Ronald Schatz has produced an analytical yet exciting study of electrical workers and their struggles. He captures the courage and vitality of these workers who fought hard not only to build a union but to preserve that union in the face of serious political repression. If they did not always succeed, Schatz makes clear that it was not for lack of effort.

*The Samuel Gompers Papers*

*University of Maryland*  
*College Park, Maryland*


In her review of the most recent biography of Willa Cather, *Willa*, by Phyllis Robinson, Carolyn See, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, says, "The phrase that best describes this new biography of Willa Cather might be 'brisk synthesis.'" She notes that most of the material in the book has been included in other biographies. She is correct that this book is a reworking of earlier books and collected letters, together with Robinson's own sometimes curious interpretations. She is also correct that the book moves along briskly, enlivened by a certain amount of unadmitted fiction. Despite the generous amount of printed material available to her, Robinson has made a number of mistakes in names and dates. Of special interest to Pittsburghers is her misidentification of Pittsburgh author Margaret Deland's Old Chester (generally recognized as the Manchester section of the North Side) as a New England village.

At first glance the documentation of the book appears good. Some other reviewers, indeed, have commented favorably on it. However, scholars who are familiar with Cather material are less enthusiastic. Susan J. Rosowski, a Cather specialist at the University of Nebraska, comments that the text contains no internal references to the endnotes. She notes that "Robinson, who seldom authenticates her source, proceeds even when she has none." Robinson's book contrasts sharply with *Chrysalis: Willa Cather in Pittsburgh, 1896-1906*, by Kathleen D. Byrne and Richard C. Snyder. This thoroughly documented biography was published by the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania in 1980 and is now in its second printing.
A typical example of Robinson's proceeding without documentation is her portrayal of Willa Cather in her childhood as an unhappy "outsider," the child of parents who were tottering on the poverty line. One wonders about the source of this innovative revelation. The endnotes give no clue. Only a few pages before Robinson had written about the Miners, one of Red Cloud's most prominent and successful families, and Cather's close and lasting friendship with the daughters of that family.

Also undocumented is Robinson's assertion that people in Red Cloud were hostile to Cather and that her parents had to shield her from "gossip and animosity" when she returned home on visits. Robinson says that she herself visited Red Cloud and read in the archives of the Cather Center there the letters from Cather to her Red Cloud friends. Yet Robinson does not allow the tone and content of these letters to stand in the way of her unsupported assertion. Even more astonishing is that after her visit to the Cather Center, she could have said that there is no monument to Willa Cather in Red Cloud. The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial was founded by Mildred Bennett and Cather's lifetime friend, Carrie Miner Sherwood, and was financed by private donations, largely from Nebraskans, until 1968. At that time the Nebraska State Historical Society assumed title to and management of the buildings and archives, making them the Cather Center of the historical society. The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation is still an active group that sponsors conferences, seminars and workshops, and awards scholarships to students engaged in the study of Cather's works.

Where the book has found favor it has been with reviewers who approve Mrs. Robinson's assertion that Willa Cather was "undoubtedly" a lesbian, latent or otherwise. ("Undoubtedly" is Robinson's cover for guesswork throughout the book.) But three reviewers have commented on two of the "undoubtedlys." Joseph Epstein in the New Criterion says, "Mrs. Robinson tells us that 'Willa undoubtedly needed sexual fulfillment as well as intellectual social stimulation.' And when she moved into an apartment in New York's Greenwich Village with Edith Lewis, with whom she lived for forty years, Mrs. Robinson writes: 'Their life together was undoubtedly a marriage in every sense.' (That's two undoubtedlys — beware trial by adverb.)" The same passages are quoted by Susan Rosowski in her review in The Prairie Schooner with the comment, "When there is nothing at all to rely upon, Robinson dismisses argument entirely and turns to the word undoubtedly." Finally, in his review in the St. Paul Press/
Dispatch Bruce Benidt quotes the same passages and comments: "Robinson seems not to want to admit that she's guessing about Cather's lesbianism. Since most of Cather's letters were destroyed at her own request, there is no way to prove the point, and as a reader, I would prefer that Robinson admit she's drawing conclusions. Authors' assumptions should not be written as historical fact."

William B. Hunter in the Houston Chronicle Magazine elaborates on Cather's sexual identification:

As Robinson convincingly demonstrates, Cather grew up a tomboy (she called herself William for a time), she never married and she had extended and profound attachments to a number of women, climaxed by the one for the last half of her life to the editor Edith Lewis. Today almost everyone will read all of this as evidence of homosexuality, and there seems to be no question that it was latent in her makeup. But did this lead to actual practice? Robinson does not argue that it did, but her implications are clear.

I strongly doubt it. Unlike our own ethical standards, those in which Cather was brought up were still rigorous, unquestioned, "biblical." We commit an anachronism if we interpret her in terms of our own contemporary lifestyles and must instead recognize the profound moral difference for individuals, then and now, between latency and practice. From what I know of her Cather would have been horrified (as would almost everyone else in her day) by lesbian practices, and we would do well to remember this as not to bias our reading of her fiction, which is based on the ethical norms of her times.

