

# *The Professor's House*, Willa Cather

## History, Commodification, and the Creation of National Identity

### History of Mesa Verde:

The discovery of Mesa Verde provided the base for the fictional and romanticized rendition of Tom's discovery of the Mesa in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*.

**1888:** On December 18, Richard Wetherill and Charles Mason rode out in search of lost cattle with their Ute guide Acowitz. That afternoon Richard entered Spruce Tree House, and the next day the two men climbed to Square Tower House.

**1889:** Over a 15-month period, the Wetherill brothers explored the Mesa Verde "ruins" and reported having entered 182 cliff dwellings, 106 in Navajo Canyon alone. On December 20, their father Benjamin Wetherill wrote a letter to the Smithsonian Institute. He proposed that the Mancos and its tributary canyons, as well as Mesa Verde, be reserved as a national park in order to preserve the cliff dwellings.

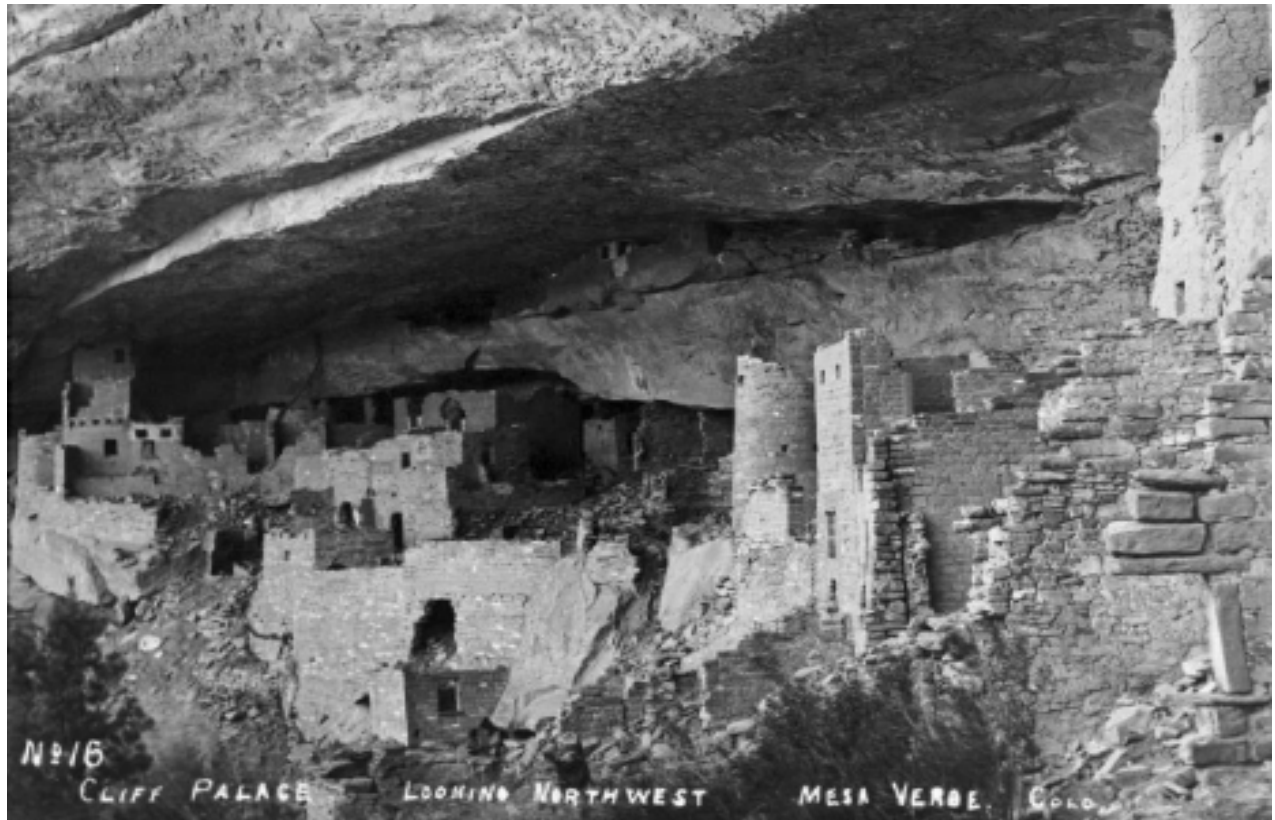
**1890:** On February 11, in another letter to the Smithsonian, Benjamin Wetherill again stated their desire that the area be made into a national park to protect the "ruins." If not, he feared that "the tourists will destroy them."

