

THE STANDARD OIL TREATMENT:
WILLA CATHER, *THE LIFE OF MARY BAKER G. EDDY*,
AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY
COLLABORATIVE AUTHORSHIP

ASHLEY SQUIRES

It will be a great historical series, as great, perhaps, as the history of the Standard Oil, and to most people more interesting. It is not an attack on Christian Science, as most magazine articles have been. It is the history of a remarkable woman and a remarkable movement.

—“The Life of Mrs. Eddy,” *McClure’s* advertisement

The Willa Cather canon needs to be one book shorter. Two decades ago, it seemed that a century-old debate had been settled about the novelist’s role in the production of the 1907 *McClure’s* series *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy*. So clear was the critical consensus surrounding her ultimate authorship of the text that David Stouck, in his introduction to the 1993 University of Nebraska edition, confidently declared that “Willa Cather is indisputably the principal author of *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy and the History of Christian Science*” (xvii). Newly available documentary evidence at the Mary Baker Eddy Library in Boston strongly indicates that it is time to reevaluate that consensus.

The work in question—which ran as a series of articles from December 1906 to August 1908—presented the life of one of the most famous women of the day in scintillating, even scandalous detail. Mary Baker Eddy was the founder of the religio-medical sect that claimed that all physical suffering was the product of erroneous beliefs in physical matter. By the time the series appeared,

she had attracted an international following, amassed a considerable personal fortune from her writings, and erected a politically and financially influential organization. For those who claimed to be healed by Eddy's techniques, which were practiced throughout the world by her students, Christian Science represented the very pinnacle of human efforts to conquer physical suffering and disease. For those who regarded her theology and healing practices as fraudulent, Mrs. Eddy was a public menace who amassed her largesse at the expense of a credulous public and threatened the very stability of American democracy. Ida Tarbell's 1904 exposure of Standard Oil in another *McClure's* biographical series on Rockefeller was frequently invoked by the magazine and its readers when discussing the Eddy project. As one admirer wrote to S. S. McClure after the publication of the first installment, "As the Standard Oil is the worst monopoly in the commercial world, so is 'Christian Science' the greatest, most criminal fraud in the religious field" (Adams, 12 Jan. 1907).

The editorial team responsible for meeting a complex set of public expectations included the credited author, Georgine Milmine; Ida Tarbell herself before she left the magazine in 1906; Burton J. Hendrick, future Pulitzer Prize winner; and Willa Sibert Cather, who had just taken the job at *McClure's* following the success of her early short stories. I argue—as Cather did herself—that rather than being the property of any one writer, the biography was a collaborative work, though critical preoccupation with the question of who deserves to be listed first (or listed at all) on the spine of the book has obscured that central fact of its production. Furthermore, the resultant habit of reading *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy* within a single-author framework, mining it for evidence about Cather's supposed early development as a writer (based on inaccurate assumptions about what she was responsible for), has led to some questionable conclusions based on assumptions about what precisely Cather did. It has also precluded some interesting possibilities for critical inquiry into a rich symptomatic text that tells us much about Mary Baker Eddy, Christian Science, and investigative journalism in the early twentieth century US.

Documentary Evidence and the Question of Authorship

Rumors about Cather's role in writing *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy* circulated throughout the decades following its original publication. Once Willa Cather achieved a national reputation as a novelist—winning a Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours* in 1922—admirers began speculating that she was the true author of the *McClure's* series that had served as the basis for the many subsequent attempts to write the biography of Mary Baker Eddy, who died in 1910. In a 1933 issue of the *New Yorker*, Alexander Woolcott stated that he had it on good authority that "the devastating serial published in *McClure's* under the name of Georgine Milmine in the brave days of 1906—were not actually written by Miss Milmine at all. Instead, a re-write job based on the

manuscript of her researches was assigned to a minor member of the *McClure* staff who has since made quite a name for herself in American letters. That name is Willa Cather” (qtd. in “A Well Known Ghost”). It is not clear where this rumor originated, though Cather’s letters intimate that there may have been some who wished to profit by reissuing the Eddy book under her name. Cather herself repeatedly denied such claims, stating that her role had been merely editorial. As she wrote to Harold Rugg on November 10, 1934:

As you suggest, the ‘unknown Cather’ is certainly a bookseller’s blurb. While I was Managing Editor of *McClure*’s, I had charge of the publication of Miss Milmine’s manuscript—cut it a great deal and rewrote some portions in order to modify it, but I am very unwilling to claim the authorship of the book (which on the whole is very badly written), and it annoys me very much to have it put over on me. (Cather, 10 Nov. 1934)

Since 1982, Cather scholars have been making a much more enthusiastic case for viewing both the magazine series and the book, which was published by Doubleday without Cather’s cooperation, as part of Cather’s opus. In an article for *American Literature*, Brent Bohlke presented a newly unearthed letter from Cather to Edwin Anderson, dated November 24, 1922, which he interpreted as contradicting the thirteen other letters she wrote insisting that her role was merely editorial. It states that the Eddy materials were purchased from Milmine by S. S. McClure. Milmine, by her own admission, wasn’t a strong enough writer to produce a publishable narrative herself. Thus,

Mr. McClure tried out three or four people at writing the story. It was a sort of competition. He liked my version the best chiefly because it was unprejudiced—I haven’t the slightest bone to pick with Christian Science. This was when I first came to New York, and that piece of writing was the first important piece of work I did for magazines. After I finished it, I became Managing Editor. (Cather, 24 Nov. 1922)

While Burton Hendrick wrote the first two issues, McClure ultimately assigned Cather to the rest of the project due to the potentially libelous nature of Hendrick’s installments. Near the end of her letter, Cather claims that Milmine “was in the interesting and rather embarrassing situation of being listed as author of a book of which she did not write a single word” (Cather, 24 Nov. 1922). It is on the strength of this one letter that Bohlke calls for “the inclusion of that book within the Cather canon” (293).

