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Introduction

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As Mary Chinery points out in the final essay of this volume, some of the American troops who landed at Normandy on June 6, 1944, carried with them the compact, but unabridged, Armed Services edition of a particularly rich and powerful American novel—Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. We do not know how much welcome distraction, to say nothing of solace, Cather’s text provided these soldiers, how much her words meant, or failed to mean, when read in the midst of Operation Overlord. One would like to think, however, that at least a few of the GIs who carried *Death Comes for the Archbishop* with them during the opening phase of the liberation of Europe took comfort in the spiritual austerity of Cather’s narrative or, at the very least, found a momentary refuge from war’s horrors in a faraway landscape of mesas, piñons, and adobe. Hopefully, some of these servicemen responded to the text in the same manner as the wounded veteran of the Battle for the Philippines described at the opening of Chinery’s essay: this soldier decided to keep reading even after discovering (contrary to the book’s title) that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was not a murder mystery. To his surprise, he “liked it anyway.”

That Cather was there, albeit vicariously, at the D-Day landings and in the midst of the Pacific island campaigns should not surprise us. Indeed, as far as her connections to twentieth-century history are concerned, we might as well, as the saying goes, expect the unexpected. Now fading is the once widely held view of Cather as a writer who separated herself from the historical present (to the degree to which this was possible) and who remained aloof from the ideological pressures and preoccupations of her day. Over the past two decades, scholars equipped with the methodologies of

New Historicism and cultural studies have turned this conception on its head, replacing the solitary, politically indifferent artist with a cultural *participant* whose works embrace, reject, or redefine, by turns, the dominant values and beliefs located in her contemporary milieu. If this ideologically alert body of scholarship has at times placed too much emphasis on measuring Cather's alignment with current political orthodoxies (as Joan Acocella charges), it has also vastly expanded the ways in which her fiction can be enjoyed, understood, and taught. No longer sealed away from politics, ideology, and material culture, Cather's texts now *say* much more than they once did. As read by New Historicists and culture critics, they speak of themes central to the so-called American century and to our own historical moment—themes such as empire, migration, multiculturalism, changing gender roles, sexual orientation, ecological awareness, and war.

The latter subject, whose importance in Cather's life and writings has only recently attracted scholarly notice, serves as the focus for this collection. Cather was not, of course, what we think of as a war writer (i.e., an eyewitness to military violence or to its immediate aftermath for whom armed conflict is subsequently a central artistic concern). She did not hear a shot fired in anger even once during her seventy-four years, and direct depictions of combat appear in only two of her narratives—in the Civil War story "The Namesake" (1907) and, more notoriously, in *One of Ours* (1922), long regarded as one of her weakest novels. On the surface, Cather's acquaintanceship with Mars was slight and, if anything, detrimental to her art. However, as the fourteen essays assembled here demonstrate, an author does not have to be a "war writer" in order to produce work that registers the cultural and personal impact of mass violence, particularly during the first half of an especially war-torn century. Though Cather turned her artistic gaze directly to the battlefield just twice during her career as a fiction writer, war forms an important component in virtually everything she wrote.

The sheer number of armed conflicts evoked in her fiction is perhaps unprecedented in American literature. In *My Ántonia* (1918), a work whose sudden moments of violence and grotesquery arguably reflect the world war that raged during its composition, Jim

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Burden inhabits a landscape that has been crisscrossed by conquistadors both old and new—by Coronado, whose memory is tellingly connected to a rusty weapon, and, more recently, by the U.S. Army, which has killed or displaced the Native Americans whose ghostly horse ring Jim sees outlined in the snow. Wars of imperialist aggression also form part of the backdrop for other Cather novels, including *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), where the Mexican-American conflict of 1848 is essential to the plot (as the event that brings Latour's future archdiocese under American political control) and where the U.S. military's genocidal campaign against the Navajos receives a disturbingly impartial portrayal; *A Lost Lady* (1923), where, in a scene loaded with historical resonance, Cather depicts a railroad tycoon nonchalantly entering Indian territory and planting a stake to mark the location of his future home (more than anything, it was the railroad that led to the near eradication of the Plains Indians in the 1860s and 1870s); and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), where Cather recreates a seventeenth-century New World city that is also an imperial fortress. The American Civil War, the central historical event for the generation that included Cather's parents, figures prominently not only in "The Namesake," which offers a gory picture of battle, but also in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), which records the conflict's repercussions within the deeply divided community of Back Creek Valley, Virginia, the writer's home until age nine. In addition, veterans of the Blue and the Gray, invariably portrayed as dignified and kindly old men, are scattered throughout Cather's Nebraska fiction, along with references to their monuments and meeting halls.

