

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

VOLUME XXII, Numbers 3 & 4

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

Newsletter — Literary Issue

Summer 1979

Edited by Bernice Slote

Twice a year literary issues of the Newsletter will present new Willa Cather material: reprints of some of Cather's early, hard-to-find, and still uncollected journalistic writings; early reviews, interviews, and notes about Cather's work; bibliographical information; and — from Cather readers — original brief notes, observations, explications, or short critical articles. (Submit manuscripts to CATHER NEWSLETTER, 201 Andrews Hall, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska 68508).

... In This Issue ...

- ☆ On **Shadows on the Rock**
- ☆ The Prix Femina Americain

SHADOWS ON THE ROCK in Red Cloud

A treasury of Catherian places, people, and story was celebrated on May 5, 1979, at the twenty-fourth annual conference of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial in Red Cloud. Many of the several hundred visitors saw two important houses — Willa Cather's childhood home in Red Cloud and the farm home of her Uncle George and Aunt Franc Cather, the large house on the Divide described in some scenes of **One of Ours**. These two houses of pioneer and early Nebraska link with the pioneer world and houses of early Quebec, described in Cather's **Shadows on the Rock**. In the afternoon panel discussion of **Shadows on the Rock**, participants were Professor Walter F. Wright, University of Nebraska-Lincoln; Donna Dunbar-Odom, University of Nebraska at Omaha; Mildred R. Bennett; Professor John J. Murphy, Merrimack College, Massachusetts (who also gave the evening lecture); and Bernice Slote, who chaired the panel program. Following are the papers by Professor Wright and Mrs. Dunbar-Odom:

CAPTURED SHADOWS

By Walter F. Wright

I trust you all remember that once upon a time one Mark Antony announced that he did not come to praise Caesar. So he began by admitting that Julius did have limitations, after which, however, he dipped his sword in a vat of thick Roman butter and, using it as a trowel, spread on the praise. No Mark Antony, I

feel, nevertheless, that he was right to start as he did, and so I shall suggest what some may regard as limitations of **Shadows on the Rock**, held up against the high standards of **My Antonia** and **Death Comes for the Archbishop**. But, fortunately, unlike the noble Roman, I need no sword nor even a butter knife for administering praise, for the values of Willa Cather are self-revealed.

Among the novelists whom I happen to like is one who lived too long ago to enjoy Willa Cather; and it is also unlikely that, though Willa read her novels, she ever saw her literary criticism, for most of what Jane Austen had to say about how to write fiction she said in letters to her niece Anna, an amateur who sent her manuscript copy of a novel that was to blush unseen for want of a publisher, if indeed it was ever finished. Jane herself wrote only about what she knew both outside and inside. Anna, in contrast, having begun her story in England, was about to round up some characters and embark with them for Ireland. Her aunt's firm advice was "Let the Portmans go to Ireland; but as you know nothing of the manners there, you had better not go with them . . . Stick to Bath and the Foresters."

Willa Cather saw things differently. She refused to rereap forever the fields around Red Cloud, and thought of creative writing as a great personal adventure. If we equate Red Cloud with Jane Austen's Chawton, Lyme Regis, and Bath, then **Death Comes for the Archbishop** is at least a trip to the Welsh mountains and **Shadows on the Rock** is a bold journey to Ireland itself.

I do not mean, of course, that Willa Cather was in the least so unaware of the Rock as Anna was of Erin. The evidence supplied by Edith Lewis, Elizabeth Sergeant, E. K. Brown, David Stouck, and my colleagues on this panel reveals that she had become fascinated with things French at least before she left the University, inspired especially by Mrs. Canfield, who helped transplant Parisian culture to Lincoln. She not only repeatedly visited Quebec, but also used Parkman and other historical sources to learn of life there in the 1670s, 80s, and 90s. The problem, however, was that the task of a novelist is much more vast than that of a historian, who can limit his topic to cover what he finds in political and religious documents and the other usual substance of memoirs of explorers and other public figures. Neither Parkman, the Récollet Friars records, nor the other

documents were extensively concerned with the daily lives and preoccupations of ordinary people. For these Willa Cather had to trust to her imagination and to assume that human nature is basically the same in diverse ages and places. This may be true; but if historical literature is to give the reader new vistas, what matters is the very special individuality with which human nature manifests itself in the given case. Sometimes one misses in **Shadows** that authentic precision of detail that the other two novels display in revealing the universal in the specific.