The University of Nebraska edition, edited by David Stouck, moves from Bohlke’s original argument to the more grandiose claim for Cather’s principal

authorship. He builds his case on the Anderson letter as well as draft copies of the biography housed at the Mary Baker Eddy Archives and Library of The First Church of Christ, Scientist. Stouck states that one of the documents in question is “the manuscript of the ‘Milmine’ book” and that “Willa Cather’s editing is evident on its pages. Cather’s handwriting is not only identifiable in edits for the typesetter but in notes on separate pages that continue to query such matters as church membership, the importance of *The Christian Science Journal*, etc” (xvii). Bohlke and Stouck are the basis for all critical engagement with the biography since and have become mandatory citations for any published work that even mentions it. The archives of the Mother Church have since been relocated to the same complex that houses the *Christian Science Monitor* and transformed into a professional research library. In 2011, the Milmine file was newly curated and made available to outside researchers for the first time in over a decade, and the evidence contained therein problematizes the case for Cather as primary author of the *McClure’s* series and the subsequent book, suggesting that the circumstances of authorship were always precisely what Cather claimed.

Let us begin with the Anderson letter, which Bohlke read in 1982 under the assumption that Cather was hiding something when she insisted in thirteen other letters that her role in the project was purely editorial and that to reprint the book under her name would be an error. Indeed, as James Woodress states in his biography of Cather, the novelist had a tendency to self-mythologize: “she altered details of her life; she exaggerated many events; she revised her opinions. She made no effort to be accurate in recalling facts, and it is hard to tell where the reality leaves off and the fiction begins” (2). Bohlke and virtually all subsequent scholars to confront this biography have assumed that the letter to Anderson contained the “real” story. Yet aside from the author’s account of the contest, which can perhaps be read as insinuating that Cather and these other editors were engaged in writing their own fresh manuscripts based on Milmine’s notes, there is little in the Anderson letter that actually contradicts the rest of the correspondence. While it indicates that Georgine Milmine was not solely or even primarily responsible for the finished product, it does not necessarily undercut her repeated insistence that the work was produced collaboratively: “She [Milmine] did not write much of it herself. That was done mostly in the office by McClures editorial staff. I took my turn at it, as did several other persons....I had only a partial responsibility—a responsibility shared with four or five other persons” (Cather, 18 March 1926). In other words, while the Anderson letter makes her role in the text’s production *seem* somewhat larger than advertised, in no place does Cather make the claim that Stouck makes for her: that she was the *de facto* author.

A corroborating account is provided by a January 13, 1933 letter from Lyman Powell to Lucia C. Warren, Corresponding Secretary for the Christian Science Board of Directors. Powell was an Episcopal minister who wrote his

own book on Christian Science in 1907 and consulted heavily with Milmine, Cather, and other principals involved in research for the *McClure's* series during that time. Powell was also apparently Cather's neighbor in New York City in 1912 and wrote to Warren in 1922 specifically to help clear up the authorship question. Powell describes Georgine Milmine as a "young Canadian newspaper woman who was impressed by the great popularity of such work as Ida Tarbell had done a few years before, as she told me in her home in Auburn, New York...one day in April 1907" (Powell, 13 Jan. 1933). Milmine spent years gathering information on Eddy, staying "long enough in a place to get naturally reticent New England people to talk freely to her, and then with her trained newspaper mind she put what she learned from them often into the form of affidavits, to which in most cases those she met readily subscribed" (Powell, 13 Jan. 1933). In 1906, Milmine submitted a manuscript "in magazine story form" to *McClure's*, and the terms of the magazine's purchase "as I learned from several representatives of the magazine" stipulated "that the magazine would send its own staff to check up on the materials and to revise and edit in conformity with the McClure's policy" (Powell, 13 Jan. 1933). Milmine told Powell that Cather "was given the special responsibility, without use of her name, for going over the story and materials of Georgine Milmine" (Powell, 13 Jan. 1933). He refers also to the work of Burton Hendrick, who, in addition to writing the first two installments, evidently went to Belfast to further investigate the issue of Eddy's indebtedness to her mentor. On the final question of Cather's degree of responsibility for the final version of the series, Powell says the following:

All this time the many letters I have on file from Miss Cather indicate that she was head of the revising enterprise and was interviewing many of the people; but her name nowhere appears for two reasons:

- 1) She was acting essentially as "re-write" editor.
- 2) All these years Miss Cather was scrupulously protecting herself from being identified with special research or debunking writing because she was preparing for her permanent work as a story writer. (Powell, 13 Jan. 1933)

The evidence that most clearly undercuts Stouck's case for Cather's "primary authorship" comes from the drafts themselves. In the footnotes to the introduction to the Nebraska edition, Stouck indicates that he himself did not actually examine these documents, which at that point had not even been fully cataloged by the researchers at the Mother Church archives. Instead, he relied upon Kevin Synnott of Russell Sage College, who

examined the 'Milmine Collection' in the Mary Baker Eddy Archives and Library and found three different sets of manuscripts related to the biography.

The first, dated at New York 1904, consists of 127 half-pages of typescript signed by Georgine Milmine and appears to represent an early attempt on her part to write the biography. The second, a carbon of a typescript for the book, consists of 414 pages with edits by both Milmine and Cather. The third consists of two copies of partial manuscripts with edits by Georgine Milmine. There are no manuscripts or typescripts for the *McClure's* articles. (xxvii-xxviii)

I am unable to ascertain how Synott and through him Stouck came to these conclusions, which are demonstrably incorrect based on my examination of the materials. To be fair, access to the Mother Church archives was notoriously difficult to obtain prior to the opening of the new research library in 2002, but it seems fairly clear to me that the claims of these two scholars were hasty and not, evidently, supported by the church's own archivists, who have little stake in this particular authorship question (Huenneke). Having conducted a thorough examination of the drafts housed in the Milmine file, I have identified the following problems with Stouck's representation of these documents.

