed alarm at the idea of Paine being the subject of a prep school assignment. Cather turned in an essay that, unbeknownst to her, would be her "first important published work" (Slote, KA 421). Hunt was so impressed by Cather's essay that he arranged without her knowledge to have it published in both the Nebraska State Journal, Lincoln's leading newspaper, and the Hesperian, the university's student literary publication. It was, as Cather would later comment, "the beginning of many troubles for me .

. . I thought I would like to study medicine. But what youthful vanity can be unaffected by the sight of itself in print! It had a kind of hypnotic effect" (Bohlke 180-81).

The essay is remarkable not only because of the writer's tender age, but because of its themes and ideas. It is not the rhetoric, says Woodress, so much as it is "the image of young Willa Cather projected against the figure of Thomas Carlyle . . . . The personal characteristics are those of Willa Cather, and most of them . . . endured a lifetime" (Life and Art 56).

In the breakthrough essay on Carlyle, Cather did, indeed, touch on many of the themes that carried through her life and work: "He saw little of society . . . for he was one of the few men who can live utterly independent of it . . . . He revered any production of the hand or of the mind of man . . . . The best traits of character, and the strongest powers of his mind belonged to other times and to other people. . . . He never strove to please a pampered public. His genius was not the tool of his ambition, but his religion, his god. Nothing has so degraded modern literature as the desperate efforts of modern writers to captivate the public . . . ." (KA 422-25).

But one section of the essay stands out, in retrospect, as being crucial to Cather's own life. It is, Woodress

says, "the most important statement of all, one that posits a lifelong conviction and a lifelong action" (Life and Art, 56): "Art of every kind is an exacting master, more so even than Jehovah. He says only, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me.' Art, science, and letters cry, 'Thou shalt have no other gods at all.' They accept only human sacrifices" (KA 423).

The idea that great achievements require supreme sacrifice is a theme that reverberates through Cather's canon, even her earliest writings. In her graduation speech, Cather alluded to "that one grand discovery for which Harvey sacrificed his practice and his reputation, the circulation of the blood . . . . It came from a higher motive than the desire for personal gain, for it too often brings destitution instead" (Red Cloud Chief 13 June 1890 5). Between the publication of that speech and the Carlyle essay, there appeared in the Red Cloud Republican a reference to learning as "a process of assimilation in which the arts and sciences are not merely a part of our school routine, but a part of ourselves, as much our own as a hand or arms" (Republican 18 July 1890 4). Cather, the new graduate and probable writer of that thought, certainly harbored those sentiments.

In her 1891 essay on Shakespeare, Cather seemed to know what lay ahead of her. For the author (which she would take another 20 years to become), "There is much to suffer,

much to undergo; the awful loneliness, the longing for human fellowship and for human love. The terrible realization of the soul . . . that it is always alone. It is a hard thing to do and only love can endure it, a love as deep and as serene as the eternal force of the universe Shakespeare loved" (KA 435).

Three years after the Carlyle essay appeared, Cather, who by then was gaining a reputation as a newspaper critic and columnist, wrote:

The further the world advances the more it becomes evident that an author's only safe course is to cling close to the skirts of his art, forsaking all others, and keep unto her as long as the two shall live. An artist should not be vexed by human hobbies or human follies; he should be able to lift himself up into the clear firmament of creation where the world is not. He should be among men, but not one of them, in the world but not of the world. Other men may think and reason and believe and argue, but he must create (KA 407).

In the Republican four years earlier, Cather wrote of "a peculiar feature of the arts, modern improvements cannot touch them, they are as changeless and as eternal as truth itself . . . . The advancing lights of civilization may give us great improvements in many



respects, but they cannot give us better artists, they belong to the fresh warmth and enthusiasm of the world's youth" (27 June 1890 4).

The Carlyle essay is important not only because of the themes it put forth, but because it marked a turning point in the young Cather's life. After the essay was published, "the talk, the praise, the sudden elevation to fame among her classmates that followed had a marked effect on Willa Cather," Edith Lewis says. "The encouragement and stimulation of this first success seem to have been the spark that released her deepest native impulse into conscious expression" (31-32).

