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The Making of Willa Cather's *One of Ours*: The Role of Dorothy Canfield Fisher

On March 12, 1921, when Willa Cather was well into the writing of her novel of male disaffection from Nebraska and rebirth in war, *One of Ours*, she wrote her first letter in five years to her longtime friend and fellow-writer Dorothy Canfield Fisher. Three days later she wrote again, urging that she and Canfield Fisher become reconciled after a long estrangement. (Sixteen years earlier Dorothy had successfully opposed Cather's publication of a short story that she believed would be unduly wounding to a friend to whom she had introduced Cather.) In this second letter Cather mentioned that she felt in need of Canfield Fisher's help with the novel, stating, indeed, that she was (in the words of Mark J. Madigan's summary of the correspondence) "the only person who could help her with it" ("Rift" 124)¹. Why, one wonders, was Dorothy Canfield Fisher the only person who could provide that help? What could Canfield Fisher provide that no one else could? That is the question I want to take up here.

Madigan's essay on the exchange of letters demonstrates that *One of Ours* provided a structured ground, delimited by their professionalism, on which the two women could achieve reconciliation. The biographical issues he elucidates, relating to both the causes of their estrangement and the clarifications that led to their reconciliation, are of keen interest, particularly as they afford insight into Cather's sense of her own provincialism. They are also of keen interest in relation to the shaping of this novel that was of such great importance to Cather's career, winning her the Pulitzer Prize but eliciting a barrage of hostile criticism, both then and later.² In calling on Canfield Fisher's help with the novel, Cather specified that it was particularly the last section, set in France—that is,

the section that includes glimpses of battle as well of French domestic life—that had been difficult to write and was causing her uneasiness. Madigan refers to the letter in which Cather made this admission (dated February 6, 1922) as the “real breakthrough” in the process of reconciliation (“Rift” 124).

It is a follow-up letter, though, dated a month later (March 8, 1922), that makes the biographical link with the novel that is pertinent here. There Cather identified the model for her central character, Claude, as her cousin Grosvenor Cather, who had been killed in battle at Cantigny on May 28, 1918. Grosvenor, Cather explained, had for a time distanced himself from her out of resentment or envy of her intellectual and artistic abilities and the wide scope of her experience, compared to his own farm life in Nebraska. Later that same month (this letter, like so many of Cather’s, is undated) she wrote again to thank Canfield Fisher for her reassurance and to respond to some of her specific comments, particularly her praise of a scene in which Claude’s officer friend David Gerhardt plays the violin. In doing so, Cather admitted that Claude reflected not only Grosvenor’s feeling of inadequacy, but her own. Just as Claude is overcome by admiration but also envy when he hears Gerhardt play, and just as Grosvenor had felt intimidated by her comparative sophistication, so she had felt intimidated by Canfield’s “intellectual background” and cultural poise when the two were in France in 1902, during what was Cather’s first trip abroad (Madigan “Rift” 126). After this late-March letter, with Cather’s admission of her long-buried feelings of inadequacy and explanation for her prickly behavior in 1902 resulting from those feelings, the two writers were able to put old hurts and resentments behind them and renew their friendship.

Of greater importance for my purposes here, however, is the fact that the exchange demonstrates how central, in Cather’s conception of the novel, was Claude’s sense of cultural deprivation and how well attuned Canfield Fisher was to this set of issues. Her sensitivity to the plight of the young person from the provinces had demonstrated that in this respect she fully merited Cather’s confidence in her as a reader of the manuscript.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher was peculiarly well qualified in other ways as well to provide assistance as Cather struggled to complete her war novel. Not only was she acquainted with midwestern life and its cultural constraints and able to sympathize with those who did not enjoy her own advantages (during the period she lived in Kansas and Nebraska she had

been among the culturally experienced elite), but she also possessed a thorough familiarity with France, its language, and its cultural traditions. In addition to this general knowledge, which her publisher called in 1918 “a lifelong familiarity with the French,” and the fact that as a well-established (though not now well-remembered) writer she could understand the technical issues Cather was facing, she had direct knowledge of France during wartime. Unlike Cather, who pointed out in a letter probably written on March 21, 1922, that no, she had not been in France during the war, Canfield Fisher had spent two years in Paris and elsewhere in France actively engaged in war relief work. Her tasks sometimes involved driving a supply vehicle in the combat zone to gather foodstuffs for ambulance drivers in training (Washington 89).³ Cather must have felt convinced that her friend could judge the accuracy and convincingness of the section of the novel set in the war zone, “Bidding the Eagles of the West Fly On,” while also verifying such matters as French phrasing and descriptive details. Although Cather had also developed considerable familiarity with France by the time she came to the writing of *One of Ours*—a familiarity she did not at all possess in 1902, when she felt abashed by her friend’s sophistication—neither her linguistic fluency nor her cultural understanding would ever equal Canfield Fisher’s, nor did she have any experience comparable to her friend’s direct observations during wartime.