The fact that the author herself felt that she had succeeded in achieving historical verisimilitude is attested in her justifying the dialogue as a translation of the characters' spoken French. The actual result is, however, sometimes a quaintness which tends to make the characters themselves seem a bit quaint, whereas they were speaking what for them was current French, not quaint at all. More serious is the fact that their thoughts are also simplified, scant in qualifications and nuances.

A second warning from Jane Austen concerned Anna's giving too much space to a girl. The admonition was unequivocal: "One does care not for girls until they are grown up." In **Huckleberry Finn** Huck is, of course, the vehicle for Twain's exposing the absurdity of the world in the light of a child's innocence and honesty. Only rarely, however, does Cécile serve such a function. Mainly she epitomizes virtues passed on to her by her mother – the best traditions of household order – and an early adolescent admiration both for the exalted lives of the Catholic missionaries and for the manly ruggedness of Count Frontenac and of Pierre Charron. She undergoes no strenuous internal conflicts. At most she regrets only that, because she could not sleep at night on a dirty sheet, she caused Pierre to cut short his visit with his country friends. And at age thirteen, invited to share in a rather elegant dinner with her father, Pierre, and the somewhat sophisticated Captain Pondaven, she does try on the new silk dress sent to her from France by her aunt, but it costs her no pain to dismiss it for her new, more practical Parisian jersey.

Yet one more comment from Jane. Having approved of Anna's portraits of certain other characters, she added, "And Cecilia continues to be interesting in spite of her being so amiable." Now David Stouck has reminded us that dreadful things are presented in **Shadows**, that for some characters life in Quebec is a purgatory and that there is much disease and death. Yet, though she must use a crutch to walk, Mme. Pommier is a wise and cheerful person. Reportedly Pierre has lived as loosely as his forest companions, but he is now exclusively a stalwart friend. If Bishop Laval is obstinate, his zeal and self-imposed poverty are magnanimous. Mother Jeanne Franc Juschereau is a paragon of practical piety. Count Frontenac is a noble stoic, almost a secular saint. Even the arrogant

and worldly Bishop Saint-Vallier, having suffered captivity and humiliation, becomes a penitent prodigal son. And Cécile's father personifies Isaac Walton's ideal – "Study to be quiet." In short, the characters do sometimes share the simplification found in fairy tales and early lives of the saints and martyrs.

To these, which, if we are disciples of the commonsensical Jane, we must call limitations, may be added what Elizabeth Sergeant may have had in mind in suggesting that the last three novels have less vitality than the earlier ones. I need not rehearse the great strain upon Willa at the time she was writing the novel. It sometimes shows in her letting stand short phrases or sentences that should have been rewritten or omitted. For example, after enumerating things for sale at the market, she adds the tag "and such vegetables as were in season." Or again, knowing that, when two men are together, they talk about something or other, she writes uninspiredly: "Pondaven and Pierre Charron began to entertain each other with tales of the sea and forest, as they always did when they got together."

