

Afterword

Willa Cather and Edith Lewis in Context

WHEN I FIRST visited Taos in the mid-1960s, I knew nothing about New Mexico, had never heard of Mabel Dodge Luhan, and paused only briefly at the Kiowa Ranch because D.H. Lawrence was buried there. For a graduate student in English literature, reverence to D.H. Lawrence was a given. I had read one novel by Willa Cather, *The Lost Lady*, and no professor in any class had mentioned her. Not one. Today I live in New Mexico, Mabel Dodge Luhan is widely recognized as a writer of memoirs and the wealthy art patron who single-handedly brought writers and artists to Taos, and D.H. Lawrence is still a writer of stature. So is Willa Cather whose *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is set in New Mexico.

What I began with *On the Rocks*, my first Willa Cather and Edith Lewis mystery, I continue in *Death Comes*: a fictional account of Willa Cather and her partner Edith Lewis, set among people they actually knew and situated in a time and place they actually lived. Cather and Lewis visited Taos, New Mexico at least four times: in 1913, 1915, 1925, and 1926, the year *Death Comes* takes place. They stayed in Mabel Dodge Luhan's pink adobe *casita* for the first time in 1925, and Edith Lewis wrote a line-a-day in her Blue Jay notebook describing their two-week stay. Cather asked to return in 1926, though it is not clear they actually did. Mabel Dodge Luhan wrote Cather that Tony was in the hospital in Albuquerque, so they would not be there to receive them. Most likely Cather and Lewis

remained at La Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe. It is partly for that reason that I chose to set *Death Comes* in 1926. I would be free of the line-a-day schedule in Edith's 1925 account and could set my own fictional agenda.

Characters directly involved in the mystery, including the federal agent Samuel Dan and Adam and Maria, are fictional. Other major characters are drawn from real people, all of whom were actually in Taos in 1926: Mabel Dodge Luhan, Tony Luhan, Andrew Dasburg, Ida Rauh, Nicholai Fechin, Long John Dent, Arthur Manby, Doc Martin, Walter Willard "Spud" Johnson, and John Collier. In *Edge of Taos Desert* (1937) and *Winter in Taos* (1935), Luhan gives a detailed account of her life in Taos and refers to many of the people featured in *Death Comes*.

Mabel Dodge Luhan first arrived in Taos in 1917, rented living quarters from Arthur Manby, divorced Maurice Sterne, hired Tony Luhan from the Taos Pueblo to build her new home, and in 1923 married Tony, her fourth and final husband. Long John Dunn, Doc Martin, and Arthur Manby were already well known in Taos when Luhan arrived. Ernst Bluemenshein and five other artists had founded the Society of Taos Artists in 1915, but Luhan wasted no time transforming Taos into a nationally recognized art colony. Writers and artists from all over the world accepted Mabel's invitation to Taos, including Marsden Hartley, Georgia O'Keeffe, Ansel Adams, Leopold Stokowski, Martha Graham, Thornton Wilder, and Willa Cather.

One of Luhan's first guests was the Cubist painter Andrew Dasburg, whom she had known in Greenwich Village and who later returned with his partner, Ida Rauh, recognized in New York as a lawyer, activist, actress, and sculptor. D.H. and Frieda Lawrence arrived in 1922, and the British painter Dorothy Brett joined them in 1924. As Luhan recorded in *Lorenzo in Taos* (1932), her friendship with Lawrence was turbulent. Mabel's offer of the Kiowa Ranch

twenty miles from Taos allowed Lawrence enough breathing room to stay in New Mexico and plan to return. In the spring of 1923, Lawrence and Frieda travelled to Mexico with the poets Witter (Hal) Bynner and Spud Johnson. From there Lawrence went to England and then to Italy where he and Frieda stayed with Cather and Lewis' good friends, Earl and Achsah Brewster.

Spud Johnson, Witter Bynner's secretary and partner during their 1923 trip to Mexico with the Lawrences, worked for Luhan occasionally until she hired him as her fulltime secretary in 1927. Johnson brought with him his iconoclastic literary magazine, *The Laughing Horse*, which featured his own poetry and essays, but friends like D.H. Lawrence and Mabel Dodge Luhan frequently contributed to its pages.

Emigrating from Russia in 1923, Nicolai Fechin first settled in New York City, where his reputation as a portrait painter was well established. Diagnosed with tuberculosis, Fechin first visited Luhan in Taos with his wife and daughter in 1926. In 1927, they returned and joined the growing community of Taos artists. In addition to artists and writers, Luhan also invited people like John Collier and his young family, expecting to engage Collier in the campaign she and Tony Luhan were waging to save Taos Pueblo lands and their sacred Blue Lake high up on Taos Mountain. That campaign became Collier's life work. In 1933 he became US Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

Over the years, Luhan's generous and numerous invitations changed the lives of countless artists and writers and helped to shape the future of Taos. For Willa Cather and Edith Lewis, Luhan's 1925 invitation was a warm welcome to visit old friends in comfortable circumstances. Cather and Lewis were at first wary of staying at *Los Gallos*. Luhan was said to be jealous and quarrelsome, a troublemaker mischievously gleeful about breaking up established relationships. Focused on doing research for Cather's novel, Cather

and Lewis wanted no drama or disagreeable interruptions. They were relieved to find Luhan a charming hostess who wanted editorial help with her memoir. Far from jealous or cantankerous, Luhan encouraged Tony to be their tour guide and made an effort to see that they fully grasped the details of Archbishop Lamy's life and the culture of Northern New Mexico. She also encouraged them to move to Taos, at least during the summers when Lewis could take time away from her job at J. Walter Thompson. But they chose instead to build a cottage on the Canadian island of Grand Manan, a location at once as remote as Taos and more familiar. Cather and Lewis had already spent several summers there as part a women's summer colony at Whale Cove, the setting of my first Cather-Lewis novel, *On the Rocks*.

