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28 Feb 2009

THE VOLUME OF THE ATLANTIC PROVINCES

No. 7

ST. JOHN'S, NEW BRUNSWICK, APRIL, 1957

35 cents

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# “SHADOWS ON THE ROCK”

## Willa Cather at Grand Manan

by L. K. Ingersoll

ON THE western side of a lovely cove at Grand Manan there stands a plain and humble cottage. Wild rose and other native shrubs have crept to the very door. It is silent and almost forgotten. In it, were written some of the popular novels of another generation. It was Willa Cather's hideaway.

Willa Sibert Cather, (1876-1947), American novelist and short-story writer, one time editor of *McClure's Magazine*, will be remembered for her studies of character and her stories of life in the Middle West. At least three of her novels, *O Pioneers*, *My Antonia*, and *Death Comes For The Archbishop*, will be in demand for many years to come and are a definite part of American literature. For twenty years, during her most successful period, Grand Manan Island played a major part in her outlook, her health and happiness which would in turn contribute to her published works.

Not too much has been written about her connection with this Bay of Fundy Island. There is ample reason. During her lifetime she said very little about it, probably nothing to the public and hardly more to her close friends. A small circle knew that she liked to spend part of each year at this, to her, faraway island. The very fact that it was rather out of the way and visited by none of her friends made it all the more desirable. Had it been otherwise, she would have probably dismissed it from her mind. It was then, actually a workshop, a place to nurture genius.

The heroine in *My Antonia*, placed against the frontier farmland backdrop of early Nebraska, is a real person. The reader sees, and feels the core of an early America, the wealth of hardship and the poverty of all except life itself through the eyes of Antonia Shimerda. And again, another pioneer, Claude Wheeler, the Western farm lad who goes overseas in World War I makes realism in *One of Ours* and won a Pulitzer Prize for its author. Willa Cather wrote of ideas and people in stories "born from a personal experience". Her skill and craftsmanship made them live and glow in vivid fashion.

It may be difficult to justify the warm and friendly author, the creator of tender moments and basic personal problems in the affairs of her brain children, with the rather austere and



WILLA CATHER

little known "summer visitor". The handful of Island residents who can claim her acquaintance are, at best, reserved in their opinion. Few of them knew her well. She had no need for them really except to serve as tradesmen or suppliers of food and material comfort at a fixed price. In truth, it seems she liked Grand Manan because of its seclusion and would have been happier still if she and her companions had been the only inhabitants.

There were rare exceptions of course. Miss Edith Lewis, her close companion since the early days, in her *Willa Cather Living* speaks of Dr. J. F. Macaulay with tenderness and respect. His death was cited as one of the reasons why they discontinued coming

to the Island. A graduate of McGill Medical School, a surgeon and physician of more than ordinary skill, he was beloved by the Island people. To the American "summer people" he represented one of the Island's few claims to culture and therefore a person to meet on an intellectual level.

Willa Cather was born in Winchester, Virginia, on an estate which was part of an original grant when Virginia was England's colony. One of seven children born to Charles Cather and Mary Virginia Boak, her early life was a quiet one, tuned to the slow moving tempo of the south. Sheep raising provided the main source of income for the family and even the Cather name had its homey origin. It was



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from the Welsh Gaelic word "Cataoir" meaning "seat" or "settle by the fire".

It was not her privilege to attend primary or intermediate school. Her Grandmother Boak was her early teacher, reading aloud to her from the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress* and from history books. She was nine years old when she was moved, with her family, to Webster County, Nebraska, to begin the really formative years. In this country of *O Pioneers*, she was later to help raise a new culture, forming the word pictures of a people who carved a new nation from plain and wilderness. But those early days were lonely and often sorely lacking in many respects. Reading was her sole pleasure and books were few. She read *Pilgrim's Progress* through eight times in a single winter.

But soon it was time for more serious study. She entered prep school and was later admitted to Nebraska State University. Here she found much to challenge her ability and her life became one of feverish activity. She was often up at five in the morning and as often was working late at night—discovering the joys of English composition, and liking the sciences as well. Then too, she wrote newspaper stories at a dollar a column to help pay her tuition.