These are some limitations. Why then read the book? Well, among other reasons, surely, is the fact that in the very folktale simplification of the characters there is something fine, something uplifting for the spirit. One will not forget Bishop Laval rising long before daylight to ring the bell. One may, perchance, when feeling ill-rewarded by life, remember the stoicism of the badly treated Count. One is inspired by men like Cécile's father, who are quietly courageous and enduring. When one's bus halts at the school stop, one may wonder which, if any, of the half dozen girls who get on approaches Cécile in keeping her room in order and showing sweet affection for her father; and, perhaps, one may even be allowed to wish that a Pierre Charron will be lucky enough to find her. It is through a philosophic articulation of Cécile's inarticulate feeling that Willa Cather gives her own comment on the creative genius that can find expression in daily life: "These coppers, big and little, these brooms and clouts and brushes, were tools; and with them one made, not shoes and cabinet-work, but life itself. One made a climate; one made the days, – the complexion, the special flavour, the special happiness of each day as it passed; one made life." And my wife called my attention to the fact that Cécile's last and climactic words in the novel are a reply to Pierre's inviting himself to stay for supper. The larder is almost empty, but Cécile bravely addresses the emergency: "We have some wild rice left from last year, and there are some carrots. We always have preserves, and of course there is soup."

And all the action takes place amid hundreds of lines which capture the colors of the houses, the streets, the river, the sunsets. One of the most vivid is of the Upper Town in the autumn of 1698: "The grey slate roofs and steeples were framed and encrusted

with gold. A slope of roof or dormer window looked out from the twisted russet branches of an elm, just as old mirrors were framed in gilt garlands. A sharp gable rose out of a soft drift of tarnished foliage like a piece of agate set in fine goldsmith's work. So many kinds of gold, all gleaming in the soft, hyacinth-coloured haze of autumn: wan, sickly gold of the willows, already dropping; bright gold of the birches, copper gold of the beeches. Most beautiful of all was the tarnished gold of the elms, with a little brown in it, a little bronze, a little blue, even – a blue like amethyst, which made them melt into the azure haze with a kind of happiness, a harmony of mood that filled the air with content. The spirit of peace, that acceptance of fate, which used to dwell in the pharmacy on Mountain Hill, had left it and come abroad to dwell in the orchards and gardens, in the little stony streets where the leaves blew about."

Surely the colors in 1697-98 on and near the Rock must have been essentially like those which Willa Cather herself had seen and which she conveyed with such graphic impressionism. Indeed, if they were not and if in the 1690s the people of Quebec were not so noble as in a twentieth-century work of literary art, well then, all I can say is that it was their own fault, for they should have been.

**THE ORDERED HOME:
The Secondary Characters' Purpose in
SHADOWS ON THE ROCK**

By Donna Dunbar-Odom

Willa Cather's artistic goal was to produce the "novel démeublé" – to whittle her content to exclude the superfluous and to include only the essential in plot, characterization, and description. In her essay "The Novel Démeublé" from **Not Under Forty**, Cather explains, "The higher processes of art are all processes of simplification. The novelist must learn to write, and then he must unlearn it; just as the modern painter learns to draw, and then learns when utterly to disregard his accomplishment, when to subordinate it to a higher and truer effect. In this direction only, it seems to me, can the novel develop into anything more varied and perfect than all the many novels that have gone before" (pp. 48-49). **Shadows on the Rock** (1931) is a beautifully and carefully prepared portrait of seventeenth-century life in Quebec. Whether one agrees with her later life love of order and the bourgeois is beside the point. In this novel, Cather has achieved her goal – she has written the unfurnished novel. In **Shadows on the Rock**, however, are apparent irrelevancies. She develops minor characters who, at first notice, have little to do with the structure and themes of the novel. But Cather's theory of the novel and her care with every work make any irrelevancy unlikely. Further examination reveals

that every character, no matter how minor, has a purpose in Cather's tribute to ordered, unchanging life.