Canfield Fisher’s role in the making of *One of Ours* may, however, actually have predated their exchange of letters. Not only did she possess a familiarity with France on which Cather drew in personal exchanges, she had also written about wartime France in two books of stories or sketches based on direct observation, *Home Fires in France* (1918) and *The Day of Glory* (1919). She told her agent (and Cather’s) Paul Reynolds that her aim in these two books was to be “‘perfectly and absolutely authentic’ rather than sensational,” to produce writing that would avoid the “vociferous quality” of much war writing and instead would “sound *real*” (Washington 89). Despite an occasional broadening of emotional tone that may evoke discomfort in today’s readers, the sketches convey, in Madigan’s judgment, “a genuine understanding of the French people, whose country was being ravaged by the war” (“Introduction” 5). Moreover, several of the pieces occupy that disputed ground at the borderline between fiction and nonfiction that Cather also, though in rather different ways, liked to occupy.

My point is that Dorothy Canfield Fisher's war writings anticipated, in several respects, what Cather was to do in the final section of her novel and that Cather may well have drawn on her friend's published works as she dealt with the difficulties she had set herself there. We can assume as a matter of course that she would have read them, since her letters indicate she generally did read Canfield Fisher's books. During the war and post-war period she was keenly interested in observations of this kind on the great issue of the day.⁴ Textual comparison indicates, indeed, that her reading of *Home Fires in France*, published four years before *One of Ours*, was an especially keen one and that a number of particular images and ideas from both that book and *The Day of Glory* had impressed her profoundly enough to stay in her mind and re-emerge in her own novel.

In the thinly fictionalized opening story of *Home Fires*, "Notes from a French Village in the War Zone," the scene Canfield Fisher sketches resembles in several respects the village in which Cather's Claude is billeted when he first reaches France as well as a devastated town near the front that he visits while waiting for his colonel to return from Paris.⁵ The unifying idea in Canfield Fisher's description is the great age of the village, its long cultural history, and its traditional way of life. She notes through the eyes of newly arrived American soldiers its "quiet gray street," its high stone walls lining the road, and the tranquil gardens behind the walls, "earthly Paradise[s] of green" with "superb nut-trees, great flowering bushes, a bit of grass, golden graveled paths" and "grapevines and fruit-trees carefully trained" against the inside of the walls (*HF* 1, 6). The unnamed narrative presence, whom we can confidently think of as the author herself, explains to a group of soldiers such matters as the reasoning of people who maintain the privacy of their gardens rather than opening them to the view of passers-by. She also explains such domestic customs as the keeping of rabbits as a food supply and the social custom of specialized rather than general food shops, such as bakeries.

Similar details appear in *One of Ours*. The first major incident after the *Anchises* lands is Claude's success in helping his men discover that different kinds of food (in this case cheese) are to be had in specialized rather than general shops. This incident occurs in an urban rather than village setting, but later, when Claude goes with David Gerhardt to find a billet while his company is assigned to a training camp, his first im-

pressions of the village are of its quiet "single street" lined with walls, behind which is found the Jouberts' "little sanded garden" (*OO* 280, 287). At a town nearer the front Claude notes "clean and shining" gravel walks, an espalliered pear tree, and a "shaven grass plot" (*OO* 309). During a week's rest at the town of Beaufort later on, he and his men are served rabbit.