After graduation, she took a course in journalism and her first position was as an editor of the *Pittsburgh Home Monthly*. It lasted a year when she moved to a post with a daily newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Leader*. Though she enjoyed her work, she rebelled at the routine and at the lack of progress in her creative talent. After four years she resigned. She had, however, gained much by this experience, meeting many of those who were leaders in the fields of music, drama and journalism. Music was a constant joy, one she endeavoured to fulfil at every opportunity.

In 1900 Willa Cather applied for a position as a high school teacher in Pittsburgh and was accepted, first to teach Latin and then English. Two years later she was named literature teacher at Alleghany High School. She loved her new profession and might have stayed but in 1905 S. S. McClure brought out her first book, *The Troll Garden*, a collection of short stories, and the very next year she was offered a position on the editorial staff of *McClure's Magazine*. She became its managing editor and was responsible for the special features.

*McClure's*, during her tenure, published original works by Yeats, Kipling, Stevenson, Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, O. Henry, and others in the heavenly firmament of letters. Many of these she met and came to know well through

visits to the magazine offices. It was a time when to "write well" was the thing to do . . .

Travel came to be of major importance. She had already taken one trip abroad while a teacher. During her work with the magazine, she made several sponsored visits to England and the continent, where she met many interesting persons in her special field. She fell in love with France.

In 1912, after leaving *McClure's Magazine*, she and Miss Lewis took up residence at Bank Street in New York. This was to be their headquarters for fifteen years—a period which has been described as Willa Cather's "best working years". *O Pioneers*, a novel dealing with Swedish settlers in Nebraska and featuring the heroine Alexandra Bergson, was published in June, 1913, by Houghton Mifflin as her first major effort as a full-time novelist. It enjoyed a modest success but the royalties from this and her other titles were barely enough for her "modest living expenses".

Two years later Willa Cather visited friends in Bridgeport, Maine, the first of many excursions in this direction. Later she visited and worked at Jaffrey, New Hampshire, a spot which was to share her enthusiasm, as a working laboratory, with Grand Manan.

*My Antonia*, described by critics as her best novel and most likely to survive the passage of the years, appeared in 1916 and it was about this time that Alfred A. Knopf became her publisher. This was a connection which was to mean a great deal. In a few short years, under the patronage of this publishing-house, she was to realize financial security.

*One of Ours*, published in 1922, won a Pulitzer Prize for its tender portrayal of an American Soldier in the Great War. It had been inspired by the war experience of a relative of the author's. And, in typical fashion, she took a special trip to France for material for the final third of the book.

As *One of Ours* was on the book stands, she was already at work on *A Lost Lady* and it was at this period that she first visited Grand Manan. Much of the latter story was written in a small cottage rented from Miss Sarah Jacobus at Whale Cove, North Head.

Edith Lewis, in her account, says "living conditions were, of course, rather primitive on Grand Manan." The cottages were designed for the rustic life, there is no doubt, and it is true that this was at least eight years before such modern conveniences as electric lights. The standard of living in the Island community was, however, extremely high for a fishing area. There were many fine homes, furnished

with taste and an eye for value but naturally the atmosphere and general level were strictly rural. Compared to life in New York City, it may have seemed primitive, but it is better to let this note refer to the rustic cottages.

The two companions found "solitude without loneliness" at Whale Cove. It was ideal for their work and after three years they built a cottage of their own. They purchased several acres of land from Mrs. Barbara Thomas on

it was wrongly felt she was unable to be friendly with ordinary folk.

The cottage "was a rather rough little place", writes Miss Lewis, "with many inconveniences; but it came to have not only comfort, but great charm. Above the living rooms was a large attic from which one could look out over the cliffs and the sea, and this Willa Cather chose for her study. There was nothing in it except a few trunks, and her chair and table."