First, there is the question of the handwriting. Though Stouck represents Synnott as absolutely assured that Cather's handwriting is present on the long, 414-page typescript, the archivist responsible for curating this file and creating the new finding aid was far less certain and indicated that which—if any—of the marginalia were Cather's was something of an open question for her. I arrived at the library armed with samples of Cather's handwriting, fully prepared to confirm Stouck's findings and looking for insight into Cather's editing process. As I examined the drafts, my confidence in these claims about Cather's presence in the marginalia rapidly eroded. Most, if not all, of the handwriting appears consistent with Milmine, whose handwritten notes are prolifically represented in the collection and whose signature appears on the final page. Neither I nor the archivists were able to say with any confidence that any of the notations were Cather's. And, in fact, the content of the drafts themselves indicates that in all probability, they were produced at least a year before Cather arrived in Boston.

Secondly, Stouck is absolutely incorrect in his claim that this is a typescript of the *book*, which was revised and published *after* the original article series. If, as Stouck claims, this is a draft of the book being prepared for typesetting, it should look like something very close to the book itself. The long draft he mentions, however, is very clearly an early draft of the articles, differing from the finished series and book in the way that all early drafts differ from the final version of a work. The foundational arguments and research are clearly present, but the published version is more expansive in scope and ambition and reflects drastic alterations in organization, tone, and style. Consider, for example, the following paragraph from the opening installment (edited by Burton Hendrick) from the December 1906 issue:

The public began to hear of this new movement out of Boston about twenty years ago. The serious-minded, the orthodox, reading in the newspapers how this invalid or that child-bearing woman had died under Christian Science treatment, regarded it as a menace. The frivolous, hearing how its healers professed to treat present bodies with absent minds, snatched at the phrase 'absent treatment,' and took it as a joke. (211)

This paragraph appears to be based on the following excerpt from the long draft:

By others, Christian Science as a scheme of life is condemned. Its doctrines are declared to be dangerous and, in both theory and practice, opposed to the best interests of society. Mrs. Eddy's claim to the discovery of the theory underlying Christian Science is contested, and her assumption of divine inspiration is held to be blasphemous. As an individual she is regarded, by these, as the essence of falsity, and her teachings as no better than a revival of witchcraft and a menace to the public welfare.

By a third or neutral class, the whole matter is taken less seriously. They are neither for nor against Christian Science, but they find humor in its claims and practices. It may not be too much to say that this view, is, on the whole, the prevailing one, and that in most communities the popular feeling in regard to Christian Science is one of ~~interested~~ skepticism which frequently relaxes into levity. (1-2)

The purpose of the paragraph—to survey the varieties of public opinion on Christian Science—is the same, though the published version has been condensed and the rhetoric ratcheted up several degrees. Other sections of the manuscript had a longer way to go, but as I shall show in subsequent sections, many of the central ideas attributed to Cather appear—albeit often in rudimentary form—in this draft. The handwritten marginalia on the draft consists primarily of insertions based on developing research in addition to copyediting marks. If this were a draft that Cather or anyone else on the *McClure's* editorial staff had marked up in late 1906 or 1907, one would expect it to be much further along.

Furthermore, while this draft is not dated, certain chronological markers strongly indicate that it was produced well before Cather arrived on the scene. In Chapter 29 of the typescript, the author discusses the annual pilgrimages that Christian Scientists made to Mary Baker Eddy's home in Pleasant View and states that "last year's pilgrimage" occurred on Monday, June 13. "1904" is penciled in above the sentence, and June 13, 1904 did, in fact, occur on

a Monday. This would place the date of this typescript's original production in 1905. Finally, both the articles and the book version of the biography are remarkably up to date in the information they present. In fact, new material was added to the book in order to reflect the current state of the Christian Science organization and new information uncovered since the publication of the magazine series. The draft in question cites no sources dated later than 1904, and the author's description of, for example, the status of Augusta Stetson in the Christian Science organization—which was tenuous in the second half of that decade—suggests that 1905 is a perfectly believable date for this document. Cather did not arrive at *McClure's* until late in 1906 and did not take over as lead editor of the Eddy project until the December 1906 and January 1907 articles had already gone to print. It is inconceivable that Cather would have been marking up a draft that still contained such rudimentary versions of the two installments that had already been revised for publication. It seems reasonable to assume that while the bones of the biography are present in this typescript, there were many intermediate drafts between this document and the version that went to print in *McClure's*. Therefore, at best, these drafts can tell us what was already in place before Cather arrived on the scene.

The conclusion that the 414-page draft was, in fact, an early draft produced by Milmine also fits with the chronology that appears in internal letters circulated among members of the Christian Science Board of Directors, particularly Frank H. Sprague, Alfred Farlow, and Harold Wilson, who maintained close contact with the editors and partners at *McClure's* as the project developed. On July 15, 1905, Sprague reported to Farlow on a meeting with Mr. Lord, who indicated that the series would “appear in a prospectus for 1906,” that “[t]hey have already been prepared and accepted” (Sprague, 15 July 1905). Though he did not know her name, he describes Georgine Milmine thus:

They were written by a woman (the name was not divulged) who is interested in studying matters of public concern, and who, in this vein, conceived the idea of “writing up” the subject of Christian Science, as it seemed to her to offer a good field for the exercise of her genius. With this end in view she appealed to Miss Tarbell (at present on the editorial staff of *McClure's*). At first Miss Tarbell doubted her ability to cope with the subject, but finally consented to let her submit a specimen of the kind of presentation she proposed to give. This proved acceptable, and she was detailed to investiate [*sic*] the matter and write a series of articles, to be published later in book form. (Sprague, 15 July 1905)

