

An Association Copy of Note: Willa Cather's copy of *Aucassin & Nicolette*

From 1896 to 1906 the renowned American writer and novelist, Willa Cather, resided in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Twelve novels with now more or less familiar titles like *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *Death comes for the Archbishop* (1927) thrilled American readers. Long before her novels, however, there were more modest achievements such as her first and only book of poetry, *April Twilights* (1903), her first collection of short story fiction, *The Troll Garden* (1905) and her work as editor of *Home Monthly*, the magazine which brought her to Pittsburgh in the first place. In 1898 she began work at the Pittsburgh *Daily Leader* but then in 1901 she took a job teaching high school students in Pittsburgh. Teaching would not become her mainstay and by 1906 she was ready to move on to a job at *McClure's Magazine* in New York City which eventually would lead to her becoming its managing editor. *McClure's* was one of America's most successful and popular literary magazines, and it was while in New York that Cather would meet her lifelong companion, Edith Lewis. But wait, we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves. It's those Pittsburgh years that are of the most direct concern for this brief essay. Willa Cather often referred to Pittsburgh as the "birthplace" of her writing career, and the very reason why the essay exists at all is because of a little book found from those natal literary years.

We have to go back to September 18, 2012 when I came across the notice from an upper Mid-Western book dealer advertised a little Mosher book which he said was from Willa Cather's library:

Aucassin & Nicolette. Done into English by Andrew Lang
Thomas B. Mosher Portland, Maine: Thomas B. Mosher. 1901. Fifth edition "on Van Gelder paper consists of 925 copies"; 12mo, pp. xxi, 65; frontispiece and woodcut designs from the original edition by Jacomb Hood; original cream wrappers, considerably toned, lacking spine, shallow tears to yapp edges, binding split; interior mostly fine. "Note--The present edition is a direct reprint of that very scarce little volume, *Aucassin & Nicolette* Done into English by Andrew Lang, London: 1887. Published by David Nutt in the Strand." Forms part of the Old World Edition. Willa Cather's copy, signed and dated December 7, 1903.

Of course this left several things unanswered, most notably, signed by whom, by Cather herself? How did the book dealer know it was Willa Cather's copy? Also, anyone reading the above would also be struck by the fact that this copy is NOT in the kind of condition that I most notably adhere to, but as I've said before on numerous occasions, with association copies all the usual bets are off. I didn't care if the

boards are considerably toned, nor that this copy is lacking the spine. We're still dealing with a potentially nice association copy, and so because the price was modest, and because I didn't want to do anything which might rouse the suspicion of the seller, I went ahead and ordered the little book without hesitation.

Upon receipt of the package ---Mark Samuels Lasner once told me "the best parts of bibliophily are getting packages in the post and the people" although sometimes I wonder about "the people"--- I was mesmerized while opening the package to examine the ownership inscription. Yes, the condition was exactly as advertised and the book will need to be restored, but now I could see the writing and compared it to known Cather handwriting of the period. Hmm. I wasn't convinced that it was Willa Cather's hand (incidentally, you'll notice that the book dealer never said it was signed by Willa Cather, only that it was "signed and dated"). So what to do? There was some peculiar initials below the date, and upon googling Willa Cather, I found some other examples at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas-Austin with a similar notations (Janis P. Stout, catalogue). I also found another which appeared at the 2001 Sotheby's auction. Neither of these findings, however, explained the initials. In this day of the Internet and the plethora of resources available to the collector, I did what any ardent, passionate collector would next do: I contacted the Willa Cather Foundation in Red Cloud, Nebraska (close to Willa Cather's childhood home), and what a contact that proved to be!

I connected with the Associate Executive Director of the Foundation, Ashley Olson, who first responded by sending me a list of the books that the Foundation owned or that were known to be part of Cather's "private library." She added "what a find!" and then proceeded to say what all such foundations are obliged to say: "we'd be honored to accept it and happy to provide a charitable donation receipt for you." The list didn't further my informational search, and I certainly wasn't ready to donate that which I've just received for the Mosher Collection. I again contacted Ms. Olson and reiterated my need for further information and she referred me to Tracy Tucker, the Education Director of the Willa Cather Foundation. It was through Ms. Tucker that my request took off.

My return email to Olson and Tucker indicated that the signed portion included the following lettering:

Willa Sibert Cather.
December 7, 1903.
F. I. McC.

I surmised that...

... the above may be "F. I. McC: where the middle initial is an el, not an I. If an "I", then I surmise it could be a shorthand for "From Isabelle McClung" who was the lovely daughter of Judge S. A. McClung. Willa Cather lived with her love at the time, Isabelle, in the same house during part of her time in Pittsburgh. I have found a couple books so

signed and dated. One was offered with a collection of books from her library offered in 2001 at Sotheby's. Another is at the University of Texas-Austin at the Harry Ransom Center. Do you have any other information on this F.I. McC or F.I. McC? Or if you have not encountered such, do you know a scholar I might contact who would most likely know?