THE COTTAGE

September 7, 1926, part of an original grant made before 1804 to Barbara Ross, daughter of a Loyalist who helped to found the first permanent settlement at Grand Manan. The site was on the western side of Whale Cove—one of the Island's beauty spots. Later they added an adjoining lot, purchased from Mr. and Mrs. Edward Johnston; both transfers are registered in the name of Edith Lewis at the County Registry office at St. Andrews.

The cottage was built, during their absence, by Charles Green and Oscar Locke, North Head carpenters and builders. Mr. Locke remembers, too, that he used to drive Willa Cather and her guests from Whale Cove to Rose Cottage Inn for dinner each day through one summer season. He feels he knew her better than most of the permanent residents and, in his opinion, she was a great person. What bothered many was her sudden reaction to unscheduled callers, noise or disturbance of any kind. Even the sound from closing a screen door would often irritate her. But this, he adds, was because of her constant concentration on her creative work, not a personal quality. He is sure that because of a misunderstanding of this need for complete serenity and order,

Meanwhile, *The Professor's House* had appeared and the University of Michigan had conferred on Willa Cather an honorary degree, the first of three she was to receive. It was also during this period that the idea was born for her always popular *Death Comes For The Archbishop*, a novel published in 1927.

Most of the latter was written at Jaffrey and Grand Manan. It describes the careers of the French bishop Jean Latour and his vicar, Father Vaillant, in establishing a diocese in pioneer New Mexico and is based on the lives of Bishop Lamy of Santa Fé and his vicar general, Father Machebeuf.

The idea for her only novel with a Canadian theme and setting was a result of a chance visit to Quebec. Miss Cather's father had recently died in the West and her New York residence had been changed to the Grosvenor Hotel. She and her companion looked forward to a summer at Grand Manan "which seemed the only foothold left on earth". For variety, they decided to travel by way of Quebec.

Her discovery of France in Canada led eventually to *Shadows on the Rock* published in 1931. In a way it was a continuation of the religious-pioneer theme so ably begun in *Death Comes*

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For *The Archbishop* and it dealt with life in the French settlement of Quebec in the 18th century. The romantic element is provided by Cecile Auclair and Pierre Charron, a fur-trader, whose love affair culminates with marriage. Other characters are Bishop Laval; Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier; Mother Jusehereau and her nuns; Euclide Auclair, an apothecary; and Jacques, a friendless boy brought up by the Auclairs.

As *Shadows on the Rock* was added to the growing list, Willa Cather was honoured with two honorary degrees — recognition to be cherished more than public acclaim. In March, 1931, the University of California conferred the Degree of Doctor of Laws and in June, Princeton University chose her as the first woman to receive one of its degrees and made her an honorary Doctor of Letters. At Grand Manan that summer the memories and awareness of public recognition, the increasing popularity of her efforts and the satisfaction of success were marred by news of her mother's death. Devoted to her parents, and her family, this was a severe shock hardly lessened by the fact of her mother's long illness.

*Lucy Gayheart* was begun in 1933 and finished at Grand Manan the following year. This was a most difficult task since in the year she had suffered from the first appearance of a very painful calamity. Her right wrist became seriously swollen, an inflammation which, on the doctor's orders, required complete rest from her work. She wore a steel and leather brace for months; during this time she could do no creative writing since she would never dictate this type of material.

She was able to finish the typing and copy-reading of *Lucy Gayheart* at Grand Manan in the spring of 1934. She kept an old Oliver typewriter at the cottage and when it needed repairs it was taken, in the early days here, to a North Head garage. The mechanic entrusted with this delicate task was more used to repairing heavy machinery and motors, but nothing in the mechanical field was too much of a problem. He was Winslow Small, now living in Saint John, and he recalls these unusual demands for his skill.

It is interesting to note that Willa Cather wrote her stories at least three times. First in longhand, usually in pencil, followed by two typed drafts, the first a revision and editing copy and the second a formal manuscript. She wrote mostly during the morning, never hesitating but building her story from a wealth of experience, knowledge, inspiration and skill. Her outline was a mental picture of what she hoped to achieve. In her revision, whole parts were frequently rewritten

but often left intact in the final manuscript. Great care was also taken with the printers' proofs.