An October 1905 letter from Alfred Farlow reported that Harold Wilson, one of Eddy's secretaries, had spoken to Milmine twice and that she “has already

submitted two articles to *McClure's* and they have rejected them, without doubt due to the pressure which has been brought to bear upon them" (Farlow, 19 Oct. 1905). At the time, Farlow and Wilson, who consulted regularly with John Sanborn Phillips, junior partner of McClure & Phillips Publishing Co., were relatively certain that the proposed series would never see the light of day, though this evidently had as much to do with disagreements among McClure, Phillips, and Ray Stannard Baker as it did with Milmine's skills as a journalist and a writer. McClure was heartily in favor of publishing the series, Phillips ambivalent, and Baker vehemently opposed to criticizing a religious group. As of December 23, 1905, Phillips wrote to Mr. Sisson: "'Let me say that it is very unlikely that we shall use Miss Milmine's stuff; perhaps we shall never use any material relating to the subject.' Signed, John S. Phillips" (Farlow, n.d.). In other words, throughout 1905, Milmine was in the process of attempting to write the series in a way that would be acceptable to the magazine editors, and the drafts in the Milmine Collection seem to be a pretty fair representation of that effort. Furthermore, it is clear that Milmine's efforts were plagued both by her own inexperience with a national publication and by the internal conflicts at *McClure's*, which resulted, in 1906, with the departure of Phillips, Tarbell, Sisson, Baker, and Lincoln Steffens, all of whom went on to create *The American Magazine*.

In short, the evidence presented by Bohlke and Stouck as proof positive that this text should be included in the Cather canon has not been represented accurately and problematizes the ways in which later Cather scholarship has built on their conclusions. Following Stouck's example, David Porter in "Cather Caught in the Eddy," appearing originally in *Violence, the Arts, and Willa Cather* (2005) and eventually in his critical biography, *On the Divide* (2008), mines the Eddy series for evidence of Cather's insights into Eddy's life and the project's influence on her later fiction. He describes Cather's attitude toward Mary Baker Eddy as "decidedly ambivalent, a mix of penetrating and often scathing criticism with considerable, albeit at times grudging, praise" (*Divide* 72). Later, he claims that in the chapters concerning Eddy's career following the death of her third husband, Asa, "The more one reads it, the more one detects Cather's distinctive voice, at once sardonic and admiring, and the more one becomes convinced that despite all her assertions to the contrary, she found both the project and its 'heroine' deeply absorbing" (*Divide* 74). While Porter's arguments about the ways in which Cather's later heroines resemble Eddy and about the biography's role in launching Cather's career and introducing her to major literary influences like Sarah Orne Jewett are compelling, the documentary evidence strongly suggests that the nuanced psychological portrayal that Porter (and Stouck) want to attribute to Cather is evident in Milmine's drafts and appears to have been heavily influenced by Ida Tarbell's previous work on Rockefeller, which essentially served as the model for this text. At best, we can say that Cather as editor was interested

in preserving that portrayal. Given the ambiguity of the archives—since we have no intermediate drafts—on the question of what, precisely, Cather was responsible for, we should be careful about making claims about what exactly Cather thought of Eddy based on this text. At the very least, the circumstances of multi-authorship make it more ambiguous than otherwise understood about what intentions and presuppositions each collaborator, including Cather, brought to the project.

Assumptions about Cather's authorship and the cachet that her imprint carries with it have also perhaps given this text a level of credibility as a definitive account of Mary Baker Eddy's life that it doesn't necessarily deserve. One of the other issues with the ways in which this text is discussed among literary scholars is that the biography's claims about Eddy are treated as uncontroversial when in many cases they have been the subject of long-standing debate or even completely debunked by modern historians. In fact, in many accounts of Christian Science by literary scholars, the *McClure's* text is cited as the only primary or secondary source. For example, the 2005 edition of the *Cambridge History of American Literature* contains a brief section on early twentieth century responses to Christian Science by major literary figures. Presenting the consensus opinion that Cather was the "principal author" of the *McClure's* text and that the biography was "her first long work," the *Cambridge* editor calls Cather "an adept biographer," citing "her treatment of Eddy's plagiarism of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby's 'Science of Health,'" a long disputed and now—thanks to strong forensic work by Gillian Gill in her 1998 biography—discredited claim that most certainly did not originate with Cather (530). Likewise, this collection cites Cather in order to corroborate Mark Twain's contentious claims about Eddy, undoubtedly unaware that Samuel Clemens and the *McClure's* team shared a very important (and problematic) source on these matters in the person of Boston lawyer Frederick Peabody, a fellow with a considerable stake in damaging Eddy's public reputation.

In bolstering Cather's argument for the collaborative authorship of this text, this essay calls for a more capacious understanding of authorship as it applies to this text, a breadth that has been lacking in scholarship that remains committed to exploring it through a single-author lens. As Foucault reminds us, although "criticism and philosophy took note of the disappearance—or death—of the author some time ago," the investment in arguing for Cather's authorship and the conclusions that have been drawn from it reveal that we are still quite committed to the "solid and fundamental unit of the author and the work" (143, 141). And as Martha Woodmansee states, we still think of an author as "an individual who is solely responsible—and therefore exclusively deserving of credit—for the production of a unique work" (426). I am not interested in who "owns" this text, in who deserves to be considered its author. I am concerned, however, with the questionable analysis and historical

inaccuracies preoccupations with Cather's authorship have produced and unthinkingly perpetuated.

The Circumstances of Collaborative Authorship

The documentary evidence corroborates Cather's repeated insistence that *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy* was the product of collaboration. According to Amy Ahearn, whose extensive primary research into the McClure archives at Indiana University's Lilly Library sheds light on the nature of authorship at the magazine, S. S. McClure relied extensively on a staff of editors and ghostwriters in the production of the biographical and autobiographical series that helped make *McClure's* a household name. In addition to his contributions to the muckraking genre, McClure introduced new definitions of editorship to American journalism, advancing the model of the "active" or "intervening" editor in place of the dominant model of the "more established, elitist journals," which "cultivated 'armchair editors,' those men (and they were almost always men) who waited for articles to be mailed in—the editor's job, primarily a passive one, to read and find pieces for publication" (Ahearn 5). S. S. McClure clearly thought of editing as a form of genius in its own right: "Tellingly, he referred to his staff interchangeably as 'writers' and 'editors.' Although these terms did not have the same meaning, they were closely related. Given his own high opinion of editing—that it, in its best form, represented the mind of a genius—he obviously valued his staff members" (Ahearn 26). Editorial practice at *McClure's* and other American magazines was evolving

organizational structures that depended on multi-authorship. The process of publishing an article demanded collaborative, if sometimes unequal, contributors, including reporters, researchers, writers, staffers, stenographers, editors, and layout personnel. With manuscripts passing through so many hands, "authorship" became a slippery category, as did "ownership." (Ahearn 5)