Euclide Auclair and his daughter Cécile form the hub of the novel-wheel. Their calm, modestly genteel life is the focus for the reader's glimpse of early Quebec. The Auclairs revere order in their lives. Cut off from France, they cling to French customs, French cooking, even French furniture in order to conquer the pressing wilderness and to maintain a sense of stability in a new land. Before Mme. Auclair's death, she maintained as much of their previous lifestyle as possible and desired that their new lives be touched as little as possible by their new homeland. To pass on this love for these simple and good values to her daughter is her greatest wish. Her success maintains the ordered rhythm of the small household: "The individuality, the character of M. Auclair's house, though it appeared to be made up of wood and cloth and glass and a little silver, was really made of very fine moral qualities in two women: the mother's unswerving fidelity to certain traditions, and the daughter's loyalty to her mother's wish" (pp. 25-26). This care for tradition draws many of the townspeople to the Auclair threshold and hearth. In fact, the purpose of many of the minor characters is to echo the Auclairs' love of order while others serve as contrast and example for the neglect of or lack of concern for an ordered life. The minor characters revolve around the Auclairs to emphasize the beauty attainable with order or the ugliness without it. A life without savagery, cruelty, or fear, with a strong sense of permanence is Cather's ideal explored through the Auclairs and the inhabitants of seventeenth-century Quebec.

Noël Pommier and his mother also preserve the values of family and home. The Pommiers have been friends of the Auclairs since their move to Quebec. Mme. Pommier was especially close to Mme. Auclair and appreciated her efforts to maintain a French household away from France. She loves to visit the home of her friend and see that it is exactly as it was before her death. Also Mme. Pommier's love for the Holy Family emphasizes her love of family and a home well-kept. When the elder Pommiers moved to Quebec, she insisted they live on Holy Family Hill to acknowledge what is most important and to ensure that they would fare well: "'When we first came to this country, I was especially struck by the veneration in which the Holy Family was held in Kebec, and I found it was so all out through the distant parishes. I never knew its like at home. . . . It is something very special to us'" (p. 101). So Mme. Pommier combines the love of a good, bourgeois life with the special Canadian love for the intimacy of the family personified by Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. But just as Mme. Pommier and Mme. Auclair hold similar values, so do Noël Pommier and Euclide Auclair. Both men are craftsmen – artists in their own fields. Pommier is

respected and known as a superb cobbler who never hurries or takes short cuts in his work. Pommier works slowly and methodically, always mindful of the rhythm and order of his work. Furthermore, his concern for family and home is evident in his care and consideration for his mother. Both mother and son are aware of the importance of order in work, in home, in life – as are the Auclairs.

On the other hand, Captain Pondaven, the captain of **La Faucon**, provides an interesting parallel to the Auclairs' care for home and family. Cather employs irony in this portrait of the sailor/family man. She plays against the stereotype of sailors as vulgar, loose-living men with no regard for the life of a bourgeois. At first, Pondaven appears worldly and exotic, right down to the parrot perched on his shoulder. But as the Auclairs become further acquainted with him, they find him to be a kind, decent man. In fact, Cécile is a little disappointed that he is not more of a typical sailor: "She had hoped he would begin to tell at once about his voyages and the strange countries he had seen, but he seemed to wish to talk of nothing but his own town and his family" (p. 217). The Captain is a fine, respectful man even at sea far from his beloved Saint Malo. He also functions as a symbol of Quebec's life line to France and loved ones there. He sacrifices his time with his family to make the dangerous voyage to Canada to bring the frontier food, goods, and more important, news of home. The Captain loves his own home and family dearly, but makes his voyages to people all over the world to make their homes finer, their lives easier, and their hearts lighter.

An established part of Cécile's daily routine is her care of Blinker. But Blinker's life and its past terrors sharply contrast the Auclairs' life and its serenity. In France, he had been forced to follow his father's profession as torturer for the Court. Blinker now carries with him the memories of the horrors of the French state – very different, indeed, from the fond memories of home held by most of the transplanted Frenchmen. As John Randall points out in **The Landscape and the Looking Glass**, "America for [Blinker] had proven a haven of refuge by the very fact that in it a man could make a fresh start. That is why he disagrees with the settlers' idea that in Quebec they are farther from civilization and heaven itself than in France; he knows they are much closer" (p. 330). In a land where such atrocities as Blinker inflicted under duress are possible, permanence and order are impossible. The security of the Auclair household could never be certain while such horrors were allowed to take place daily. In fact, Auclair's knowledge of the injustices in his native land (particularly the torture and execution of Bichet, Auclair's boyhood equivalent to Blinker) provided added motivation for his move to Quebec. In Quebec the Auclairs can maintain their smooth routine with no

