Significance in Kansas Simplicity:

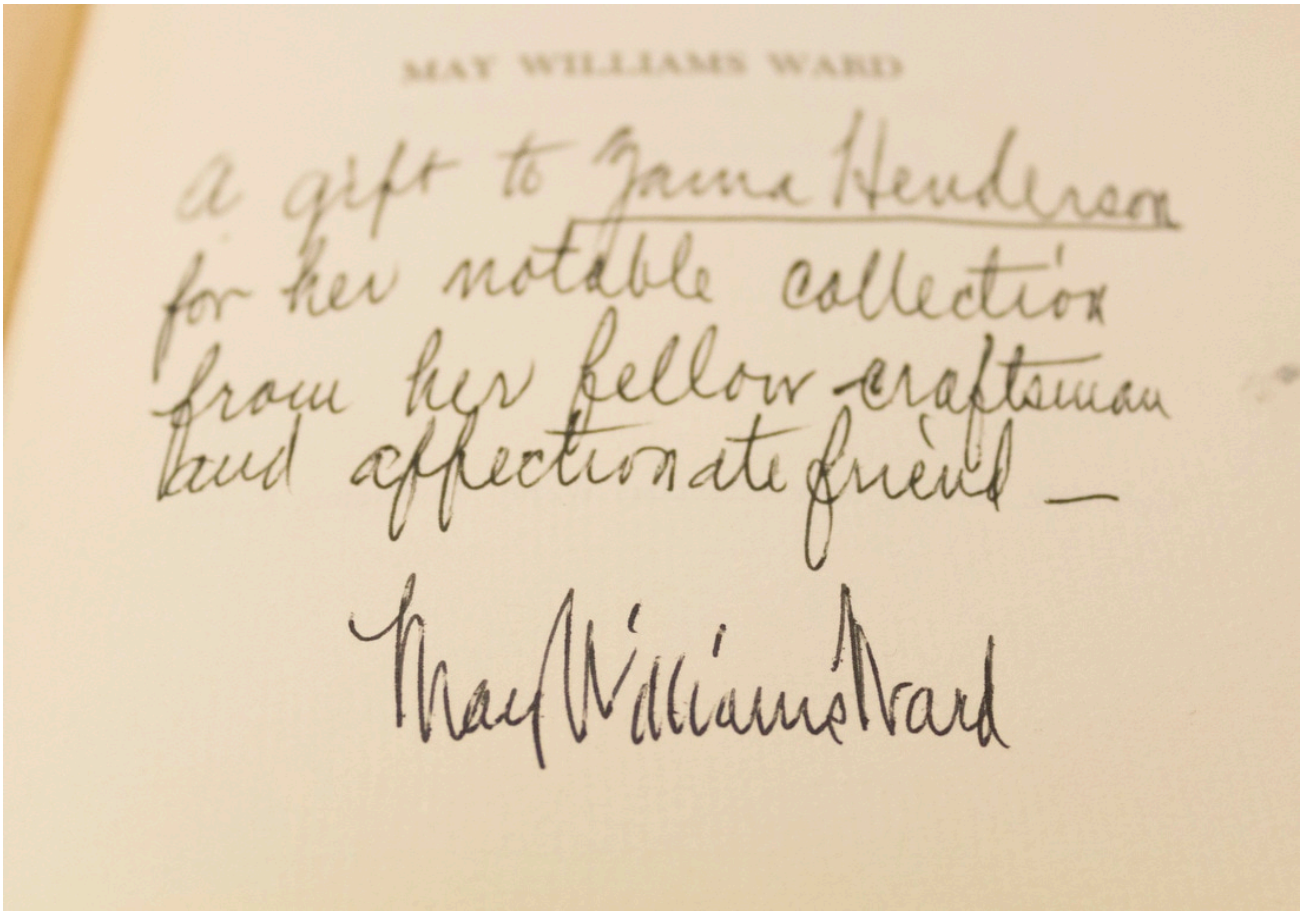
The Untold Story of May Williams Ward and the Regionalist Movement