That query got her attention and she wrote back that she has been consulting with some of their Cather scholars around the country, and that there is “much conjecture about the plausibility of the ‘F’ standing for ‘from’ and they asked if you would be willing to let us look at an image of the inscription.” She further added that Cather was also acquainted with the McClure family which presented another possibility. That was all I needed and so sent her the image and addition information on the Sotheby’s book, *Jude the Obscure*, noted as Willa Cather’s Copy and inscribed “Willa Sibert Cather / December 7 1901 / Pittsburgh [?F.L] McC” Notice that the date was the same month and day as the book I acquired. Anyway, the game was afoot. The image was going to be shared with several scholars.

On October 4, 2012 I got my much awaited reply from Ms. Tucker. The scholars who examined the inscription included Dr. Robert Thacker, Dr. Charles Johanningsmeier, and Dr. Steven Shively, a group to which she referred to as “Cather scholars one and all” and further that their collective knowledge and outstanding memory for detail never failed to amaze her. Another expert from this group, and one who might have spoken for them all, was Dr. Andrew Jewell who is at the Cather Archive at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where Cather attended the university. He is also on the Board of Governors at the Cather Foundation and has a forthcoming book of Cather’s letters. Dr. Jewell indicated that “I am pretty certain that is Isabelle McClung’s handwriting, based on the few samples I have seen. It is, at least, highly consistent with Isabelle’s hand. Also, according to Byrne and Snyder’s *Chrysalis*, Isabelle’s full name was ‘Frances Isabelle McClung.’ Bingo. This must be a gift Isabelle gave to Cather on her birthday in 1903.” The month and day is the same as the *Aucassin & Nicolette*. I’ll say BINGO too. How exciting. I feel like what some of those folks on PBS’s “History Detectives” felt like. Ms. Tucker concluded her email by again thanking me for contacting them and added that it is “an exciting find indeed!” With this essay I want to publically thank the scholars who examined the inscription, and of course wish to thank Ashley Olsen and Tracy Tucker for their important role in shepherding my request through the channels of the Willa Cather Foundation, and especially Dr. Jewell. But wait, what’s that book to which Dr. Jewell referred? *Chrysalis*! What else does it have to say about this Cather and McClung relationship? There’s more to the story.

My wife and I went out to Pittsburgh for my son’s birthday on

December 15 and we dropped by the wonderful Caliban Book Shop run by my esteemed fellow ABAA colleague, John Ezra Shulman. My wife, Sue, had there spotted a copy of *Chrysalis—Willa Cather in Pittsburgh, 1896-1906* during an earlier trip to Pittsburgh. Sue collects books on American authors' homes, and at first thought that this didn't quite measure up to what she collected, but on further thought she wanted to see it again and knew it was in John's stock, so we both had good reason to seek it out. Sue gets lost in the stacks and comes over to me with book in hand pointing out that Chapter 4 is entitled "Isabelle McClung" running from pp. 37-53. What a revelation those pages are. The whole story unfolds about the importance of Isabelle to Willa Cather, how the good fatherly Judge welcomed Cather to live there from 1901 to the spring of 1906, and how Cather returned there for long visits and writing sessions from 1906 to 1916. If Pittsburgh was Cather's literary birthplace, the McClung home was the womb. *Chrysalis* was another apt metaphor for the title of Byrne's and Snyder's book on Cather.

There were several people, especially women, very close to Willa Cather throughout her lifetime, but ranked up at the very top echelon was Isabelle McClung. They maintained a very intimate correspondence throughout their lasting and deeply emotional friendship, but none of the correspondence is extant.* Isabelle and Willa toured Europe together in 1902 and, along with another friend, personally met their mutually admired A.E. Housman (author of *A Shropshire Lad*) in England. When I found that out, I had only a slight but noticeable twinge of regret that the Mosher book given by Isabelle to Willa could have been that title published by Mosher in 1906 rather than the 1903 *Aucassin & Nicolette*. That would have made it an even more important association copy, but look... we got to take 'em as we get 'em. Suffice it to say, this is a remarkable association copy, a testament to the love shared between Willa Cather and Isabelle McClung, and a gift that must have stayed with Cather for years to come, perhaps for many years in the very home that lovingly coddled and fostered her new and then unfolding literary talents. There is much more to this story, and to the close association between Cather and Isabelle, but should the reader wish to uncover more, you can pick up a copy of *Chrysalis* and read Chapter 4 and the rest of the book for yourself. Me? I'm just tickled pink to have an inscribed copy of Mosher's little Old World Series' *Aucassin & Nicolette* that played a silent role in that story. Some of that silence has now been broken.

* After Isabelle died in Sorrento in 1938, her husband returned all letters Cather wrote to Isabelle and she disposed of them after rereading many of them, in fact, she turned them over to her partner, Edith Lewis to be burned. (*Chrysalis*, 53 referencing Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's *Cather: A Memoir*, 265)

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