In the remainder of this essay, I will use the primary evidence to flesh out the collaborative process that brought *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy* into being, examining Georgine Milmine's efforts to research Eddy's life over the course of two years and turn her vast collection of notes into a compelling narrative, Burton Hendrick's brief and controversial turn as editor of the series, Willa Cather's role both as editor from early 1907 through 1908 and as a public face of sorts for the project, and finally the influence exerted by S. S. McClure, whose interventionist editorial and managerial style and behind-the-scenes negotiations shaped what came to print. Through that reconstruction, a complex narrative emerges that helps explain why giving the Standard Oil treatment to Christian Science—making a "Rockefeller" of Mary Baker

Eddy—seemed like a profitable and necessary enterprise for *McClure's* and hints at the reasons why Eddy and her movement captured the imaginations of some of the most prominent men and women of letters of the early twentieth century.

Georgine Milmine

Those making grandiose claims for Cather's authorship tend to radically underestimate Georgine Milmine's journalistic credentials. Though arguably not as skilled as her muse, Ida Tarbell, Milmine deserves her due. Indeed, based on the accounts of current critics, I was fully prepared to find Milmine's manuscripts borderline incoherent. But all of the extant drafts and handwritten notes contain perfectly lucid, grammatical prose. The worst thing that can be said about her writing is that it is ordinary, even pedestrian. These drafts certainly lack the verve and stylistic flair of the published versions but do read like decent, straightforward reportage, very much, in fact, like what a newspaper reporter might write.

Cather scholars frequently cite the biography's rigorous documentation as one of its real strengths, pointing to the year and a half that the novelist spent fact-checking Milmine's research even as installments were going to press. Though various independent reports in the Milmine file attest to the fact that Cather played a big role in bringing the research up to date, a great deal of the documentation most celebrated in the final version is present in Milmine's drafts. In fact, the section of the biography that compares bits of *Science and Health* to the writings attributed to P. P. Quimby is more or less intact. The biography's central concern (in all forms from draft to book) is attempting to prove through testimony and documentary evidence that Mary Baker Eddy had, if not explicitly stolen, at least appropriated the original ideas of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby and recalcitrantly refused to properly show her indebtedness to him.

It is apparent from her notes and drafts that Milmine was persuaded quite early on by allegations of plagiarism—which Gillian Gill effectively disputes in her magisterial biography of Eddy—and was attempting through her research to find further confirmation of and an explanation for Eddy's duplicity. The result is the wonderfully nuanced—though factually flawed—psychological portrait inspired by Tarbell's deft treatment of Rockefeller and so frequently attributed to Cather. The introduction of the long draft announces from the outset that Milmine was concerned with Eddy's psychology, with “that strength which often goes hand in hand with weakness, which makes no account of means if the desire is obtained” (4). Indeed, Milmine was taking a different approach from many critics of *Christian Science* who simply wrote Eddy off as a knowing charlatan, whose megalomaniacal tendencies had been evidence from her early childhood, when she was prone to bouts of hysteria that required the members of her family to walk on eggshells. Of her troubled past as a

sick young woman, Milmine says in the long draft that those closest to Eddy became inured to these dramatics and less inclined to sympathy: “Some of them have not hesitated to say that her hysteria was brought on and dismissed at will and <that it> was employed mainly for the purpose of gaining her own way when she was opposed” (15).

Milmine stipulates, however, that such accusations were frequently leveled against women of nervous constitutions and advances the argument that this exceptional sensitivity was part of her psychological makeup as a religious “genius.” At certain points, she even considers credible the notion that Mary Baker Eddy may have been, from a very early age, a psychic. Eddy would later report that she “took on” the sufferings of the individuals she healed and was sensitive to the thoughts of others, which she believed had the power to harm or even kill her if directed at her with malicious intent. Milmine also takes these claims seriously, suggesting that “in this peculiar ‘sixth sense’ may lie the physiological reason for her outbreaks of passion as a child, for her over-fine nerves, and for all or many of the traits which rendered her a peculiar child, a disagreeable girl and a difficult woman” (69).

Milmine’s research notes show that she was consulting external sources on psychology. She transcribed sections from William James’s chapter on “Religion and Neurology” from *Varieties of Religious Experience* word for word into her notes. It is through this psychological lens that Milmine views Eddy’s alleged appropriation, even theft, of P. P. Quimby’s theories, not as a calculated act of deception but as the product of self-deception on the part of a complex, sensitive mind. The stricken portion of the following paragraph is telling, showing that Milmine was in the process of reconfiguring her initial—often more negative—interpretations or, perhaps, censoring them to assuage the concerns of Baker and Phillips (the following passages refer to Mrs. Glover, which was the future Eddy’s surname at the time):

From this time on, Mrs. Glover gradually ~~and perhaps naturally, to a woman with her pronounced desire to dominate and control,~~ ceased to proclaim Dr. Quimby as her physician and teacher, or as the discoverer of mental cure. She talked less and less of him and finally even said to one of her students that Dr. Quimby had been a hindrance to her instead of a help...doing away with head rubbing was the first deviation she had made from the letter of the Quimby instructions. It, no doubt, profoundly impressed Mrs. Glover and gave her a strong feeling of proprietorship in the system, since she must have felt that it was an improvement over the Quimby method, and a step in advance. She was looked up to, also, by her students, as the only interpreter and expounder of the new idea <“science”>. This attitude of her pupils, all of whom were much younger than Mrs. Glover, very likely helped to hasten to a conclusion the idea, slowly forming in her own mind, that she herself was more responsible for Dr. Quimby’s “science” than Dr. Quimby himself. (105)

