PERIODICALS

RESOURCES & ENVIRONMENT

from national forests at below-market prices has not only cost the taxpayer over $2 billion but, by artificially reducing pulpwood prices, has also discouraged the use of recycled paper. Until Congress and the White House end such contradictory policies, Shea warns, “the federal government promotes the continuation of a throwaway society.”

ARTS & LETTERS

Willa Cather’s
Long Ordeal


During the 1920s, Willa Cather (1873–1947) was one of the major figures in American letters. Her six novels of that decade included the Pulitzer Prize-winning One of Ours (1922); she was awarded honorary degrees from Yale, Columbia, and the University of Michigan.

But during the ensuing Depression years, Cather’s reputation faded. Reflecting contemporary political fashion, American critics denounced her, as they did playwright Thornton Wilder, for being an old-fashioned conservative. A New Republic reviewer in 1931 claimed that, by setting her works in the remote American past, Cather wrote as if “mass production” and the class struggle did not exist. More often, male critics disdained Cather simply for being female; Granville Hicks, for example, charged that Cather’s gender barred her from having the “stern stuff” necessary to be a good novelist.

Why, asks O’Brien, a professor of English and American studies at Dickinson College, did a new breed of male critics during the 1930s suddenly rank Cather as a “minor” writer? The arbiters of the previous decade tended to be independent men of letters such as H. L. Mencken. But critics of the 1930s, including Lionel Trilling (Columbia) and Henry Seidel Canby (Yale), were mostly academics seeking to legitimize American literature as a field of study. To these ambitious scholars, who expressed their views in new journals such as The New England Quarterly (est. 1928) and American Literature (est. 1929), women writers were unfit to be included in the definition of a national literature.

In a collection of essays, Not Under Forty (1936), Cather took on her foes, defending her right to ignore contemporary social problems in her work and praising such distinguished female predecessors as her mentor, novelist Sarah Orne Jewett. The essays were sharply attacked, and Cather vowed never to publish literary criticism again. She also refused to permit her writing to appear in high school and college anthologies.

Yet, as her stock among the literati fell, Cather received hundreds of letters of support from loyal readers. Her biographer, Edith Lewis, said these letters were for Cather “a great anonymous affirmation of her art,” and they helped her to keep writing. Since Cather’s death, her fiction has continued to attract an audience; O Pioneers, My Antonia, all her other novels, and most of her short stories are currently in print.