The Pittsburgh Stories of Willa Cather
Edited and introduced by Peter Oresick
208 pp.
$25.95, $19.95
Reviewed by Lu Donnelly, former Architecture Around Us columnist for WPH magazine

Willa Cather lived in Pittsburgh from 1896 to 1906, and returned frequently to write in her study at her friend Isabelle McClung’s house until 1915 when Judge McClung died and the house was sold. As an enduring gift to the literary life of Pittsburgh and to honor her 20 years of writing in the city, Oresick has collected Willa Cather’s six Pittsburgh short stories for the first time in one volume. This is the second volume of the Marianna Brown Dietrich Notable Book Series featuring another female author of national import.

Cather was born in Virginia in 1873, moved to Nebraska in 1882, and then to Pittsburgh 14 years later. While her Nebraska novels are the most often read, she was quite prolific and continued writing until her death in 1947, having lived 40 years in New York City. Cather wrote 12 novels and at least 60 short stories and was the second woman to win a Pulitzer Prize after Edith Wharton. She won the prize the year following publication of her 1922 novel about the First World War titled One of Ours. The six short stories in the Dietrich collection all have either Pittsburgh protagonists or settings.

Cather stated that “Pittsburgh was the birthplace of my writing.” An 1896 letter she wrote from Pittsburgh to a friend indicates her philosophy of life: “There is no God but one God and Art is his revealer; that’s my creed and I’ll follow it to the end, to a hotter place than Pittsburgh, if need be.” The stories included in this collection bear out this philosophy.

In the story titled “Professor’s Commencement,” Emerson Graves characterizes Pittsburgh this way: “it controls a vast manufacturing region given over to sordid and materialistic ideals … the reign of Mammon has been long and oppressive.” Each of the stories is carried along by this juxtaposition of beauty in music, art, or literature with the grasping materialism of manufacturing.

Her protagonist in “Paul’s Case” steals money from his office, runs away from what he perceives as his humdrum life, and spends a week in a luxurious New York hotel. Paul describes the life on Cordelia Street (Aurelia Street) in Shadyside: “The men on the steps—all in their shirt sleeves, their vests unbuttoned—sat with their legs well apart, their stomachs comfortably protruding, and talked of the various prices of things, or told anecdotes of the sagacity of their various chiefs and overlords.”

In “The Namesake” an expatriate American artist living in Paris returns to his family homestead in the Mon Valley to care for his elderly aunt and discover more about the relative he’s named after. The crux of the story is Cather’s capturing of an artist’s triumph: “artists know when we, rarely, achieve truth in our work; the feeling of union with some great force, of purpose and security, of being glad that we have lived.”

My favorite story, “A Gold Slipper,” is a vignette of a man “of substance” who is forced to attend a concert to impress his wife’s school friend and had to be seated on the stage behind the singer as they purchased their seats at the last minute. Our man of substance rescues the singer from her broken down car on the way to the train station. They find their accommodations on the train across from one another and discuss life for several hours.

The fifth of the six stories is about a talented pianist and composer who grew up in a fictional town like Edgeworth/Sewickley (think Ethelbert Nevin). Unlike the real Nevin, this man was married very young to a grasping woman and ran off with a beautiful singer as a way to escape the unhappy marriage.

Finally, in “Double Birthday,” an uncle and nephew share a name and a birthday. As the story takes place during Prohibition, when asked by a local judge what gift he can send for his 80-year-old uncle the younger man asks for a fine bottle of wine.

This collection was edited and has an introduction by Peter Oresick, a poet, professor, and publisher born in Western Pennsylvania who died only a month before the book’s release. In his introduction, he describes Cather’s various jobs in the city and her evolution as a professional journalist and teacher. A chronology of her Pittsburgh years from 1896 to 1916 included at the back of the book is well worth having. The book is a fitting tribute to both their life’s work.
Miller selected a variety of writings from Pinchot that “offer us an unparalleled view of his active engagements as he lived them, thought about them, and captured them on the page.” Unparalleled because as Miller notes, Pinchot’s autobiography was written and assembled with a specific voice and message in mind. Miller chose documents that were not originally published in Pinchot’s autobiography; while they are “purposeful” (he was, after all, a politician), these particular writings were not “polished, with an eye to how history would receive and interpret them.” These were written in the moment, for the moment.  

Miller organized 43 of Pinchot’s publications and speeches into five sections: “Forests, Forestry, and Foresters,” “War and Peace,” “Governing the Keystone State,” “Water, Energy and Power,” and “Natural Engagement.” The essays and speeches were written at various points throughout Pinchot’s life. Each section has an introduction and each document is annotated by Miller, although readers unfamiliar with Pinchot, conservation history, or 20th-century American history may find supplemental context helpful to engage with some of the readings. Regardless, Pinchot’s writing is generally easy to follow for a wide audience.

Through this collection, Miller demonstrates his thesis that the variety of Pinchot’s interests shows “his enduring Progressive commitments,” and that many of his ideas sound familiar to us today. Particularly interesting are Pinchot’s thoughts on private versus public ownership and utility of nature’s resources, human’s influence on destructive flooding, and international commitments to conservation. Miller also chose documents related to famous political battles Pinchot fought, including the building of the Hetch Hetchy Dam and the argument over private ownership of Alaska coal fields. Documents from his time as Pennsylvania’s Governor illuminate a period of national and state political upheaval and include writings that reveal his support of women voters, both of his inaugural addresses, his Prohibitionist beliefs before and after its ultimate repeal, and federal solutions to the Great Depression. Pinchot is certainly a man of his era and it is important to view his writings through this lens. Many of his essays are tinged with colonial or paternalistic perspectives, and he uses racist language regarding Native Americans and a fishing companion called “Mexican Joe.” Like many of his peers, Pinchot was interested in the eugenics movement, which Miller unfortunately does not discuss in this treatment.

As we discuss conservation and the environment today, it is important to understand when, why, and how the current programs and regulations were implemented in the first place. A contemporary of Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir, Pinchot remains less well-known, but his writings offer an important perspective on the history of the conservation movement, Progressive Era, and Depression-era politics. With any collection of documents, it is fair to question whether they were selected to intentionally fit the thesis, or vice versa, and to read with this in mind. Char Miller appears to have thoughtfully arranged an array of documents to highlight Pinchot’s work, and showcases Pinchot’s own claim: “I am a Governor, every now and then, but I am a forester all the time—have been, and shall be, all my working life.”

Gifford Pinchot may not be a household name today, but this Progressive-era figure would arguably feel comfortable in at a modern political debate. As the first Chief Forester of the Forestry Service, a Progressive Republican, and a two-term Governor of Pennsylvania, Pinchot’s exhaustive career spanned many decades and encompassed numerous issues. In Gifford Pinchot: Selected Writings, editor Char Miller has chosen a broad range of the eclectic conservationist and politician’s writings and speeches that tap into the mindset of an early 20th-century social, political, and environmental activist. A scholar on both environmental history and Pinchot, Miller rightly argues that Pinchot’s writings are worth analyzing today, particularly as climate change and humanity’s relationship with the environment continue to be argued.

2 Ibid., 2.
3 Ibid., 227, 241-244.