Why Grand Manan and not Taos? Or Santa Fe, where they spent still longer periods doing research for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*? All three locations are far removed from New York City, and when Cather was writing, that's exactly what she wanted—quiet and distance from the distractions of the city. Taos was less hectic than Santa Fe and the home of the Society of Artists, most of whose members Lewis knew from New York. But Cather and Lewis chose Grand Manan because people there proved even less intrusive for a writer at work. For Cather and Lewis, the drawback with Santa Fe and Taos was exactly what enticed other writers and artists to live there: they were lively arts communities. But with so many artists and writers living there and so many of them old friends, Cather and Lewis chose instead to spend their summers on a quiet island in the Bay of Fundy.

Old friends in Santa Fe and Taos included Witter Bynner, whom they knew from their early days at *McClure's Magazine*; another old friend from that period, Elizabeth (Elsie) Shepley Sergeant, was building her own adobe home just north of Santa Fe in Tes-
t-que and publishing accounts of its progress in *Harper's Magazine*.

(Cather's friendship with Sergeant had already cooled. In 1953 Sergeant published *Willa Cather: A Memoir* that rivaled Edith Lewis' 1953 *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*.)

Just a few miles northeast of Sergeant's adobe, the serenity of the Española Valley and the village of Alcalde drew Cather and Lewis to the San Gabriel Ranch. Run by the wealthy New England renegade from high society, Carol Stanley Pfäffle, the Ranch was but one of several ranches around Alcalde owned and run by wealthy female movers and shakers like the anthropologist Mary Cabot Wheelwright (who, along with Hosteen Klah, established the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in 1937). These "New Women" worked closely with women in Santa Fe, including wealthy party-givers Martha and Amelia Elizabeth White and the novelist Mary Austin, to support and sustain Indian arts and culture. The anthropologist and feminist Elsie Clews Parson and Alice Corbin Henderson, co-editor of *Poetry* whose daughter married Mabel Dodge Luhan's son John Evans, also helped apply political pressure to preserve Indian lands and lives.

Alcalde, Santa Fe, Taos, these and the other places Cather and Lewis stayed in New Mexico—including Lamy, Albuquerque, Laguna Pueblo, and Gallup—were important for developing Cather's knowledge of the land and people she portrayed in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Mabel Dodge Luhan always hoped she could entice someone to extoll the virtues of New Mexico and Taos Pueblo's way of life. Luhan expected D.H. Lawrence to do that. He never did. Instead, Willa Cather's classic *Death Comes for the Archbishop* so illuminates Northern New Mexico and its culture that even today tourists read it as a much-loved travel guide.

Cather and Lewis chose never to engage directly in political causes, but Cather's fiction reveals her own love of New Mexico and her attention to the political issues of her day. Learning about the details of their stay with Mabel Dodge and Tony Luhan in Taos

adds to our understanding of Cather's fiction, places Cather and Lewis in their historical context, and provides a compelling backdrop for *Death Comes*.



A Final Note about the FBI*

On July 26, 1908, Charles J. Bonaparte, the United States Attorney General appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt, created the federal Bureau of Investigation (BOI) after a political showdown with Congress, which had banned the loan of Secret Service agents to the Department of Justice. One of the bureau's first official tasks was visiting and making surveys of houses of prostitution across the country in preparation for enforcing the "White Slave Traffic Act," the Mann Act, passed on June 25, 1910. In 1932, the bureau was renamed the United States Bureau of Investigation. The following year, the BOI was linked to the Bureau of Prohibition and renamed the Division of Investigation (DOI) before finally becoming an independent service within the Department of Justice in 1935, when it was renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation, or FBI.

Although the FBI's Albuquerque Field Office didn't officially open until 1949, the federal agency's presence in the area went back many years earlier. Since the Bureau's beginnings in 1908, its agents investigated federal crimes in Albuquerque and the rest of New Mexico. Through the 1920s and 1930s, the El Paso, Texas office handled the territory now covered by the Albuquerque Division. Bureau agents in New Mexico pursued car thieves and interstate traffickers in women.

* Wikipedia.org and FBI.gov

Acknowledgements

MY VIEWS OF Willa Cather and Edith Lewis come from reading their unpublished letters; the 2015 *Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, edited by Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout; and Edith Lewis' 1953 memoir, *Willa Cather Living*. My greatest debt is to them and to the many archives across this continent that hold Cather's and Lewis' correspondence—from the Huntington Library in California to the Houghton Library at Harvard, from the University of New Brunswick-Fredricton to the Grand Manan Museum in New Brunswick, Canada.



My knowledge of Taos, the artists and writers associated with *Los Gallos*, Mabel Dodge and Tony Luhan, Spud Johnson, and D.H. Lawrence's Kiowa Ranch come primarily from reading their memoirs and fiction, my research on location and at the New Mexico History Museum, and from interviews with Claudia (Taudy) Smith Miller (Mabel Dodge Luhan's great-granddaughter), Kevin Cannon (current owner of the pink adobe), and Sharon Oard Warner and others familiar with the Mabel Dodge Luhan estate and D.H. Lawrence's Kiowa Ranch.



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About the Author

SUE HALLGARTH is a former English professor. She has written scholarly articles on Willa Cather and Edith Lewis, and this is her second book of fiction featuring the two of them. Her first book in the series is *On the Rocks*, set in 1929 on the island of Grand Manan in New Brunswick, Canada. She lives in Corrales, NM.

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