Even more significant are the many moments when World War I, the conflict that had the greatest personal impact on Cather, enters into her fictional world. The events of 1914 to 1918 are, of course, central to *One of Ours*, which focuses on a Nebraska farmer turned doughboy, and to *The Professor's House* (1925), which in describing a professional historian's response to four years of unprecedented slaughter memorably sums up the War to End All Wars as "the great catastrophe." Yet World War I appears in other works as well, often in passages that seem incidental initially but grow in significance upon rereading. For example, in *Lucy Gayheart* (1935),

Harry Gordon momentarily escapes thoughts of his lost opportunity for happiness with Lucy by plunging into the “war work” offered by the Red Cross and by Herbert Hoover’s Food Conservation Program (177). Ultimately Gordon serves overseas with a volunteer ambulance unit (à la Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos). And then there are the multiple references to the war in short stories such as “The Old Beauty” (1948), a late (and underappreciated) work whose full meaning only becomes clear when, as Janis P. Stout demonstrates in her contribution to this collection, we read it as an account of a world broken in two by unthinkable violence—a world that went on breaking for Cather until the very end of her life.

The ubiquity of armed conflict whether as a main theme or as a background feature in Cather’s writings reflects her historical context, reading, and artistic preoccupations. Indeed, it would be surprising, given the historical events that transpired shortly before and during her lifetime, if Cather’s fiction did not touch upon military matters frequently. Born three years before the Battle of Little Bighorn, the last large-scale clash between the U.S. Army and Plains Indians, and just eight years after Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, Cather lived to see warfare move onto a terrifying global scale. Judging from her letters—which contain, as Stout has demonstrated in her calendar of Cather’s correspondence, with references to conflicts past, present, and future—she seems to have thought of war on a regular basis (particularly after 1914), and few American conflicts from 1861 to 1945 failed to intersect with her life in some significant fashion. As a child and then as an adolescent, Cather witnessed the rituals and pageantry through which Civil War veterans, both Southern and Northern, commemorated the war of their youth, and she soaked up family stories of her lost uncle, William Seibert Boak, a Confederate mortally wounded at Manassas. While in her early teens in the 1880s, Cather created a visual testimony to her fascination with the Civil War by donning a soldier’s kepi, perhaps her uncle’s, for a Red Cloud photographer (see the frontispiece). Further evidence of her deep-seated interest in the War between the States surfaced during her career as a journalist: in 1900 she offered a highly fictionalized account of her meeting with Stephen Crane in 1895 and recollected a de-

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tailed discussion of *The Red Badge of Courage*. (Her familiarity with Crane's war writing shows up elsewhere as well: in 1898 she wrote a scathing review of his poetry volume *War is Kind*, and in 1926 she provided an introduction for his Spanish-American War dispatches collected under the title *Wounds in the Rain and Other Impressions of War*.)

More than three decades after Cather donned the headdress of a Civil War soldier, a very different conflict captured her attention and prompted the most intensive research she ever conducted as a fiction writer. While composing the story of Claude Wheeler, a character partially inspired by the writer's first cousin Grosvenor P. Cather (killed on the Western Front in 1918), she interviewed dozens of soldiers, absorbed most of the major works of World War I literature available by the early 1920s, and even traveled to the battlefields of France, where she saw firsthand the vast cemeteries and swaths of shell-pounded countryside left in the war's wake. However, exorcizing the personal trauma of World War I proved difficult for Cather, and one novel alone could not contain her thoughts on such a shattering historical event. She continued to reflect on "the great catastrophe" throughout the 1920s and 1930s, both in her fiction and in her correspondence, and she contemplated the approach of World War II with weariness and dread (even as she hoped the United States would shake off its isolationism). As James Woodress has observed, Cather's grim thematic concerns in her final novel—paralysis, lust, and betrayal—perhaps have much to do with the violent historical background against which she wrote (483). Three wars arguably inform *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*—the American Civil War, which Cather weaves directly into her narrative; World War I, a central source for her darkening vision during the final third of her life; and World War II, whose opening stages, dominated by fascist victories, were contemporaneous with the novel's composition.

Arranged chronologically, beginning with the American Civil War and ending with World War II, the fourteen essays in this collection examine the presence of armed conflict in Cather's life and art from several theoretical perspectives—ranging from New Historical to formalist—and vary widely in terms of scope and methodology. The essays are, however, grouped together by com-

mon themes and interpretive concerns. Central to the first four is the issue of memory, both personal and cultural, an issue made all the more fascinating by Cather's complex liminality. As a southerner and northerner, Nebraskan and New Yorker, regionalist and Europhile, realist and modernist, Cather provides a particularly rich case study in how a literary artist negotiates often conflicting cultural traditions and ideologies. Among the many questions that *Cather Studies 6* explores are the following: How did Cather *remember* the various conflicts that intersected with her life? And how did her individual memory interact with cultural memory?