This interpretation would ultimately feature prominently in the articles and the book. In fact, what appears to be a revised version of this same paragraph begins thus:

Surrounded as she was by these admiring students, who hung upon her words and looked to her for the ultimate wisdom, Mrs. Glover gradually became less acutely conscious of Quimby's relation to the healing system she taught. She herself was being magnified and exalted daily by her loyal disciples in whose extravagant devotion she saw repeated the attitude of many of Quimby's patients—herself among them—to their healer. (161-62)

In the draft, Milmine negotiates her way through the moral complexities of the problem, indicating that it is not her intention, suggesting that the appropriation was “probably not deliberate” but only the “yielding <surrender> to a natural temptation” (118-19). She does, however, indict Eddy for shoddy attempts to cover her tracks once the appearance of dishonesty was uncovered:

The part of the transaction on Mrs. Eddy's side for which no good word can be said is her subsequent attitude. Failing of the strength of character to acknowledge her human weakness in substituting herself for Dr. Quimby as the originator of the application of the <mental system of> healing principle<,> Mrs. Glover, when the word was finally spoken proclaiming herself to be the author and discoverer of Christian Science, and finding that this aroused the resentment of Dr. Quimby's friends and patients, <to a degree which she could not have foreseen>, felt herself obliged to defend her position, and <she> has kept at it constantly since, at the expense of truth <in the face of> all the easily-obtained evidence of her own making which shows her to have been an ardent disciple of Dr. Quimby and to have acknowledged <proclaimed> him as the <apostle> of the <a> new truth which <she thought> was to revolutionize the world. (119)

Again, this idea appears with very similar wording in both the articles and the book.

In summary, the foundational research, organizing principles, and many of the most compelling ideas in the biography originated with Milmine's early attempts to translate her notes into narrative. It was the job of subsequent editors to transform these arguments and this narrative framework into something that would meet the magazine's standards, but their interventions were not always what one might expect. What this means is that we must grant Milmine substantial responsibility for most celebrated features of the biography—its central argument and deft psychological analysis—that have typically been addressed in the relevant scholarship as if they were the sole property of Cather. As I shall show, Cather may have had a hand in curating and refining Milmine's work, but it is impossible to determine whether or not Cather herself shared

Milmine's assessments or whether these features reveal Cather's voice in any substantial degree.

Burton Hendrick

In her letter to Anderson, Cather indicates that the January 1907 installment of the biography, edited by Burton Hendrick, "frankly deals with legend—with what envious people and jealous relatives remember of Mrs. Eddy's early youth. It was given for what it was worth, but I always consider such sources dubious" (Cather, 24 Nov. 1922). Yet while Cather blames the dubious sources who informed his work, the striking differences between the section on which these two installments were based in Milmine's long draft versus the final version in both *McClure's* and the book indicate that Hendrick perhaps had an agenda of his own. Milmine's circumspect reporting and nuanced portrayal of Mrs. Eddy are replaced with invective. Though Milmine's sources were hardly unbiased accounts of immutable facts, she at least indicates in her draft where reports of specific incidents came from and often weighs those reports against Mrs. Eddy's own words in a way that leaves room for a reader to decide. The published versions tend to pronounce upon these disputed issues as if they were uncontroversial and remove lexical signals that the writer is exercising a researcher's judgment on a controversial matter.

Consider, for example, the portrayal of Eddy's father, Mark Baker. Outlines of this section (of unknown date and authorship) suggest that the characterization of the Baker patriarch was designed to suggest hereditary origins for Eddy's famously mercurial temper. Milmine describes him in the long draft as "intensely 'set' on having his own way" with a temper "beyond all ordinary limits," but she qualifies these characteristics as "accompaniments of qualities that make for progress and achievement" however "trying" they might be to "family and community" (4). She goes on to suggest that "[h]ad it not been for the positiveness of the Mark Baker disposition, it is interesting to surmise that there might have been no Christian Science movement of present day proportions" (4). The revision directed by Hendrick and appearing in the final book version, however, contains a far less supportive reading of Mark Baker:

These incidents show the caliber of the man who was Mrs. Eddy's father. There is no doubt that he possessed qualities out of the ordinary. With his natural force and strong convictions, and with his rectitude of character, he might have been more than a local figure, but for the insurmountable obstacles of a childish passionate temper and a deep perversity of mind. He was without imagination and without sympathy. From fighting for a principle he invariably passed to fighting for his own way, and he was unable to see that the one cause was not as righteous as the other. His portrait—a daguerreotype—shows hardness and endurance and immovability. There is no humility in the heavy lip and square mouth, no aspiration in the shrewd eyes; the high forehead is merely forbidding. (9-10)

Milmine's early treatment of Eddy's hysterical "fits" as a child is also far more sympathetic than what appears in the article and book versions. She depicts the young Mary's outbursts of temper and frequent bouts of illness as the rebellion of a dynamic, energetic personality against an oppressive family environment. The revisions characterize them as evidence that the future founder of Christian Science ruled tyrannically over her own family through irrational and inexcusable behavior even as a very small child.

Both versions use the fact that Mary's outbursts tended to be worst on Sundays to support these wildly different interpretations of her behavior. The draft describes the situation thus:

An incident showing her excessive sensibility is related by a member of the Baker family. On Sundays, Mark Baker was strict as to the proper observance of the day in his own house. There was the usual church going, and after that, silence and decorum at home. It was on these blue-law Sundays that Mary's nerves received their severest tests. The youngest of the large household, it was hard for her to sit in enforced quiet all day, and remain<ing> indoors from morning until night, with the small rooms over-crowded with five other children, all <active, but> obliged to keep equally silent.