By Abilene Alderson

The year is 1893. Osawatomie, Kansas is quiet, save for the sounds of furious bicycle pedaling: it is the sound of the eleven-year-old May Williams Ward hastening down to the newspaper and demanding her poems be printed. This was not a bad place to start, for indeed, Ward would grow up to publish poems in newspapers, magazines, and books across America.[1] Yet the story of the first woman poet out of Kansas is a forgotten one. Though nationally

[1] Ward was published by *Life* magazine, the *Kansas City Star, Ladies Home Journal, Good Housekeeping,* and the *New York Sun,* to name just a few journal titles.

acclaimed, May Williams Ward's accomplishments are today reduced to a few online blurbs. Her career began in 1921 and over the next 50 years she produced over 2000 poems and seven books – yet only six years ago, Lana Wirt Myers, a journalist from Kansas, remembered the overlooked artist in *Prairie Rhythms: The Life and Poetry of May Williams Ward.* To this day, the life of May Williams Ward is difficult to trace, an unjust turn of events considering her accomplishments.



"Only the blossom is palpable," writes Ward in *Of Poetry,* "Ivory petals cupping the essence of a dream." A physical description of her book *Wheatlands* is my attempt to make Ward's printed blossoms palpable, offering insights into the author's mind. Right away, *Wheatlands: Poems and Block-Prints* is an intriguing volume. The front cover, handmade by Ward, bears a flowing abstract design of silver and pink with blue watercolor splatters. The mix of paint makes the cover binding shiny and reflective. When you open the book, the title page holds the inscription "A gift to Zanna Henderson for her notable collection from her fellow-craftsman and affectionate friend – May Williams Ward."[2] This dedication provides important insights: it holds the name of the first owner. Also, it speaks to the close relationship between Ward and Henderson. The flyleaf, moreover, indicates that our copy of *Wheatlands* housed in special collections of Hale Library is an "autographed first edition," one of only 500 volumes.

The text contains no annotations. I imagine Henderson added the book to her collection. Most likely, she treated *Wheatlands* with special care as a token of her friendship with the author. And indeed, the book is in remarkable unused condition. The printed text is medium-sized, perfect for easy reading, and the volume fits comfortably in hand. The paper used is thick and sturdy, and the pages are deckle-edged. Each sheet of paper bears a watermark that reads "Book Co." The 64 pages of the volume front-to-back contain 59 poems.

Ward's block-prints are what make *Wheatfields* truly unique. Block-printed poems written by the author mingle and stay in dialogue with printed illustrations, also original designs by May Williams Ward. That is, the book is not only showcasing Ward's poetic skills, but her

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[2] Zanna Henderson donated many volumes of poems to Kansas State University, including the copy of *Wheatlands* that I used for my research. I think it is so intriguing that Ward was not only close friends with Henderson, but she also knew of her poetry collection – a part of which may reside at Kansas State as well.

visual artistry as well. Throughout the book there are 15 total block-printed poems and illustrations, not including the title page.

The text flows seamlessly between block-print poems and images. Block-printing first originated in China, and was developed as a method for images on cloth and paper. First, a relief is carved onto a wood block, the block then is covered in ink and stamped onto the desired surface. This method did not stay in Asia, however, there exist many examples of "block books," where each page was one giant block-print. These books were typically a more affordable option to those printed with the printing press.[3]

[3] These books were printed primarily in the late 15th century, and were religious in nature. Their purpose was to provide affordable religious literature to the community by making it more available to those without the funds to purchase expensive typeset books. Surviving examples are very rare, only a small number have survived the rigors of time due to their being cheaply made.