Ann Romines starts us down the beckoning path that leads out from such questions with her essay "Willa Cather's Civil War: A Very Long Engagement." Noting that Cather was "the particular target" of Southern Lost Cause mythology, Romines traces Cather's ambivalent attitudes toward her Civil War inheritance all the way from her Virginia childhood to *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, written almost a lifetime later. As Romines convincingly demonstrates, Cather's final novel turns upside down many of the conventions of Southern Civil War commemoration and nostalgic Southern fiction such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (published in 1936, the year that Cather began work on her own depiction of the Old South). A book "without battle scenes or youthful male heroism," *Sapphira* "contains none of the saleable staples of Civil War art." And, even more important, the narrative violates a central Lost Cause taboo by openly confronting the ideological issue at the heart of the war—slavery. At the same time, however, Romines notes instances when the novel resurrects pro-Southern Reconstruction-era stereotypes, as when, for example, the former slave Tap falls prey to an evil carpetbagger and an ignorant Yankee jury. With its many contradictions, *Sapphira* ultimately demonstrates "how difficult and freighted a process the telling of Civil War stories (still) is."

The issue of memory also stands at the heart of Michael Gorman's "Jim Burden and the White Man's Burden: *My Ántonia* and Empire." Just where and how, this essay provocatively asks, are Native Americans *remembered* in Cather's novel of triumphant European settlement on the Great Plains? Do the wars of imperialist aggression that cleared the way for communities such as Black

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Hawk receive any recognition in the text? Gorman persuasively argues that the relative absence of references to Native Americans in Jim Burden's narration is, in itself, revealing; indeed, it invites an ironic reading of Cather's often blind and deluded protagonist. Seldom conscious of Nebraska's original inhabitants (his contemplation of the fading horse circle is a rare exception), Jim prefers to define the Plains as virgin territory, as land without human history, as a nothingness waiting to be made into something. The historical realities of violence and displacement that Jim conveniently ignores enter the novel only symbolically—through his slaying of the rattlesnake, an indigenous creature that stands for both the Sioux Indians (whose tribal name was understood in 1918 to mean “venomous snake”) and the nation of Spain, an imperial competitor defeated by the United States in 1898.

Margaret Anne O'Connor's essay, “The Not-So-Great War: Cather Family Letters and the Spanish-American War,” focuses on memory in a different way. Utilizing materials only recently made available, as part of the George Cather Ray Collection at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, O'Connor examines the letters that G. P. Cather (later the model for Claude Wheeler) received from several Webster County soldiers who served in the Spanish-American conflict. Ironically, the martial enthusiasm that G. P. later displayed, as he rushed into the ranks of the first American division to reach the Western Front (he would meet his fate in the first American battle of the war), perhaps reflects his failed memory: his turn-of-the-century correspondents described a military experience made up primarily of boredom, discomfort, sickness, and fear. By 1917 G. P. had forgotten the lessons contained in their testimony. Willa Cather, on the other hand, did not forget the ugly side of war as she came to know it during the writing of *One of Ours*, and her novel of the First World War ends, appropriately enough, with a soldier's letters in the hands of a grieving mother who sees through her son's illusions.

Titled “Between Two Wars in a Breaking World: Willa Cather and the Persistence of War Consciousness,” Janis P. Stout's essay deals with the burden of memory. Drawing upon Cather's correspondence and published writings (particularly neglected short stories and essays) from the interwar decades, Stout argues that

Cather never fully recovered from the “shock” of World War I, with its ten million casualties and host of industrialized horrors, and that her sense of living in a world forever broken by war colored virtually everything she wrote after 1918. In particular, Stout locates evidence of Cather’s war consciousness in the stories “Uncle Valentine” (1925), “Double Birthday” (1929), and “The Old Beauty” (1948), as well as the essay “148 Charles Street” (1936). From this bold, exploratory analysis, a new version of Cather emerges. In his landmark study *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), Paul Fussell focuses on the way in which British literary artists responded to the historical and cultural ruptures produced by mass slaughters like the 1916 Battle of the Somme. According to Fussell, the grotesque realities of the Western Front fostered a volatile mode of interpretation that he terms “modern memory,” a mode characterized in part by stark, ironic dichotomies (e.g., cavalry versus machine guns, bloodthirsty generals versus Christlike troops, optimistic strategy versus stalemate and disaster). Stout posits a similar dynamic at work within Cather’s creative imagination, which abounds in its own extreme dichotomies and incessant breakages. No one who reads this exciting analysis will see Cather’s post-World War I fiction the same way again.