Sundays thus became the regular day for Mary's attacks of hysteria, and after these she would lie <as> rigid as a corpse while a doctor was sent for, and hastened to rescue her from the cataleptic state. When at last she had two of these attacks on one Sunday, the older children took up the subject with the head of the house and pleaded for more liberty on the seventh day. After he had granted this and they could run about the farm on Sunday, Mary's hysteria grew less violent. (6-7)

This version suggests that the Baker children all chafed under their father's Puritanical regime, that Mary's fits provided a pretext for quite reasonable requests on the part of the entire family for more freedom. The book version, however, depicts the youngest child's behavior as entirely unsympathetic, a source of alienation between herself and other family members, suggesting that the "chief problem in the Baker house was how to pacify Mary and avoid her nervous 'fits'" (12). Mark Baker, it suggests, was forced to abandon his time-honored Sabbath traditions in order to accommodate his daughter's ill behavior. "Sundays became a day of torture not only to the hysterical child, but to all the family, for she invariably had one of her bad attacks, and the day ended in excitement and anxiety. These evidences of an abnormal condition of the nerves are important to any study of Mrs. Eddy and her career" (12-13).

In summary, the sections Hendrick oversaw do reflect a distinct editorial point of view—even a bias—that deviates sharply from Milmine's manuscripts. Indeed, there was fear that Hendrick's installments could have been considered libelous. That the introductory installment of December 1906 was published

with a photo of the wrong woman did not help matters. As a reader named Louis Block wrote to the editors in February 1907, “I can not help but feel that your magazine is engaged in a very valuable piece of work in publishing these articles, but at the same time their worth and value will be greatly diminished if they are subjected to the suspicion of not being founded on fact” (Block, 11 Feb. 1907). Hendrick’s interventionary style of editing and flair for the controversial are worthy of note before we turn to the sections shepherded to print by Cather because, as we shall see, the differences in their editorial style are pronounced though perhaps not quite what one would expect.

Willa Cather

According to Cather, McClure selected her as Hendrick’s replacement because she had no particular axe to grind on this subject—“I haven’t the slightest bone to pick with Christian Science” (Cather, 24 Nov. 1922). Therefore, what is notable about the huge portion that Cather edited is the lack of these dramatic interventions into Milmine’s initial assessments. Cather’s presence, one might say, is distinguished through her absence, by the tendency *not* to deviate too much from Milmine’s relatively even-handed assessments. This is not to say, however, that the installments that Cather shepherded to print are unbiased. John Dittmore, who met with the young author-editor for over an hour in 1908, described Cather as “a very pleasant woman, who, I believe, intends to do the right thing, but her associations with the enemies of Christian Science...have created a very violent prejudice against Mrs. Eddy, evidence of which cropped up every few minutes” (Dittmore, 31 Oct. 1908). Though it is impossible to really pinpoint the exact words for which Cather was responsible, words which may have had their origin in some intermediate draft produced by Milmine or some other editor, I can indicate some noteworthy differences between the drafts and research materials and the finished product that may suggest some distinct departure between the voices of each writer.

One such departure is the greatly enhanced analysis of *Science and Health*. Milmine transcribed long, unmediated passages of the text into the long draft, but a thorough review was published in the final installment of the series, June 1908, though it was transplanted to the middle of Chapter XI in the book version. In that concluding article, the writer, presumably Cather, lays out a thorough exegesis of Mrs. Eddy’s theory on the nature of mind and matter, on Scripture, on marriage, poverty, and healing. Her assessment of Eddy’s writings is, in the main, negative but deftly explicates the similarities between Eddy’s medico-religious teachings and modern psycho-therapeutics: “That the mind is able, in a large degree, to prevent or to cause sickness and even death, all thinking people admit” (183). From here, the article takes up Milmine’s central thesis: that Eddy was, at best, a popularizer of ideas that originated in better minds, that her chief skill was in her ability to turn these theories into “personal property” (188). It declares Mrs. Eddy a “patronizing and platitudinous expositor” devoid of both intelligence and “religious feeling”

(186). The one “original elemental contribution to Quimbyism,” she suggests, “is the belief in Malicious Animal Magnetism, the mental power that enables human beings to reach out in thought and harm others” (186). The writer declares this a “superstition born of her own vindictiveness and distrust” (186). Yet her final word on the subject of Mrs. Eddy, the thought that concludes a series that spanned a year and a half, reflects Milmine’s early pragmatic efforts to dispassionately evaluate Mrs. Eddy based on the fruits of her labors rather than an emotional reaction to her more unsympathetic qualities:

On the theoretical side, Mrs. Eddy’s contribution to mental healing has been, in the main, fallacious, pseudodoxal, and absurd, but upon the practical side she has been wonderfully efficient. New movements are usually launched and old ideas are revived, not through the efforts of a group of people, but through one person. These dynamic personalities have not always conformed to our highest ideals; their effectiveness has not always been associated with a large intelligence or with nobility of character. Not infrequently it has been true of them—as it seems to be true of Mrs. Eddy—that their power was generated in the ferment of an inharmonious and violent nature. But, for practical purposes, it is only fair to measure them by their actual accomplishment and by the machinery they have set in motion. (189)

Yet Cather seems to have also slightly revised Milmine’s thesis about the relationship between Christian Science and Quimbyism in order to make it more accessible to the *McClure’s* audience. Milmine was in sympathy with Quimby acolytes who were busy making a case against Mrs. Eddy in order to restore the departed Quimby to a place of preeminence in the field of mental healing. Milmine’s portrait of Phineas Quimby, which is reflected in the final version, paints him as a humble, self-sacrificing man who freely allowed others access to his life’s work and who was more concerned with alleviating suffering than personal gain. This, of course, is contrasted to the biography’s portrayal of Eddy’s Machiavellian attempts to retain absolute control over the dissemination of her ideas and writings, a reflection of the muckraker’s suspicion of monopolistic greed.