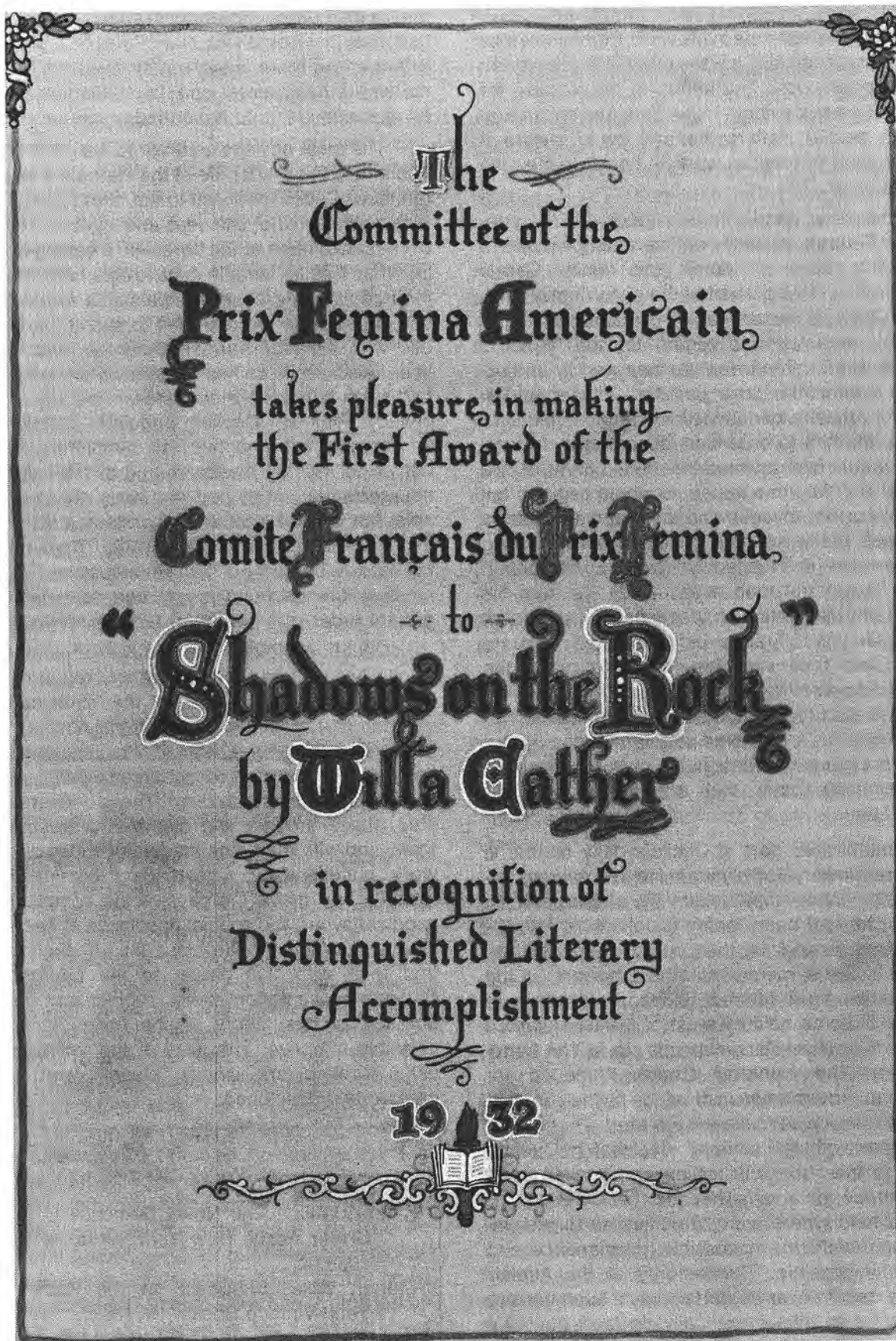
fear of disruption. Blinker functions as a symbol of the ugliness that remained in France and of the New World where there is a place for even the Blinkers of the world. Again order and its maintenance are held as precious ideals to honor and preserve.