**1891:** Baron Gustaf E. A. Nordenskiöld, of the Academy of Sciences in Sweden, using painstaking field methods for his time, excavated, sketched, and photographed numerous sites. He collected about 600 items which were sent to Sweden, and now reside in the National Museum in Helsinki, Finland. Nordenskiöld's initial attempt to ship his artifacts back to Sweden sparked a controversy. When his pack animals, loaded down with 600 items (including a mummified corpse), reached the Durango railway station, he was accused of looting Mesa Verde and arrested. But the charges were dropped when it was established that he could not have broken any law, since no law existed to protect antiquities at the time.

**1900:** The Colorado Cliff Dwellings Association formed under the leadership of Virginia McClurg and Lucy Peabody. The organization's sole purpose was to preserve the cliff dwellings of the Mesa Verde area. They promoted their campaign to make Mesa Verde a national park through letter writing, fund raising, and even tours of Mesa Verde for the press.

**1901-1905:** In February, 1901, the first bill was introduced before Congress to create "Colorado Cliff Dwellings National Park." The bill did not pass. At least four more bills were introduced during the following years, but all failed.

**1906:** In 1905, a bill for the creation of Mesa Verde National Park was introduced in the 59th Congress. This bill was subsequently passed, and the park was created on June 29, 1906. The bill was signed by President Theodore Roosevelt. Earlier that same year, on June 8, 1906, a bill called "an Act for the Preservation of American Antiquities," or more commonly, the **Antiquities Act of 1906**, was passed. This act made it a federal crime to collect or destroy any historic or prehistoric object or building on federally owned land.



**Top:** Cliff Palace c. 1890-1900 Cliff Palace.  
Thomas McKee. MEVE  
9084, TM-36.

**Bottom:** Wetherills at Spruce Tree House, 1891, John and Al Wetherill at Spruce Tree House. Nordenskiöld photograph, 1891.  
CREDIT: Nordenskiöld Photograph

**Source:**  
<http://www.nps.gov/>



## S.doc.314 - Preservation of Historic and Prehistoric Ruins, etc., 1904

any protection for its antiquities.

It was not until perhaps twenty-five years ago that excavations began in the ruins of the Southwest. Among the first to excavate for commercial purposes were three brothers in Colorado, who saw the commercial value of the Pueblo and Cliff ruins. They began with the Cliff Palace, in southern Colorado, which is one of the most interesting ruins in the world. They went through it thoroughly. I suppose the antiquities they sold from that ruin ran up in amount anywhere between five and ten thousand dollars. They then proceeded to work in other ruins.

Doctor KELSEY. It should perhaps be noted that at that time the prices were much smaller than now, so that ruins to the value of \$5,000 or \$10,000 represented very much more than now.

Reverend Doctor BAUM. I suppose the present value would be double that amount.

Doctor KELSEY. Or more than double. The single pieces sell for how much?

Reverend Doctor BAUM. There is one piece owned by Mrs. McClurg for which an offer of \$3,000 has been made by the Smithsonian Institution. They excavated other ruins of the Mesa Verde region. They went through many of the ruins of the San Juan watershed, in which there are over 1,600. Then they went through the Chaco Canyon, where one of them has now a large trading station.

Here the American Museum of Natural History of New York has expended over \$50,000, and the ruins are still far from being excavated. That one ruin contained over 2,000 rooms and was once 7 stories in height. About 50,000 pieces of turquoise have been taken from this ruin.

For 10 miles up Chaco Canyon there are extensive ruins on both sides of it. The canyon is about a mile wide. Pueblo ruins are scattered along the ridges of the canyon.

I venture to say, from a somewhat careful examination of the ruins in and adjacent to the Chaco Canyon, that there was a population of 150,000 people, all within a section of 5 miles wide and 15 miles long.

