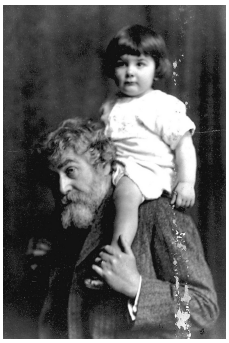
C.E.S. Wood (1852-1944)



C.E.S. Wood may have been the most influential cultural figure in Portland in the forty years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. He helped found the Portland Art Museum and was instrumental in making the Multnomah County Library a free and public institution. He secured the services of his friend Olin Warner, a nationally known sculptor, to design the Skidmore Fountain, and his words "Good citizens are the riches of a city" are inscribed at its base. The Portland Rose Festival was his idea. He numbered among his friends Mark Twain, Emma Goldman, John Reed, Clarence Darrow, Lincoln Steffens, Ansel Adams, John Steinbeck, Charlie Chaplin, James J. Hill, and Langston Hughes. Soldier, lawyer, poet, painter, raconteur, bon vivant, politician, free spirit, and Renaissance man, Wood might also be the most interesting man in Oregon history.

He was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, February 20, 1852, the son of Rosemary Carson and William Maxwell Wood, first surgeon general of the U.S. Navy. Wood graduated from West Point and came west in 1874 to fight Indians. He served as aide-de-camp to General O.O. Howard in the Nez Perce (1877) and Bannock-Paiute (1878) campaigns. Wood recorded one of the most famous speeches in Native American oratory, the surrender speech of Chief Joseph, which reportedly ended with "From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever." There is some controversy about the recording of Joseph's speech. Wood claims to have written it down as Joseph spoke, but some historians believe that he recorded a speech Joseph gave to his chiefs in council as reported to Wood by two Nez Perce go-betweens. He and Joseph became friends, and he would twice send his oldest son Erskine to summer with Joseph in Colville, Washington.

Wood returned to West Point as Howard's adjutant, earning a law degree at Columbia University on the side. It was there that he participated, anonymously, in literary history, arranging for the West Point press to print Mark Twain's *"1601," or Conversation as it was by the Social Fireside in the Time of the Tudors*, a scatological story of life in Queen Elizabeth's bed chambers. The elaborately printed edition of only fifty copies is legendary among book collectors.

He retired from the army and returned to the West with his family, settling in Portland in the mid-1880s. He became a member of the first law firm in Oregon, Durham and Ball, where he specialized in maritime law. Senator George Williams was in the firm, and many of its clients were wealthy pillars of the town. Wood represented the French banking group Lazard Freres, helping it sell a wagon road grant and arguing the case before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1915. His was "probably the first million dollar fee in Oregon history."

Wood and his wife Nanny raised five children and were vital members of the Portland aristocracy. They had three sons, Erskine, Max, and Berwick, and two daughters, Nan and Lisa. His wife Nanny (born Nanny Moale Smith), came of age in the aristocratic circles of Washington, D.C., and was a grande dame of Portland society noted for her beautiful garden.

Wood's love of the visual arts is carved in Portland cultural heritage. The presence of works by several American impressionists—J. Alden Weir, Albert Pinkham Ryder,Childe Hassam, and Olin Warner—in the houses of fortunate Oregonians and in the Portland Art Museum is primarily due to Wood. He was a talented painter with a particular gift for landscapes and watercolors. Some of his own work, perhaps done with Hassam in eastern Oregon on one of his visits, still hangs in the museum.

He called himself a philosophical anarchist but worked with the Democrats, even running for senator in 1906. A Democrat in a Republican state, he nevertheless had an influence on the political atmosphere, working closely with William U'Ren to draft and pass the initiative and referendum and direct election laws. He became an advocate of

Henry George's single tax, the idea of taxing only undeveloped land in order to discourage land speculation, thereby redistributing wealth and democratizing the economy. In 1908, he resigned from the Oregon Bar Association after it refused to admit a black attorney. He was a vocal supporter of the suffrage movement and eloquent critic of the United States' entry into World War I. He supported the Industrial Workers of the World, commonly known as the Wobblies, and he defended both Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger when their right to speak in Portland was challenged.

Wood was a gifted public speaker and a talented, versatile writer of poetry, fiction, drama, satire, essay, articles, and occasional verse. Between 1904 and 1911, Wood wrote for *The Pacific Monthly*, a popular Portland magazine, publishing poems, stories, articles, book reviews, features, and a column called "Impressions." In "Portland's Feast of Roses," a 1908 article boosting the Rose Festival and the growing prosperity of Oregon, Wood paused to question the cutting of old-growth timber: "There is no spot where the primeval forest is assured from the attack of that worst of all microbes, the dollar." His politically charged Christmas verse (annual gifts) are beautiful examples of fine press printing. Wood's first book was *A Book of Indian Tales* (1901), myths and legends he collected while soldiering and exploring in the Northwest and Alaska. In 1904, he published *A Masque of Love*, a poetic drama defending free love.

In 1915, Wood published *The Poet in the Desert*, a long poem set in the southeastern Oregon desert, which he often visited, staying in the Harney basin area with his friend Big Bill Hanley (cattle baron and sagebrush philosopher, at whose P Ranch along the Blitzen River Wood often stayed). In this epic Jeremiad, Wood summons the spirit of the natural world—truth—in judgment of the ills of civilization—poverty, prostitution, and economic injustice. Wood wrote three distinct versions of the poem—in 1915, 1918, and 1929—and it is the work for which he wished to be remembered. He gained a modicum of fame for *Heavenly Discourse* (1927), a book of forty satirical dialogues set in heaven with a benevolently libertarian god attended by angels and his intellectual heroes (Mark Twain, Voltaire, Rabelais). His favorite targets were prudery, prohibition, war, and evangelical fervor.

At the age of fifty-eight and estranged from his wife, Wood fell in love with the beautiful poet and suffragist Sara Bard Field Ehrgott. She was thirty years younger than he and married to a Baptist minister. Sara divorced her husband, spending a year in Nevada to do so, but Nanny Moale refused to consider giving Wood a divorce. In 1918, after providing for his family with the fee he received from the Lazard Freres group, he joined Sara in San Francisco. Wood's departure scandalized Portland.

The couple built a modest estate called "The Cats" on a hillside overlooking Los Gatos and lived a life of comfortable Bohemianism, writing and entertaining guests. Wood wrote a long rant called *Too Much Government* (1931) and a sequel to *Heavenly Discourse* called *Earthly Discourse* (1937). Occasionally, they roused themselves for a worthy cause, actively supporting The Scottsboro Boys and Leon Trotsky's right to a fair trail and vigorously defending themselves when they came under investigation by HUAC (the House of Representatives Special Committee on Un-American Activities). Wood died just before his ninety-second birthday on January 22, 1944.

C.E.S. Wood helped create the institutions and form the attitudes that we recognize as intrinsic to the Oregon experience. He championed independence, social justice, the arts, freedom, and the free. He is one of the patron saints of Oregon's understanding of how to live well.

Written by Tim Barnes

Further Reading:

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