The most obvious contrast to the good life of the Auclairs is the cruder life of the Harnois. Pierre Charon takes Cécile for a visit to the farm family, and she is appalled by what she sees and learns. The Harnois women take none of the care with cleaning and cooking that Cécile herself does single-handedly. Their food cooked in grease is unpalatable to the girl, and she is unable to force herself to spend the night in a bed with the four Harnois daughters and dirty bed linen. Also Cécile comes to appreciate something she had never had to consider before – the importance of privacy. Although Cécile's priggishness approaches an annoying extreme, her visit completely convinces her of her mother's wisdom and of the value of the bourgeois life: "They had kind ways, those poor Harnois, but that was not enough; one had to have kind things about one, too . . ." (p. 197). The family is not fully characterized, but they serve to show Cécile how much difference "kind things" can make and how important order is in her life as well as her father's.

Cather obviously has focused on Euclide and Cécile Auclair and their love of ordered, unchanging life and its comforts. Many of the minor characters sharpen that focus by reflecting the Auclairs' values or by showing the results of the absence of such values. Cécile summarizes Cather's feel for the lifestyle of her main characters: "These coppers, big and little, these brooms and clouts and brushes, were tools; and with them one made, not shoes or cabinet-work, but life itself. One made a climate within a climate; one made the days, – the complexion, the special flavour, the special happiness of each day as it passed; one made life" (p. 198). Although one may find fault with this paean to the bourgeois life, Cather's presentation of her subject and her incorporation of her theory of the novel *démeublé* is certainly effective. The lives of the townspeople of early Quebec are simply, clearly, and carefully created and developed.

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Shadows on the Rock was the first novel to be awarded France's Prix Femina Americain. The scroll Willa Cather received in 1933 has been presented to the WCPM by Charles E. Cather and Helen Cather Southwick. It reads: "The Committee of the Prix Femina Americain takes pleasure in making the First Award of the Comité Français du Prix Femina to 'Shadows on the Rock' by Willa Cather in recognition of Distinguished Literary Accomplishment." The display of this gift (shown above) was a conference highlight — a highlight that will continue to shine on.

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SHADOWS ON THE ROCK: Early Reviews

A few years ago Willa Cather stormed her way straight to the reader with one of the best modern novels in the English language, **Death Comes for the Archbishop**. Hitherto, we had not heard of her here in Ireland presumably because her work differing so much from the psychological novel in vogue did not appeal to the reviewers. Miss Cather goes back for her subjects to the valiant spirits and the great personalities of pioneer times. Her new book, **Shadows on the Rock**, just published by Cassell (7/6 net) is a story of French Quebec [It] is a memorable picture of the world which these French **émigrés** make on this rugged rock in a land so different from their . . . own . . . And what writing it is! . . . [Her style] has the simplicity and naturalness of first rank work. Her writing is measured, quiet, beautiful and of a great restrained power. . . . She is not concerned with the

construction of her novel in the conventional mould; she dispenses largely with plot. Her books contain no big scene. Rather she is interested in great character and in significant events. — *The Irish Press*, 22 January 1932.

[One aspect of **Shadows on the Rock**] is the good that it may well do in promoting those bonds of brotherhood that should flourish to the full in the Canadian nation. Religious bigotry, or at least a proscribed religious outlook, has shut out too many non-Catholics from the birthright of all Canadians — an unrestricted appreciation of all the elements of the early making of Canada in which Catholicism was dominant because that was the faith of those early Canadians. . . . I believe [this book] will do untold good and perhaps prove to be as significant an addition to novels of early Canadian life as would a tale embodying drama and action to the nth degree. — *Canadian Bookman*, August 1931.

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- To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with the Nebraska State Historical Society.
- To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.

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