

# Reviews

*Willa Cather, Alexander's Bridge* Historical essay and explanatory notes by Tom Quirk, Textual essay and editing by Frederick M. Link. *The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition, Lincoln and Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. 303 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0-8032-1132-2, ISBN-10: 0-8032-1132-5. £ 41 hardcover.*

When Willa Cather's *Alexander's Bridge* appeared in 1912 it was a popular success and hailed by critics as "an important first novel"(178). Published in three installments in *McClure's Magazine*, the work went through five printings between 1912 and 1933, and was included as part of the third volume of the Autograph Edition of Cather's works (1937). However, in her own critical writing about it,<sup>1</sup> Cather regarded her first novel as the product of inexperience and the mistaken assumption that she needed "interesting materials" for a novel. At the time she thought these were either in Eastern U.S. cities or in Europe, far away from her familiar Midwestern landscape. "The impressions I tried to communicate on paper" she writes in "My First Novels," "were genuine, but they were very shallow"<sup>2</sup>

Although the novel does take place in Boston, London and New York, and though it develops characters who at first glance appear to value social status and witty conversation rather than psychological depth, it also draws attention to the anything but shallow dilemmas with which Cather struggled at a time when she found herself at a crossroads in her imaginative life. In 1912 she was exhausted by responsibilities as managing editor at *McClure's* which left her little energy and time to devote to creative projects (142). In some respects, the dilemmas faced by the protagonist of *Alexander's Bridge*, Bartley Alexander, mirror Cather's own: when the novel opens, he is at point in his career where he has achieved recognition and professional success, yet he senses he has compromised his personal integrity. In

1 Cather's commentary about *Alexander's Bridge* included three published reactions in twenty years. 135.

2 Cather, "My First Novels [There Were Two]," reprinted in Stephen Tennant, *Willa Cather on Writing*. (New York: Knopf, 1949), 91.

a broader sense, the text raises important questions about the psychological and cultural pressures placed on individuals during the earlier time in which the novel is set, the late nineteenth century Gilded Age in America.

Whereas the novel may be autobiographical in the sense that it reflects Cather's frustrations about the demands of her job at McClure's, the more superficial details of the plot hardly reflect her own experience (as is often the case in first novels): Bartley Alexander is an engineer rather than an artist, he is well into middle age whereas Cather at the time was in her thirties. He responds to his midlife crisis through the renewal of a romance with his former sweetheart, the Irish actress Hilda Burgoyne. Conveniently, before his wife Winifred finds out about his betrayal, he dies on the collapsing bridge that was meant to be the most important accomplishment of his career.

Considering that *Alexander's Bridge* was first published just a year before her breakthrough *O Pioneers!* (1913), it is not surprising that the latter overshadowed it. Also considering that Cather's own views have until recently shaped much of the critical response to the work, it follows that readers hoping for a Scholarly Edition of Cather's first novel would need to be patient. Fortunately it is now available as the eighth volume in the series.<sup>3</sup>

This volume, consistent with the previous seven, begins with a meticulously edited text of the novel compiled from a series of collations.<sup>4</sup> The text is followed by a historical essay, maps and illustrations, a textual essay tracing the history of the production and printing of the novel during Cather's lifetime, Cather's 1922 Preface (195), and tables of editorial changes from the first copy-text to subsequent editions.

These resources provide a rich basis for exploring the novel as an important part of Cather's literary production as a whole. As Tom Quirk notes in his historical essay, it represents "the unavoidable and tentative first step toward Cather's later works" (181). *Alexander's Bridge*, he suggests, was an "ambitious experiment which moved [Cather] that much more quickly and securely into her own literary territory [...] It set in motion imaginative energies that would eventually take her there" (183).

Quirk's essay succeeds admirably in the project of rescuing the novel from the author's own dismissal of it. He questions Cather's opinion that she was inexperienced, noting that in 1912 she had already published, among other texts, a volume of poetry, *April Twilights* (1903), over forty short stories,

3 *O Pioneers!*, University of Nebraska Press, 1992 was the first of Cather's novels published in a Scholarly Edition.