Not that Cather needed much spark to release that impulse. "Even at sixteen," Lewis notes, "she was not a docile student" (31). "She was not a shrinking violet even at 17 but bright-eyed--alert and rather assertive," a classmate from that Second Prep English class remembered. The classmate, Grace Morgan Riley, shared a desk with Cather in "brusque old Dr. Hunt's English class,"--the class for which she produced the Carlyle essay. Riley recalls one Monday morning when Cather argued so long with Hunt on "a disputed point between them as to whether the eyes alone gave expression to the face," that the professor forgot to ask the students to hand in their themes that were due--a theme Cather had not finished because of a weekend trip. "Before she argued the birds off the bushes, the 40 minute

period was over and class dismissed," Riley recalls. "Many were the heated discussions between them on strategy in story writing."

Writing in 1948, a year after Cather's death and 57 years after their class together, Riley remembers Cather as "never a favorite with the boys because she was so mannish herself. They dutifully dated her once and then were scared off. A mature mind in a young woman of 17 is unusual and no doubt she knew even then what she planned to do." Cather diverted herself in class by writing blank verse "rather than listening unless she could start an argument. Painstaking with all her work, she was neat and accurate but not enthusiastic except it were her hobby [sic], English" (Shively 122-23).

By her freshman year, Cather was largely decided on what she planned to do and channeled her enthusiasm into an ambitious and lively essay titled "Shakespeare and Hamlet." That essay was also printed in the Journal, in two Sunday installments on 1 November and 8 November 1891. That Cather would be recognized for her work on Shakespeare seems natural, Slote says, because "in Willa Cather's background of classics, Shakespeare had roots deep as any tree of life" (KA 36). Shakespeare to the young Cather was "Emperor of literature, he is the almost unbearably rich, godlike creator, king of language and the imagination, who must be worshipped and loved" (KA 60).

In her newspaper columns, Cather's references to Shakespeare are so numerous and so authoritative they convey an intimate knowledge and understanding of his immense body of work. "Nothing in drama could be quite outside his presence," Slote says (Prairie Schooner 65). As she does in the 1891 essay, much of Cather's commentary on Shakespeare deals with the fact that the greatest figure in English literature came from the stage and that immortality was never his intention.

"If Shakespeare were alive today he probably could not answer the vexed Shakespearean questions," Cather writes in the Courier in 1895. ". . . he simply planted his genius and let it grow and he was not particularly responsible for or even concerned about the form it took" (KA 255). "He never knew he was creating the literature of the future," she had written in the Journal earlier in 1895. "His merry evenings at the Mermaid's Inn were never spoiled by the knowledge that the greatest savants of all nations would exhaust their wisdom to find the secret of his power." If Shakespeare were alive in Lincoln in 1895, she says, he would probably manage the Lansing Theatre and "doubtless the police would run him in occasionally, just as they used to centuries ago" (KA 288).

Cather's first essay on Shakespeare anticipates that devotion and affection for the spectacle of a common man creating the world's greatest body of writing: "I don't

think Shakespeare had any definite purpose even in writing Hamlet. . . . It was not like him to plan which should be a puzzle for all time to come. . . . Sometimes I wonder if Shakespeare would have quite known what was meant, if art, or the art purposes in his plays, had been mentioned to him. . . . Hamlet has been accorded the place of the greatest masterpiece of the greatest master, not by literary critics, but by popular taste. . . . So it is with all literature which reaches the hearts of the people, where it finds its noblest, surest immortality. . . . The critics may kill the author . . . but the soul they can never touch, for they have never reached it; the soul they never kill, for they have never seen it" (KA 426-30). Shakespeare's "great secret" was not great intellect nor craftsmanship, but "supreme love for the ideal in art, and for the real in it too. . . . There have been other men with as much ability, as much talent, but they have contended themselves with being men of letters, rather than creators of thought" (KA 434).

In some ways, the 17-year-old Cather is anticipating the theories that the middle-aged novelist would synthesize into her well-known treatise on writing, "The Novel Demeuble." In that 1922 piece, Cather laid out in one specific paragraph her theory of how one must "select the eternal material of art": "Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there - that, one might

say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear, but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself." Cather concludes by saluting the elder Dumas, who "enunciated a great principle when he said that to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls" (Great Short Works 328-30).

Thirty-one years earlier, in her essay on Shakespeare, Cather said: "He did not want to be studied; he just wanted to be loved. He did not write to make men think; he wrote to make them feel. . . . There are under all our forms and fashions a few fundamental principles which are alive in us all . . . Shakespeare was the master of these few elementary emotions which are the keystone of life" (KA 435-36).