These brothers, after going through these ruins, or many of them,

**Source:** Committee on Public Lands. Senate. *Hearing Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Public Lands of the United States Senate*, S.doc.314, Apr. 22, 1904 ProQuest Legislative Insight, PL59-209-1 Antiquities Act of 1906

## Letter to Pat Knopf, 1938

→ In a letter written to Pat Knopf, Alfred Knopf's son, on 12 December 1938, Cather describes her inspiration for the novel as being Dutch paintings. The letter was published (in abbreviated form) in 1940 in the College English Association newsletter and then reprinted after Cather's death as the essay "On *The Professor's House*" in *On Writing*.

"Just before I began the book I had seen, in Paris, an exhibition of old and modern Dutch paintings. In many of them the scene presented was a living-room warmly furnished, or a kitchen full of food and coppers. But in most of the interiors, whether drawing-room or kitchen, there was a square window, open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a stretch of grey. The feeling of the sea that one got through those square windows was remarkable, and gave me a sense of the fleets of Dutch ships that ply quietly on all the waters of the globe—to Java, etc.

In my book I tried to make Professor St. Peter's house rather overcrowded and stuffy with new things; American proprieties, clothes, furs, petty ambitions, quivering jealousies—until one got rather stifled. Then I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa, and the fine disregard of trivialities which was in Tom Outland's face and in his behaviour.”  
("On *The Professor's House*" 31-32)

**Source:** Cather, Willa. "On *The Professor's House*." *On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*. Foreword by Stephen Tennant. New York: Knopf, 1949. 30-32. Cited in Karush, Deborah. "Bringing Outland Inland in *The Professor's House*: Will Cather's Domestication of Empire." *Cather Studies*, 4 (1999) <http://cather.unl>

### Willa Cather's Mesa Verde Promotional Essay, Originally printed Jan. 31, 1916, in *The Denver Times*

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Mesa Verde Wonderland Is Easy to Reach  
Colorado Show Place as Authoress Sees It

Adventurous Young Swede, Who Made Trip  
Long Ago, Wrote Book to Describe It

Journey Now Easy and Spell Cast by Remains  
of Forgotten Race is Potent

By Willa Sibert Cather

[...]

Willa Cather's 1916 Mesa Verde Essay 85

Everything in the cliff dweller villages points to a tempered, settled, ritualistic life, where generations went on gravely and reverently repeating the past, rather than battling for anything new. Their lives were so full of ritual and symbolism that all their common actions were ceremonial – planting, harvesting, hunting, feasting, fasting. The great drama of the weather and the seasons occupied their minds a good deal, and they seem to have ordered their behavior according to the moon and sun and stars. The windows in the towers were arranged with regard for astronomical observations. Their strong habitations, their settled mode of living, their satisfying ritual, seem to have made this people conservative and aristocratic. The most plausible theory as to their extinction is that the dwellers on the Mesa Verde were routed and driven out by their vulgar, pushing neighbors of the plains, who were less comfortable, less satisfied, and consequently more energetic.

[...]

Dr. Johnson declared that man is an historical animal. Certainly it is the human record, however slight, that stirs us most deeply, and a country without such a record is dumb, no matter how beautiful. The Mesa Verde is not, as many people think, an inconveniently situated museum. It is the story of an early race, of the social and religious life of a people indigenous to that soil and to

#### 86 Prairie Schooner

its rocky splendors. It is the human expression of that land of sharp contours, brutal contrasts, glorious color and blinding light. The human consciousness, as we know it today, dwelt there, and a feeling for beauty and order was certainly not absent. There are in those stone villages no suggestions revolting to our sensibilities. No sinister ideas lurk in the sun-drenched ruins hung among the crags. One has only to go down into Hopiland to find the same life going on today on other mesa tops; houses like these, kivas like these, ceremonial and religious implements like these – every detail preserved with the utmost fidelity. When you see those ancient, pyramidal pueblos once more brought nearer by the sunset light that beats on them like gold-beaters' hammers, when the aromatic pinon smoke begins to curl up in the still air and the boys bring in the cattle and the old Indians come out in their white burnouses and take their accustomed grave positions upon the housetops, you begin to feel that custom, ritual, integrity of tradition have a reality that goes deeper than the bustling business of the world.

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**Source:** Rosowski, Susan J., and Bernice Slote. "Willa Cather's 1916 Mesa Verde Essay: The Genesis of *The Professor's House* " *Prairie Schooner* 58 (winter 1984): 81-92.  
JSTOR



PL50-535, Mesa Verde National Park Establishment, 1906

ship, the place of beginning.