It is scarcely surprising that Cather would note characteristics of French life that were, in fact, authentic. The use of rabbit meat in France was noted, for example, by Dr. Frederick Sweeney, whose wartime diary Cather used in writing the novel, especially for the crossing on the flu-ridden *Anchises*.⁶ It is also scarcely surprising that the writer who said that the earth itself was the heroine of one of her novels (*O Pioneers!*) would appreciate the love of the French people for their country. Accordingly, when Claude meets a one-armed veteran who joins the beautiful and gracious Mlle. de Courcy in mourning for the "poor trees," which have had the "worst" of the bombardments, and who means to trim and coax back the ones that show even the least signs of life "still . . . in the trunks," he thinks, "How much it must mean to a man to love his country like this" (*OO* 312-13). Certainly it would not have taken Canfield Fisher's example to bring to Cather's mind that love for the soil. She might well, however, have been prompted to emphasize the idea by the example of her friend's stories, many of which stress the French love for their native soil.

In "The Pensionnaire," for example, Canfield Fisher writes about a furloughed poilu who finds his home shattered and spends his entire time at home clearing debris, planting, and grieving for the destroyed trees—or as she puts it in "A Honeymoon . . . Vive l'Amérique!" the "carefully and expertly murdered fruit-trees and vines" (*HF* 237). When some of the pensionnaire's peonies begin to put up shoots, his wife exclaims, "I told you what was in the ground alive they couldn't kill!" (*HF* 49). We are reminded of the "sound" life still in the trunks of the trees seen by Claude—who would assuredly have been sensitive to the hope that cherished trees could come back, since one of his most troubling childhood experiences was his father's murdering of a cherry tree beloved by Claude's mother. Love for the earth and pride in careful gardening also appear in Canfield Fisher's "Vignettes from Life at the Rear" (*HF* 60-63), where attention is also drawn to such particulars of battle-

field experience as sheltering in shell holes and being cut off from food supply—both of which, again, appear in *One of Ours*. Canfield Fisher would likely have heard such stories directly from combatants in the course of her relief work, as the nameless “Madame” of the sketch does. Cather also spoke with returned soldiers, though at a considerably greater distance both of time and of space.

Parallels of a different kind occur with Canfield Fisher’s well-executed though heavily propagandistic story “A Little Kansas Leaven,” in which a mentally alert but otherwise ordinary young woman from the Midwest goes to France as a volunteer. The narrative development of the ordinariness of Ellen’s daily life, then her growing awareness of the war and her desire to get involved, resemble Cather’s account of Claude Wheeler’s life in Nebraska.⁷ Elements in common include the need to get out a map to see where Belgium is, the central character’s groping toward a sense of fairness as she tries to make sense of early reports of German aggression, and the use of personalized analogies to explain support for the war effort. In “A Little Kansas Leaven,” Ellen explains her admiration of the Belgians’ doomed resistance through the analogy of resisting a burglar who wants to go through her own and her cousin’s room in order to rob and perhaps kill their neighbor (*HF* 137-8). The “neighbor” she is actually talking about is, of course, France, and Belgium is the “room” the marauding outlaw is going through. Cather uses similar domestic analogies to comment on Germany’s violation of Belgium. As Claude and his friend Ernest stand looking out over their fields, trying to formulate their feelings about the invasion, Ernest says that being a soldier in the German army must be like being “marched into a peaceful country like this, in the middle of harvest, and begin[ning] to destroy it” (*OO* 136). Shortly afterward, Claude exclaims that the world had been mistaken in its assessment of the German people: “It’s as if we invited a neighbour over here and showed him our cattle and barns, and all the time he was planning how he would come at night and club us in our beds” (*OO* 139-40). Ellen, in “A Little Kansas Leaven,” is so moved by her sense of the unfairness of Germany’s invasion of Belgium and her admiration of French patriotism that she withdraws all her savings and goes to France to help. Similarly, as Claude and his mother read the news from Belgium and France, he feels inspired to wish that he could be “an atom in that wall of flesh and blood that rose and melted and rose again” in defense of Paris (*OO* 142).