Yet Milmine’s draft takes this assessment of Quimby a bit outside what would have been considered the mainstream. Quimby proponents believed that their hero had himself independently resurrected a primal truth that had the power to transform the world. Their issue wasn’t necessarily with the central precepts of Mrs. Eddy’s philosophy but with her failure to acknowledge Quimby’s prior discoveries. In the final chapter of the long draft, Milmine begins, “Christian Science, as the writer understands it, contains a central truth, and expresses a popular philosophy. The idea at its center is not essentially different from that exploited by some of the ancient and modern philosophers,

and its theory is akin to the mysticism of the Orient” (410). Compare this to the version that appeared in *McClure's*, which places Christian Science not in the tradition of ancient wisdom but in the context of developing scientific approaches to psycho-therapeutics: “It is the future of psycho-therapeutics that will determine the future of Christian Science. If ‘Mind Cure,’ ‘Christian Psychology,’ and regular physicians offer the benefits of suggestive treatment in a more rational and direct way than does Christian Science, Mrs. Eddy’s church will find in them very formidable competition” (189). The book takes this a step further, arguing that “the permanent value of suggestive therapeutics will ultimately be determined, not by the inexperienced or overzealous in any walk of life, but through the slow and patient experiments of medical science” (485).

We are left with the frustrating conclusion that evidence of Willa Cather’s skill as an editor may very well lie in the fact that it is nearly impossible to tell where Milmine ends and Cather begins. This lack of clear lines demarcating the contributions of Milmine and Cather and undoubtedly many invisible others reveals the problem with assigning to Cather any kind of motivation or tacit agenda. While Cather says that she had a “shaping hand over the form, arrangement, and presentation of the facts in that series of articles,” she often represented her impact as purely lexical (Cather, 18 March 1926). As she told Genevieve Richmond, her interest was in “making it presentable...from a purely technical point of view” (Cather, 8 Dec. 1933). She offers no insight into what she actually thought of the series’ controversial subject matter except to state that she was unbiased. Yet it is clear from the letters between Church authorities and the various editors at *McClure's*, including S. S. McClure himself, that as much as Cather was responsible for shaping Milmine’s early ideas for the series and for perhaps contributing her own voice, so she was also under pressure to reflect the magazine’s evolving editorial style and perspective on Mary Baker Eddy and the more sensational aspects of her story, a perspective that was continually shifting based on the internal politics of the magazine and the growing dominance of S. S. McClure.

According to Ahearn, McClure did shape Cather’s prose in the later issues, based on his belief that “‘plain facts’ were most persuasive to readers,” discouraging “his reporters from engaging in ‘literary’ styles” (22). But perhaps more important is the impact that the magazine’s internal politics may have had on the editing process. The reports of Farlow and Wilson (Eddy’s secretary, not the historian) on the inner workings of the magazine suggest that *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy* may have been one (of perhaps many) of the objects over which McClure and his associates struggled for editorial control. Wilson indicates in a July 1906 letter to Farlow that McClure was being restrained from publishing the kind of attack on Mrs. Eddy that he desired by the “more conservative” individuals surrounding him. As Wilson states:

To me it is patent that Mr. McClure is personally disposed to approach the subject of Christian Science as an antagonist and for the purpose of doing what he would call "showing it up." This, notwithstanding that Mr. Sisson, a close acquaintance and former business associate, has undertaken personally to rid Mr. McClure of the popular misconceptions of Christian Science, and still whatever prejudice would influence him, by a frank, and I am sure, convincing statement of the benign influence Christian Science has exerted in his own experience and of its wonderful results apparent to Mr. Sisson on all sides. (H. C. Wilson, 18 July 1906)

Farlow and Wilson did, indeed, try their utmost to keep the project from ever coming to fruition. They claimed to have obtained, at various points, permission from John Sanborn Phillips to read the manuscript before it was sent to press. They even tracked McClure to his home in New York after being turned away from his Boston office on a couple of occasions. McClure clearly chafed under what he saw as the interference of the Church's board of directors and the restraining influence of his partners. Therefore, when the magazine editors split, and everyone who had objected to any aspect of the publication of the Eddy series left the picture, McClure was free to do as he pleased. According to Mr. Wilson, Will Irwin, then managing editor of the magazine, still had misgivings about the series, as did a Mr. Randolph, who attended a meeting with McClure and the representatives from the Church and who was reportedly among those being considered to rewrite Milmine's manuscript. Yet McClure's control of Irwin and Randolph appears to have been considerably stronger than it was over Phillips and Baker.

In other words, multiple competing agendas were in play both before and while Cather was editing the series, which should dissuade anyone from making claims about the degree to which the articles reflect Cather's own opinions. Likewise, this biography needs to be understood not as a detached or uncontroversial account of Mary Baker Eddy's life and work but in the context of raging public debates being fought in newspapers, courtrooms, and state legislature and as the product of the toxic internal politics of *McClure's* and rapidly deteriorating relations between the editors at the magazine and Eddy's lieutenants. Those facts do, however, point to one of the possible reasons why Cather was associated with this particular series for so long. In addition to serving as the primary editor, it seems clear from Dittmore's account of his meeting with Cather and S. S. McClure's later pronouncements that she was also acting as the public face for the magazine for business pertaining to the Eddy series. As a woman with no particular qualms with religion from the Midwest, whose "interests lay in literature rather than in reform," Cather was an ideal face for a controversial series about a female religious leader.

Conclusion

In the introduction to the Nebraska edition, David Stouck suggests that “we must ask in what ways it is important to identify and read this book as part of the Cather canon” (xvii), but I would insist that this is precisely the wrong question to ask. While it is possible to see this text as a case study in Cather’s apprenticeship as a writer and to trace the presence of Mrs. Eddy in her later fiction, the circumstances of multi-authorship demand that this text be approached quite differently from any of her novels. Rather than the product of a single mind that can be mined for insight into a unique genius, this is a work that is multi-vocal, reflecting a set of overlapping aesthetic and social concerns that were arrived at collectively. It is no wonder, then, that Cather felt no particular ownership of the text, “a piece of work which was not of my own choosing” (Cather, 18 March 1926). To Anderson, she described it as “a sort of discipline, an exercise. I wouldn’t fight for it; it’s not the least in my line” (Cather, 24 Nov. 1922). In order to better understand its impact on Cather’s development as a writer, we need to better understand the other voices contained within it and the external circumstances and pressures that Cather would have inevitably been forced to contend with as she undertook this project.

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