4 The editing for Scholarly Editions follows protocol set by the Modern Language Association (245).

and a collection of stories, *The Troll Garden* (1905) (138). Whereas Cather claimed that she had put too much effort into imitating the writing of two of her mentors, Henry James and Edith Wharton, Quirk explores a range of additional contexts for the novel, including a range of literary influences, geographical influences, and the role played by events such as Cather's travels to London and the Continent, the actual 1907 collapse of the Quebec Bridge, and the performances of the Irish National Theatre Company in London.

Scandinavian readers will be particularly interested to learn about the connections between the theater of Henrik Ibsen, which is expressed in the character of Hilde Burgoyne in *Alexander's Bridge*, and in Cather's imminent return to her own Nebraska roots in *O Pioneers!* Theater critic William Archer, who Cather knew because he had published an essay in *McClure's* on modern drama, encouraged her to pay attention to the Irish National theatre, in particular to its Ibsen influence which encouraged both localism and nationalism as the foundations for one's art. Quirk notes,

Her conversations with Archer [...] might have had contradictory influences on Cather. On the one hand [...] Archer was forthrightly urging her to remove to London; on the other hand, if she really took his artistic statements to heart, he was suggesting that to be an artist one must return to one's native materials (161).

As nuanced and wide-ranging as Quirk's insights into Cather's developing identity as an American writer are, a reader hoping for some discussion of Cather's emerging androgynous voice will be disappointed. For Quirk, the "tissue of oppositions" characterizing *Alexander's Bridge* relate primarily to Cather's dilemmas around geographical place and class, but not gender (165). Although he mentions that during her writing of *Alexander's Bridge* she traveled between Boston, Maine, and New York to visit various women mentors and friends such as Annie Fields and Mary Jewett, the sister of her mentor and friend. Sarah Orne Jewett, he leaves me wondering if and how they had any influence on Cather's growing capacity to write both as an artist and as a woman without seeing any inherent contradiction between the two identities. (143).<sup>5</sup>

5 See Sharon O'Brien's *Willa Cather: the Emerging Voice*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Second Edition, 1997) especially her chapter on "Maternal Voices" for a thoughtful discussion of the development of Cather's gendered voice (314-333). For example, O'Brien notes that, though in her early years Cather assumed Hawthorne's view that most women writers were among the "scribbling masses," and less than serious, she did admire several women actors. Hilde Burgoyne might then be seen as an image of Cather's emerging strength as a woman artist.

In the textual essay that follows Quirk's historical essay, Frederick M. Link suggests that the task of editing Cather's works has been particularly tricky because of her strong engagement in the editorial and publishing process. Cather protected both her personal life and her early writing, disposing of many of her letters. As daunting as the aim of the editors is, Link notes that they are nonetheless

committed to providing readers with the most fully realized text belonging to the period of Cather's most complete imaginative engagement with her work, not with what might be in our opinion the "best" text of that work (269).

As in the other volumes in the series, this one includes the use of "warm, cream antique paper stock," large type, and wide margins as preferred by Cather (x).

In short, the Scholarly Edition of Willa Cather's *Alexander's Bridge* makes an important contribution to Cather research. It adds to our understanding of Cather's identity as a writer, and to our understanding of the text in relation to the larger body of her writing. It provides an important contextual resource that will benefit scholars, but also teachers and new students of Cather's work. Readers of this new edition of the novel and its accompanying essays will be reminded that writing and publishing are painstaking, contested cultural and politicized endeavors. But readers will also find reminders of the many ways in which imaginative writing is always a transformative process.

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Jennifer Eastman Attebery. *Up in the Rocky Mountains. Writing the Swedish Immigrant Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 304 pp., \$20.00 softcover, ISBN 978-0-8166-4768-2. \$60.00 hardcover, ISBN 978-0-8166-4767-5.

Since the beginning of the Swedish migration to America, thousands if not millions of personal accounts of the experience have been written in letters and sent to friends and family in Sweden. A carefully defined set of these letters, from 1880 through 1917, has now become the subject of Jennifer Eastman Attebery's study focusing on the Swedish immigrant experience in