SEC. 2. That said public park shall be known as the Mesa Verde National Park, and shall be under the exclusive control of the Secretary of the Interior, whose duty it shall be to prescribe such rules and regulations and establish such services as he may deem necessary for the care and management of the same. Such regulations shall provide specifically for the preservation from injury or spoliation of the ruins and other works and relics of prehistoric or primitive man within said park: *Provided*, That all prehistoric ruins that are situated within five miles of the boundaries of said park, as herein described, on Indian lands and not on lands alienated by patent from the ownership of the United States, are hereby placed under the custodianship of the Secretary of the Interior, and shall be administered by the same service that is established for the custodianship of the park.

Name.

Regulations.

*Provided*.  
Prehistoric ruins.

SEC. 3. That the Secretary of the Interior be, and he is hereby, authorized to permit examinations, excavations, and other gathering of objects of interest within said park by any person or persons whom he may deem properly qualified to conduct such examinations, excavations, or gatherings, subject to such rules and regulations as he may prescribe: *Provided always*, That the examinations, excavations, and gatherings are undertaken only for the benefit of some reputable museum, university, college, or other recognized scientific or educational institution, with a view to increasing the knowledge of such objects and aiding the general advancement of archaeological science.

Excavations, etc.

*Provided*.  
Restriction.

SEC. 4. That any person or persons who may otherwise in any manner willfully remove, disturb, destroy, or molest any of the ruins, mounds, buildings, graves, relics, or other evidences of an ancient civilization or other property from said park shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction before any court having jurisdiction of such offenses shall be fined not more than one thousand dollars or imprisoned not more than twelve months, or such person or persons may be fined and imprisoned, at the discretion of the judge, and shall be required to restore the property disturbed, if possible.

Penalty for destroy  
ing ruins, etc.

Approved, June 20, 1906.

Source: 34 Stat. 616, Chap: 3607, 'An Act Creating the Mesa Verde National Park', PL59-353, First Session, ProQuest Legislative Insight

Interiority of history through the cultural museum house movement:

"Yet Cather's novel presages a new form of interiority- a modernist interiority- in which the home fulfills and important civic role. Charting a shift in cultural primacy from original sites and their museum representations to the exhibition space of the private home, *The Professor's House* envisions a home not simple as an alternative site to the museum but as a new kind of museum. Cather's unique concern with the place of history within modernity finds her negotiating the home's conflation of economic, social, and cultural value to imagine how the domestic interior could renew culture. To recast the home as a museum requires attentiveness to the formal as well as the social aspects of the domestic interior, and in her novel Cather restages the revivification of cultural objects by incorporating them into the settings and scenery of daily life. Yet she goes further to deny that this affective relation is limited to a single space or time. The

mise-en-scene of history and culture is maintained through distinctly curatorial household rituals and performances that establish a relationship between objects, spaces, and persons both within and between homes. Undercutting more traditional notions of preservation, Cather's novel creates a literary museum that models a mobile and generative archive for the modern era" (Festa77-78).

**Further Reading:**

Cather, Willa. "On *The Professor's House*." *On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*. Foreword by Stephen Tennant. New York: Knopf, 1949. 30-32

Festa, Elizabeth. "Conveniently Situated Museums: The House Museum Movement and Modernist Interior in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*." *Arizona Quarterly*, 67.1 (Spring 2011) pp. 73-113. *ProjectMuse*

Karush, Deborah. "Bringing Outland Inland in *The Professor's House*: Will Cather's *Domestication of Empire*." *Cather Studies*, 4 (1999) <http://cather.unl>

Rosowski, Susan J., and Bernice Slote. "Willa Cather's 1916 Mesa Verde Essay: The Genesis of *The Professor's House* ." *Prairie Schooner* 58 (winter 1984): 81-92. *JSTOR*

Thompson, Raymond Harris. "The Antiquities Act of 1906 by Ronald Freeman Lee." *Journal of the Southwest*, 42.2 (Summer 2000), pp. 197-269. *JSTOR*

Wilson, Sarah. "'Fragmentary and Inconclusive' Violence: National History and Literary Form in *The Professor's House*." *American Literature*, 75.3 (Sept. 2003) pp. 571-599. *ProjectMuse*