Ward's stunning block prints illuminate the themes her poetry explores, contemplations of nature and everyday life. The natural look of the hand-made artworks by the author enhances the overall naturalistic feel of Wheatfields, giving the volume a distinct personal touch. To me, poetry is the most personal ways to express innermost feelings and dilemmas. Making poetry juxtaposed by artwork augments the intimacy of expression. In a way, you feel like reading a private journal while paging through *Wheatlands.* This is what makes this book so unique and fascinating – it feels alive with the spirit of Ward.

Differences

Farmsteads and clustered villages of the wheatlands
Seem islands all alike as seen from the air;
They are different as trees if you walk among them,
Trees sun-green, rain-dark or withered. There
Human hearts know joy, or doubt, or despair.

Among my favorite poems by Ward is *Differences,* a celebration of small Midwestern towns and life. Though only five lines long, the poem describes vividly the importance of village life and everyday people, it embraces the rural while it acknowledges the presence of the modern world. The first line contains the name of Ward's collection, wheatlands. This is no coincidence. Ward is emphasizing the importance of rural settings. She does not allow readers to forget where their minds should linger while studying her poetry. *Differences* explores the stereotypical perception of small Midwest towns "all alike as seen from the air." This jab at big city people in their jets looking literally and symbolically down on the Midwest attacks sweeping generalizations held without ever actually putting foot on the ground. According to Ward, rural communities however are "different as trees if you walk among them." She holds

you cannot know the character of a place unless you have been there and walked around. Ward further stresses the individuality of countryside life describing trees as "sun-green, rain-dark or withered."

In the accompanying woodcut print on the left, opposite the poem, Ward repeats the same message: three trees in three different seasons enforce the focus on the natural so important to regionalists like Ward and the comparison between plant life and small-town people. The next poem, *The Yearglass,* deepens Ward's exploration of trees. The title of the page holding both poems, called "Of Trees and Wheatlands People," further stresses the link between plant and human existence. Trees and people share similar moods, suffer similar fates. In fact, these are again the very same trees and people that modern city-slickers in their big jet planes fail to appreciate. In *Wheatlands*, May Williams Ward pushes the ideas of the rural beautifully everyday and of significance in simplicity.

May Williams Ward grew up in Osawatomie, Kansas, a small town 61 miles southwest of Kansas City. Osawatomie, home to the famous anti-slavery fighter John Brown, saw many historic battles.[4] From a very early age Ward displayed a love for poetry and the written word. Born on Thursday, January 26, 1882, Ward was a precocious child. At home, she was surrounded by poetry and music. Only nine years old, she wrote her first poem: "Far away in ancient Egypt / Ere the pyramids were builded / Lived a maiden and her lover / Separated by the desert." Perhaps not material for the *New York Times,* yet already at her tender age she had latched onto the most enduring theme in poetry: tragic love.

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[4] Osawatomie, Kansas was a hub of activity during the Civil War, and the origin of many free-state guerillas. Ward even wrote a poem about John Brown published in *Wheatlands,* entitled *John Brown and the Cabin in Osawatomie.* (p. 20)

During her career, Ward garnered an impressive array of poetry awards. One of the most notable recognitions was an invitation to the MacDowell colony. The New Hampshire art colony invited the finest artists to stay, work and exchange ideas. An invitation to the colony was an honor filled with inspirational artistic exchanges. At MacDowell, the 39-year-old Ward wrote poems and discovered block printing. The idea for the bock prints that grace the pages of *Wheatlands* came from a fellow artist, Anna Heyward Taylor. Taylor was known for woodblock prints, celebrating Charleston, South Carolina.[5] In fact, a leading figure of the Charleston Renaissance, Taylor is an example of the ways in which the Regionalist Movement empowered female artists. The 42-year-old Taylor became a role model for Ward. Taylor's woodcuts were most likely attractive to Ward due to their focus on the local environment.