Cather's devotion to Shakespeare lasted all her life. She died on April 24, 1947, the day after the 383rd anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. In her last year, Edith Lewis says, Cather sought out "the glory of great poetry . . . . She turned almost entirely to Shakespeare and Chaucer that last winter; as if in their company she found her greatest content, best preferred to confront the future" (196). "She began with Shakespeare," Slote says, "and her life ended with him" (PS 66).

### Conclusion

Willa Cather's relationship with the Nebraska State Journal grew from those first essays to nearly three years of regular employment and contributions that lasted until 1902, when she was teaching and writing in Pittsburgh. She also wrote for the weekly Courier in Lincoln and was for a time listed as its associate editor. By the time Cather left Nebraska for Pittsburgh in 1896, she was already well on her way to a notable career in journalism.

The young writer who headed east in 1896 "was a girl who could stop national dramatic companies in their tracks, who could write for two or more papers at the same time (words to fill a page, earn a dollar, sometimes mark the heart); a girl who did not need to sign her work" (Slote, KA 29).

It is, of course, her outstanding fiction for which Cather is remembered today, but she first gained a reputation for the quality of her journalism. Cather's excellence as a journalist is displayed in the recognition she won even before she had a full-time job in the field. As an undergraduate, she helped Jones, the Journal editor, teach a practical journalism course at the annual Nebraska Chautauqua Assembly in Crete. In January 1896, the 22-year-old recent graduate was asked to address a gathering of women editors and spouses of newspaper executives at the annual convention of the Nebraska Press Association

on "how to make a newspaper interesting." In the five-minute presentation, Cather "thought it was not enough for a newspaper to deal with the facts. It should present them in the most interesting form. A paper can afford to let each writer handle the line of work he is best able to do. If a newspaper man rides a hobby, the theater or boxing, he will have a host of followers. A neutral newspaper is an abomination. The newspaper should be personal" (NSJ 1 February 1895 3). Before she left Nebraska, Cather had not only been recognized for her journalism, she was helping to shape the way other journalists approached their work.

"If there is a woman in Nebraska newspaper work who is destined to win a reputation for herself, that woman is Willa Cather," wrote Ella W. Peattie in 1895 (32). The comment reflects the attitudes of Victorian society, but it properly should have read "person" rather than "woman," because, even as a college student, Cather "already was the equal of the older professionals who wrote for the Lincoln papers" (Woodress, ALL 90). Some of her co-workers recognized that. "She is unquestionably destined to be among the foremost of American literary women," fellow Journal writer Walt Mason noted (NSJ, 1 February 1896 3).

During her years in college, Cather enjoyed not only the recognition in print that journalism brought, but the doors it opened. In his introduction to Willa Cather in

Person, editor L. Brent Bohlke, notes:

It is perhaps ironic that the press, to which Cather had devoted at least fifteen years of her career and from which she had learned much of her craft, became her enemy in later years. Journalism was once her medium, her ally, but she came to have little sympathy for journalists. At the beginning of her career, Willa Cather from Nebraska loved the entree that journalism gave her to the famous -- Stephen Crane, Rudyard Kipling, Anthony Hope Hawkins, Sarah Orne Jewett, Ethelbert Nevin, Olive Fremstad. After her career was established and she was famous herself, Willa Cather from Park Avenue was annoyed with young journalists who were constantly seeking her. She did not grant them the same generous access that she had once been accorded. (Bohlke xxvi-xxvii)

Throughout her life, Cather aligned herself with notable people, and Lincoln of the 1890s afforded her many early opportunities to do so. Lincoln was less than 30 years old and the University of Nebraska was only 20 years old when Cather entered the university's prep school. But while the young state capital was not exactly "the Athens of America," James Shively notes, "for an alert and ambitious student it provided stimulating opportunities"



(15). The university had an enrollment of only about 450 students when Cather arrived in Lincoln, but it "included in its circle an amazing group of subsequently distinguished people" (Shively 15). That circle included four future state governors, a U.S. senator, two members of Congress and two chancellors of state universities. Add to that Cather's circle of Lincoln friends that included Louise Pound, later a noted literary scholar; her brother, Roscoe Pound, who went on to become dean of Harvard Law School; poet, philosopher and literary scholar Hartley B. Alexander; Harvey Newbranch, the longtime editor of the Omaha World-Herald, who won a Pulitzer Prize for an editorial following the Omaha Courthouse Riots of 1919, and Dorothea Canfield, who as Dorothy Canfield Fisher won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Besides the future talents in the student body, the University of Nebraska faculty included Dorothy Canfield's father, then-Chancellor James H. Canfield (for whom the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's current administration building is named); Charles Bessey, a well-known botanist who authored several books and was president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and a young Military Department commander named John J. Pershing, whose Nebraska cadets won fame as "Pershing's Rifles," and who went on to become commander of the Army during World War I.