And another reviewer, Herb Hyde, in the Lincoln (Nebraska) Sunday Journal and Star, writes:

The one thing I do not understand about the critical commentary generated by Willa: The Life of Willa Cather is why so many people are anxious to jump on the bandwagon and say Willa was a lesbian when no documentary proof of this has been presented and when scholarship demands that such proof be submitted in irrefutable quantity. The conclusion must be inferred on the basis of what is at best circumstantial material; it cannot be based on something that does not exist. To those who say proof of lesbian relationships lies in letters destroyed long ago, I ask: How do you know? Nor is proof to be found in extant Cather letters (which can be examined but not published); if it were, scholars would have revealed it long before now.

There is something else to be said. Where is it written that two women (or two men) cannot have a loving, intimate relationship without sex, and why do some observers of such a relationship automatically assume that sexual activity is involved? Where is it written that we must share everything, including our letters, with the world? Do we not all have a right to privacy? And do we not have a right to that privacy without being suspected of ulterior motives?

Willa Cather's writings owe nothing to her sexual preference, whatever that might have been. They stand on their own merits, magnificent in their universal appeal to the literate peoples of our planet, loved in whatever language they are read, admired by practitioners of the writing craft. They will endure long after her detractors have passed away.

One of the present reviewers, Helen C. Southwick, has grappled with the question of Cather's alleged homosexuality in "Willa Cather's Early Career: Origins of a Legend," Western Pennsylvania His-
In this article, she concludes that it is a gross distortion of evidence to define Cather's relationship with Isabelle McClung in Pittsburgh as sexual. Quite simply, Robinson's book is filled with surmises, unwarranted guesses, and lofty assumptions that are not and cannot be documented regarding Cather's personal life.

Others are sharply critical of the shallowness of Robinson's treatment of Willa Cather's life and career. The Booklist: "Robinson's Willa is not a scholarly presentation." "The book feels unsubstantial, superficial," writes Bruce Benidt. "It is neither a penetrating, critical look at Cather's novels and stories nor a very deep consideration of her background and life." Susan Rosowski concludes that "this biography is insensitive because Robinson apparently assumes so little from her reader... It is a popular rather than an academic biography." Finally, Larry Horney in the Indianapolis Star writes: "Willa Cather was a stimulating woman — creative and talented — one of those people in American letters who deserve attention. The shame of it is, she doesn't deserve the kind of attention Phyllis C. Robinson gives her in this recent biography."

Yet not everyone condemns the book. Catherine Bancroft in the Philadelphia Inquirer says that Robinson, "a longtime Cather fan, has written a succinct, up-to-date account of Willa Cather's life... not stinting on any of the controversial areas (such as Cather's homosexuality) but proving herself a pleasingly direct and trustworthy chronicler." In the Pittsburgh Press Carl Apone sees the book as "very readable, often fascinating and well researched... [it] might even touch off renewed interest in the brilliant writings of this brilliant woman." Regardless of where these reviewers are in the spectrum of opinion on Robinson's book, they all concur that Cather has earned her place in the upper echelons of American literature and that her writings are considered classics.

Documentation and proof, however, remain the key issues in evaluating Robinson's Willa. There have been a number of well-documented books on Willa Cather — and this is not one of them. Both of the present reviewers have traveled across the country checking facts in libraries, historical societies, universities, and in other places offering verification for our publications, as well as interviewing friends and relatives of Willa Cather. Richard C. Snyder combed the Pittsburgh area to add to the research underpinning Chrysalis. And now we hope that all the tiresome and undocumented assumptions about Willa Cather's supposed lesbianism will be put aside until such time
(should such time ever come) that such unwarranted conclusions can be documented.

*West Alexander, Pennsylvania*  
Kathleen D. Byrne  
*Pittsburgh*  
Helen C. Southwick


There are those in government who would have us believe that all is well in America, that horrifying tales of increased poverty, a rise in the number of homeless and hungry, the frightening incidences of black unemployment, especially among the young, are just a figment of liberals’ imaginations. Such attitudes are the product of callousness, insensitivity, and a curious American proclivity to ignore its history. Edmunds’s small book snaps us back to reality and reminds us of a time not too far distant when black Americans were imprisoned in poverty and denied all the benefits of citizenship by a universal racism. It is a reminder that we are not too far removed from the days just after World War II when blacks could not swim in city pools, when there were no black secretaries on the staffs of city corporations, when one searched in vain for a black face in the local media, in nursing and medical schools, or behind the counters of department stores. It took “wade ins” and much violence before the pools were desegregated, demonstrations led by the present speaker of the state house of representatives K. Leroy Irvis, before department stores agreed to employ blacks behind their counters, and the twenty years of badgering and hectoring by the Urban League and other black organizations before the Board of Education hired its first black teacher in 1937. That is not an enviable record, and in a period of recession when social programs are being decimated the appearance of Edmunds’s book is almost a call to arms, a plea for vigilance, lest we revert to darker days.

But the book is also a tribute to all those who fought against frightful odds in an effort to improve the condition of blacks in the city. In that sense it is a statement of hope. Formed in 1918 as a social welfare agency, the Pittsburgh Urban League tackled the many problems created by the massive influx of southern black migrants in the years after 1915 when Pittsburgh’s black population grew at an annual rate of nearly 45 percent. In the next two years it rose 227 percent.