Canfield Fisher's story of the plain girl from Kansas who gains heroic status by plunging into the war effort also seems to anticipate Cather's novel in its association of the Allies' war effort with a kind of spiritual glory and its rejection of pacifist or isolationist positions on the war—a note she sounded even more loudly at the end of "Some Confused Impressions," in *The Day of Glory*, where American soldiers go out "gloriously through the darkness to sacrifice" (132). It is notoriously difficult, of course, to decide Cather's "meaning" in her fiction; she is not a writer who makes overt statements. The interpretation of her attitude toward the war in *One of Ours* is no exception. To Blanche Gelfant, Claude's mother expresses an "impassioned advocacy of the war in Europe, which influences Claude to enlist in the army" (92); to Patricia Lee Yongue, Claude's mother and other women in the novel convey arguments *against* the war which go unheeded (145). My point is not to pronounce either of these diametrically opposed readings right or wrong; indeed, I generally find Cather's writing even more radically ambiguous than scholars have customarily allowed. Even so, it does seem to me, both from my reading of the text and from my reading of Cather's letters commenting on her writing of the novel (especially those to Dorothy Canfield Fisher), that she is at least partially invested in Claude's perception of the rightness and glory of fighting for France and its beautiful way of life and that she thus shares, at least to some degree, the pervasive attitude that Canfield Fisher expresses unambiguously—so unambiguously, indeed, that her story, unlike Cather's novel, serves as a call to action. Despite this difference in intentional purpose, however, it is clear that both writers were working with an idea of the war as an occasion imparting glamour or something that might be called glory to an otherwise humdrum existence.

Two more ideas in *Home Fires in France* that might have particularly struck Cather: First, the idea of interesting diversity, exemplified in French culture. In a story called "Hats," an American businessman who has come to France to continue his import of stylish hats praises a feminized France's skill in couture in terms that argue the value of difference or variety.

I don't know whether it's because she's been at the business of running the styles so long, so much longer than anybody else so that she's got all her fibers settled together, just right to catch

the note, the way the wood in an old violin trembles all over at sounds that leave the wood in the leg of a chair perfectly calm. Mind, I don't say the violin is any more important than a chair. As far as I'm concerned personally, if I had to choose I'd rather have the chair. What I'm trying to say is that they are *different*. And we've got to get used to the idea that *because things are different it doesn't mean one is better than the other and they ought both to be like the best one.* (HF 225)

We can imagine that this passage would have evoked a favorable response from the writer who celebrated, in a book published one year after her friend's book of war stories—*My Antonia*—immigrants' diversity of customs at a time when calls for Americanization and cultural uniformity were loud (Reynolds 63, 73-81). In *One of Ours*, Claude similarly displays interest in differentness—of foods, of customs, of ways of feeling. Second, the idea of the strength and courage of women in wartime. This is indeed a primary motif of both of Canfield Fisher's volumes, appearing in various guises in virtually every story or sketch. We have seen the celebration of female strength and determination in "A Little Kansas Leaven." Similar tributes appear in "Eyes for the Blind" and elsewhere in *Home Fires*, which ends with "La Pharmacienne," whose central character is undauntable. The two strongest pieces in *The Day of Glory*, "On the Edge" and "France's Fighting Woman Doctor," are celebrations of "valiant" and "patriotic" Frenchwomen who exhibit skill and "selfless courage" (DoG 47, 44, 131).

Cather's celebration of women's achievements in the war is less overt than Canfield Fisher's, but in her characteristically understated and indirect way she too emphasized the strength and importance of women. Yongue has argued, in fact, that the women characters in *One of Ours* are the book's touchstones of value. From Mrs. Wheeler and simpleminded Mahailie to the hardworking teacher Gladys Farmer, Claude's undeniably unpleasant wife Enid, a woman pilot, and the quiet relief worker Mlle. Olive de Courcy, women go about their business, thinking their own thoughts and shaping their world. Cather was no self-proclaimed feminist—even if she did once say in an interview that the movement of women into careers couldn't help but be a positive thing (Bohlke 49). We would expect, then, that even setting aside the fact of personal friend-

ship she would not have manifested the interest in Gertrude Atherton's book of war essays, which celebrated women's wartime relief roles with a keen edge of feminist argumentation, that she expressed in Canfield Fisher's. Her friend's confidence in women's capacities, unelaborated with political argumentation, was one that we would expect to appeal to Cather, who repeatedly, throughout her career, created competent and independent-minded but generally apolitical women characters.⁸

When Cather asked Dorothy Canfield Fisher to go over the manuscript of her novel of a midwestern youth who glamorizes his life by going to war, she was not, then, merely drawing on her friend's knowledge of the French language and landscape, but on a very precisely focused set of experiences, attitudes, and modes of expression. So close are some of the parallels between *One of Ours* and Canfield Fisher's two books of wartime stories, especially *Home Fires in France*, that we might even wonder if, reading the manuscript, Canfield Fisher may not have been brought up short by the possibility of imitation on Cather's part, not with respect to the work as a whole (*One of Ours* is a very different kind of book from Canfield Fisher's volumes of stories and sketches) but with respect to those specific aspects of the novel that Cather had asked her particularly to scrutinize.