Ralph L. Beal, a well-known insurance agent living in North Head, tells of being commissioned by Willa Cather to accompany a box of proofs to Eastport, Maine, to ship by express to her publishers. This was to prevent a "ruthless" destruction of her work by Customs officers. Mr. Beal is the custodian of the cottage at Whale Cove and has many requests, from summer visitors, to see "inside". But he must stand firm in a rule of "no visitors".

The last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, was finished at Grand Manan in September, 1940. It was the beginning of the end for her writing career and her contact with the Island. Miss Lewis writes with great feeling of what Grand Manan had meant:

"Ever since the writing of *One of Ours*, Willa Cather had found that island, so simple and primitive in all the conditions of living, a great resource, an increasingly congenial place to work . . . the beautiful silence, accentuated instead of diminished by the sound of the sea on the shingle, the wind blowing the alder bushes, rain on the roof, the songs of hundreds of birds, was tranquillizing to the spirit, seemed to open up great spaces for it to roam in.

"During the Grosvenor period, Grand Manan was the only spot where Willa Cather could have a few of her own things about her; some of her books, one or two of her rugs . . . a few pieces of silver . . . It was a sort of Robinson Crusoe life, calling for frequent resourcefulness and invention . . . We often rebelled against the rather austere provision of the only little boarding house within reach; so that it was necessary to have a constant stream of supplies winging their way to us from distant points; garlic and olive oil from New York, bread from Montreal . . . groceries from Saint John, from an excellent grocer who also sent us Pol Roget of an excellent vintage."

After 1942, the Island seemed out of the question. The war, the restrictions on travel, the lack of help with all the young men gone to serve in the armed forces and "the splendid Grand Manan doctor, Dr. Macaulay, a McGill graduate, who had been a staunch friend, and helped us out in any emergency, died of a heart attack . . ."

In that year too, Willa Cather found it necessary to have a surgical operation from which she never fully recovered. The next four summers were spent at North East Harbor, Maine, and during this time, with increasing physical discomforts, she cast her pen



Whale Cove, the view from the cottage

aside for the contemplation and enjoyment of her last years. She read endlessly, in poetry and in many of the classics and enjoyed the visits of her friends.

She died on the morning of April 24, 1947. The obituary appeared, a week later, in the *St. Croix Courier* of St. Stephen, on the Island page, and was read and noted with little comment. Many felt they would have enjoyed knowing such a personage. But the

chief reaction was that of pride. The Island had provided the necessary atmosphere for a successful career. It was the Island itself that had mattered most.

In the Whale Cove area there is a colony of summer residents who feel the cottage should be purchased and set up as a museum. But nothing changes. The wild rose and other native shrubs creep closer and closer and will some day envelop it all.

#### Acknowledgments

*Willa Cather Living* by Edith Lewis is published by Alfred A. Knopf, Incorporated, 501 Madison Avenue, New York (22), N.Y. Quotations and the use of the photograph by Nicholas Muray are made with the publisher's kind permission. *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, by E. K. Brown, completed by Leon Edel, and most of this author's work is published by them. Photographs of the cottage and Whale Cove by E. N. Wilcox.

The works of Willa Cather:

#### Novels

Alexander's Bridge, 1912  
O Pioneers!, 1913  
The Song of the Lark, 1915  
My Antonia, 1918  
One of Ours, 1922

A Lost Lady, 1923

The Professor's House, 1925

My Mortal Enemy, 1926

Death Comes for the Archbishop, 1927

Shadows on the Rock, 1931

Lucy Gayheart, 1935

Sapphira and the Slave Girl, 1940

#### Short Stories

The Troll Garden, 1905

Youth And the Bright Medusa, 1920

Obscure Destinies, 1932

December Night, 1933

The Old Beauty and Others, 1948

#### Verse

April Twilights, 1923

#### Essays

Not Under Forty, 1926

Willa Cather on Writing, 1949



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