The next five essays in this volume all focus on *One of Ours*, a controversial book that has finally come into its own as a sophisticated, if ambivalent, statement on war and its construction within early-twentieth-century American culture. One signal of the novel’s belated recognition as a major work came in 2002, when the University of Nebraska–Lincoln hosted a daylong conference titled “Great Passions, Great Aspirations: Willa Cather and World War I.” Most of the papers and panels featured at that memorable event focused on *One of Ours*, and they revealed a text that is remarkably multi-layered—even by Cather standards. Originally presented at the Great Passions, Great Aspirations conference, Pearl James’s essay, “The ‘Enid Problem’: Dangerous Modernity in *One of Ours*,” plunges us straight into the novel’s formidable complexity by focusing on a character who has become something of a critical lightning rod—Claude Wheeler’s wife, Enid Royce. Arguing that “*One of Ours* conflates a nostal-

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gia for ‘natural’ pre-industrial frontier life with a nostalgia for traditional femininity,” James presents Enid as a “dangerous New Woman,” whose defiance of traditional gender roles brings her inevitably into conflict with her husband. Other critics have made similar observations. However, what sets James’s analysis apart is the depth and specificity with which she links Enid’s threatening modernity, in all its many facets, to the turbulent background of wartime America. Enid’s “scientific domestic economy,” for example, “reflects the discourse used to mobilize women on the home front, in their kitchens, parlors, and gardens.” Likewise, Enid’s accomplished handling of an automobile (Claude, one notes, relinquishes that masculine holy of holies, the driver’s seat) evokes the entry of American women into the Motor Corps, one of many wartime expediencies that destabilized conventional notions of gender. By establishing such connections, James offers the most thorough analysis to date of a character whose disappearance halfway through the narrative belies her many connections to the war that ultimately destroys Claude.

Bayliss Wheeler, one of Cather’s most unpleasant creations, receives a similarly thorough and detail-rich analysis from Celia M. Kingsbury. Titled “‘Squeezed into an Unnatural Shape’: Bayliss Wheeler and the Element of Control in *One of Ours*,” Kingsbury’s essay establishes Claude’s neo-materialistic, pleasure-killing older brother as a small-town version of Henry Ford and John Harvey Kellogg, American moguls driven by a socially sanctioned “desire to acquire and control.” Likening Frankfort to a Foucaultian panopticon, with Bayliss as its “enforcer and executioner,” Kingsbury notes the many nuances that go into this repellent character’s portraiture—his connection, for example, with German *Kultur* as it was constructed by American propagandists and his ironic kinship with Enid, his near Doppelgänger.

The other three essays on *One of Ours* all focus on the novel’s most problematic section—Books IV and V, where Cather depicts her protagonist’s service in the American Expeditionary Forces. Dismissing this portion of the text, combined with some expression of regret that Cather did keep her story in Nebraska, became standard in the negative reviews that the novel received in 1922, and scholars today remain divided when it comes to deter-

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mining the success or failure of Cather's rendering of military life. However, anyone who doubts the intricacy of Cather's artistry in the second half of her most controversial novel would do well to study Mary R. Ryder's essay, "'As Green as Their Money': The Doughboy Naïfs in *One of Ours*," an exceptionally close reading that locates unexpected significance in what seems, at first sight, to be entirely clichéd language. Zeroing in on Cather's back-and-forth references to American soldiers as "men" and as "boys," Ryder demonstrates that Claude and his companions "must . . . play a double role in the national imagination." Citing numerous World War I propaganda posters, Ryder concludes that *men*, as defined within wartime discourse, were robustly masculine—trained killers who endured and inflicted violence. *Boys*, on the other hand, were innocent, clumsy, and soft—the perfect signifiers for propaganda that played up the moral purity and disinterestedness of American intervention. Tested in the manly arena of combat but still a child in his understanding of French culture (as well as the geopolitical realities of World War I), Claude moves uneasily between these two discursive roles and becomes in the process "the prototype" of the American soldier.

Mark A. Robison and Debra Rae Cohen shed additional light on the war chapters in *One of Ours* by considering the related themes of recreation and tourism. Robison's essay, "Recreation in World War I and the Practice of Play in *One of Ours*," situates Cather's novel within a unique cultural context—"the curious intersection between war efforts and the ideas emerging in the new field of recreation." After offering a detailed account of the early-twentieth-century recreation movement, which worked to provide American adults with opportunities for healthy outdoor play, and the U.S. War Department's emphasis on morale building amusements and diversions, Robison demonstrates that Claude's sense of joy in Books V and VI has little to do with combat (thus, he is not, contrary to Stanley Cooperman's influential interpretation, a true war lover). Instead, Robison ties Claude's contentment to the recreational opportunities offered by the American Expeditionary Forces—to the musical performances, culturally enriching travel, games, and quiet walks that Claude enjoys as a soldier. Meticulously researched, Robison's contribution to this volume repre-