If so, she seems not to have raised the issue. One possible reason for her not to have done so would have been that she was not surprised. She would have known only too well from their controversy, years earlier, over "The Profile"—the very controversy that, even more than Cather's behavior in Europe, had led to their estrangement—how intent Cather could be on having her work take precedence over merely personal concerns.⁹ She would have known, too, how prolonged a disruption in their friendship might result from raising an objection. They were women in their forties (Cather in her late forties), and Canfield Fisher must have shared Cather's hope that their relationship during their remaining years could be more amicable than it had been during the previous two decades. Another possible answer, of course, is that if she did notice the echoes I have pointed out, she may have simply been gratified and pleased that her respected friend had found in her work some of the seeds that grew into so impressive a novel as *One of Ours*.¹⁰

Notes

1. I quote the paraphrase rather than the letter itself because of the ongoing prohibition on publishing or quoting Cather's letters.

2. Ernest Hemingway's ridicule of Cather's depiction of battle in a letter to Edmund Wilson is well known; see Baker, 105.

3. Atherton (204) shows Dorothy Canfield Fisher's name immediately beside that of Edith Wharton in a list of American women whose names should appear on a "roll of honor" for working "as hard" for France "as if this great afflicted country were their own."

4. Among letters in which Cather commented on speeches, magazine pieces, or books giving accounts of the war are the following: to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, pm. September 28, 1914; to her Aunt Franc (Cather), November 17, 1914; to Ferris Greenslet, "Sunday," probably 1919.

5. Cather had seen considerable devastation in this area herself, during a 1919 trip to Cantigny to locate the burial place of her cousin. Letter to Charles Cather, July 7, [1920]; to H.L. Mencken.

6. A transcription of the diary is available at Love Library, University of Nebraska.

7. Parallels can also be seen between Canfield Fisher's Ellen and Cather's Enid, Claude's disagreeable wife in *One of Ours*. Ellen, a "plain, rather sallow, very serious" sort of woman, maintains her view of German guilt even in the face of her minister's pacifist sermon and a neighbor's explanation that the German army only wanted to walk peacefully along the roads of Belgium. She insists, "They'd promised they wouldn't" (HF 134-6). After the sinking of the *Lusitania* she withdraws all her savings from the bank and goes to France despite her employer's threat that she won't have a job when she returns. Enid, a moralistic Prohibitionist, "never questioned the rightness of her own decisions" so that "when she made up her mind, there was no turning her" (180). When she hears that her missionary sister is ill, she abruptly goes off to China to help, despite Claude's opposition.

8. Cf. Skaggs's succinct statement (24), "Cather has rendered the varied potentialities of women more memorably than perhaps any other American writer. See, however, Fetterley 43-59; also, Lambert 676-90, arguing that after *My Ántonia* Cather turned away from such presentations. Fetterley's and Lambert's arguments ask us to ignore not only many minor characters in *One of Ours*, but such a major figure as Rachel Blake in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

9. The controversy over "The Profile" related to Cather's modeling of her central character, whose face is severely scarred, on a woman to whom she had been introduced by Canfield. As a result of Canfield's determined opposition, the story was deleted from *The Troll Garden*, though it was later published in *McClure's*. The dispute, long a mystery, was cleared up by the discovery of letters now in the Bailey-Howe Library at the University of Vermont. See Madigan, "Willa Cather and Dorothy Canfield Fisher."

10. According to her subsequent review in the *New York Times Book Review*, September 10, 1922.

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Dorothy Canfield Fisher, original name Dorothea Frances Canfield, pen name Dorothy Canfield, (born February 17, 1879, Lawrence, Kansas, U.S.–died November 9, 1958, Arlington, Vermont), prolific American author of novels, short stories, children's books, educational works, and memoirs. Britannica Explores. 100 Women Trailblazers. Her Son's Wife (1926) is one of the best regarded of her longer works; the story of a perfectionist mother who learns to accept her son's ill-bred wife, it may contain her best characterization. In the 1940s and '50s, Fisher worked for numerous environmental, children's, and educational causes and also wrote several historical children's books, including Paul Revere and the Minute Men (1950).