The 1890s were "A golden era" for the University of

Nebraska, says Robert Knoll. "High expectancy was in the air, for the world lay all before them, and, they thought, Providence was their guide--Providence aided by energy, high ambition, and an eye to the main chance" (27).

Another Lincoln resident with whom Cather and other students enjoyed an acquaintance and an occasional visit to his library was a former Omaha World-Herald editor turned lawyer and politician named William Jennings Bryan. He was just ascending to the national political position that would result in four unsuccessful runs for the presidency.

Lincoln's strategic position as a railroad stopping point between Chicago and Denver was also an important aspect for the budding journalist and critic because it brought many of the top traveling theatre troupes through Lincoln. That enabled Cather to see and review some of the best theatre productions of the day, a task she took seriously. "Miss Cather did not stand in awe of the greatest actors, but set each one in his place with all the authority of a veteran metropolitan critic," Jones, the Journal editor, later remembered (Woodress, ALL 92).

Newspaper writing gave Cather the room to shape and form in print many of the principles of writing and of art that she would carry throughout her life. In her years in Lincoln, Bernice Slote says, Cather "set down those principles of art which she finally considered to be absolutes" (31).

When she left Nebraska, Cather's literary career was still years off, but the perceptive young woman knew that "a certain kind of writing was like talk--voices disappearing on the air--but talk that often changed to the texture of the slower, deeply felt, created thing that is art" (KA 29).

After college, Cather spent nearly two decades in journalism and teaching before she was able to devote her full time to writing fiction. It is a period many scholars today tend to dismiss as simply a valuable prelude to her fiction. It was part of "the long apprenticeship that leads to her mature artistry," Woodress says (ALL 89). "Her period of apprenticeship," writes E.K. Brown, "would inevitably be a long one" (70). "Many of her biographers try to get through it hurriedly," says Joan Acocella, "for it is unheroic material. She is no longer the marvelous child and not yet the marvelous novelist" (60).

But Cather's early newspaper writing, even that which she did during and just after high school in Red Cloud, deserves serious study, because it foreshadows not only the style with which she would write fiction, but her love for art, her amazing knowledge of things literary and dramatic, and the convictions by which she lived her life. Had Cather never written one word of fiction, her early newspaper writing, including that produced before she turned 18, would still stand as a remarkable body of work. She

was not writing great fiction for the weekly paper in Red Cloud or the Nebraska State Journal, but some of her contemporaries felt she was turning out some of the best newspaper copy of the day--in Red Cloud, in Lincoln, in Nebraska and in the Midwest. It should not simply be dismissed as "apprentice work," because it showcases the emerging voice of a truly gifted writer, in all its purple flurry.

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### Appendix

The following article appeared in the 4 July 1890 issue of the Red Cloud Republican and is included here as one of the pieces that Willa Cather likely wrote during the summer of 1890.

It is a noticeable feature of the times that America is growing careless about celebrating her national holiday, the fourth day of July[.] If it were not for the boys and firecrackers where would our patriotism come from? And the stirring scenes of '76 are so nearly forgotten that we are ready to reprove even them, their fire-crackers and torpedos, as they frighten our horses and disturb our peace. Let us think for a moment how we possess that peace, of the cannons that thundered, the swords that gleamed and the men who died to lift the standard of freedom and equality high upon earth where it gleamed upon the mountain top of America for the first time since the world set upon its endless journey about the sun. It is due to their memory that we commemorate the day with joy. It is due to the nation that we inspire the spirit of patriotism in our children, for they must be her defenders. The strongest point of the Catholic faith in Italy is the observance of the feast day, when the country folks flock into the village and by impressive ceremonies keep a reverent spirit alive in their children for the great founder of their



faith. How many of the brave heroes of the civil war who dared all, risked all and many of them lost all, owe their patriotism to the time when on the long looked for day went into town and their hearts swelled and beat faster in the jeans jacket as they listened to the patriotic speeches and songs, and felt the instinct of love for their native land as they heard the muskets rattle. We do not learn patriotism from histories or learned discourses, but from these enthusiastic demonstrations in the homes and hearts of the people. (4)