Ward published in well-known magazines, such as *The New York Times* and *Life.* In addition, she was the editor of the national poetry magazine *The Harp.* What is more, Ward established the Poetry Society of Kansas and was the president of the Kansas Authors Club. In a time when men dominated the art world, Ward achieved much more than what people expected of a girl from the Kansas prairie. Ward's poetic methods honor the tradition of Walt Whitman, who likewise explored pastoral themes and celebrated the ordinary. *Wheatlands* echoes in many ways Whitman's masterpiece *Leaves of Grass*. Ward's *Wheatlands,* was also every bit as revolutionary as Whitman's work.[6] For example, the poem *Sky-Mountain* is a perfect instance of Ward's nature-praising poetry. "Prairie-land is golden … Airy … Wide … The

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[5] Meriea C. Dennison, *Art of the American South, 1915-1945: Picturing the Past, Portending Regionalism* (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2000)

[6] For those interested in this sort of naturalistic poetry, check out: Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Aukland: The Floating Press, 1900)

sky our only mountain, we, inside!" effuses Ward. The poem is enclosed in a woodcut artifact etched by hand, which gives the ode to the prairie a strong personal touch.

No question, the prairie was the place that Ward loved best. Ward, indeed, was greatly influenced by local Kansas nature, specifically the prairie. Many of her poems focus on everyday settings and personal experiences: the two world wars and the Great Depression. Her verses speak to these events, building a poetic timeline of her life and the life of her nation. *Wheatlands* contains an inriguing series of three poems, entitled "Dust Bowl, (A Sequence)." *Reversal,* the first of the three poems, encapsulates how Americans felt during the depression. "Dust again," begins Ward, the first two words already heavy with broken dreams. The word "again" insinuates that perhaps the dust had stopped for a moment, only to start back again. Creating the sense of how hopeless that the people endured who endured the dust. "All our values are shaken," she continues, emphasizing the strain on the self-definition of many Kansans. However, dust did not only physically effect people, it shook their core values as well. Ward links physical toll to this shaking of values: "Pushing despair / Under the sill and into the hard-pressed lung." Personifying dust as despair, she masterfully links dust, bodily effects, and psychological toll. Ward gives poetic expression to the Dust Bowl trauma. She strove to humanize experiences, to make them relatable to everybody. This champion poet of Kansas deserves much more recognition. Yet perhaps she would prefers things the way they are – to be able to fade into the fabric of the prairie she knew and loved so well.

But if we fully want to understand Ward, we need to consider the regionalist movement.[7] Regionalism blossomed after the Civil War and began to fade after World War II.[8] America, overwhelmed with international troubles, sought an escape, a place that felt safe and at home. As a woman who lived through the Depression and two World Wars, Ward's poems are flavored with echoes of these American events. She weaves them seamlessly into her landscape in classic regionalist style.

The Midwest played a key role in the development of regionalism. That is, Kansas was not just relevant to regionalism – it was the springboard for the movement. It was an artistic movement that focused, for the first time, on the heartland, the American Midwest. It allowed the Midwest to be finally seen and heard. It was the first movement that truly empowered female artists. Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, was an early regionalist. In fact, the standards for regionalism were often set by women and literature a key form of expression. The most well-known regionalist painting, *American Gothic* by Grant Wood, has become an iconic representation of the Midwest. It is an excellent summary of regionalist values.[9] Much like Wood's work, Ward paints a picture of the strong Midwest farmer in a series of three poems, which she entitles "Wheat Farmer, (A Sequence)."

The first four-line poem in this sequence, called *Scene,* does precisely that: it sets a scene that pulls the reader into the life of a Midwestern farmer, as Ward assumes this man's

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[7] Mark Storey, *Country Matters: Rural Fiction, Urban Modernity, and the Problem of American Regionalism* (University of California Press, 2010).

[8] That isn't to say that regionalism is over, however – Wendell Berry, a contemporary writer who has published books as recently as 2000, is a perfect example of regionalism. But this movement is not as prominent nor as important as it was in those days.

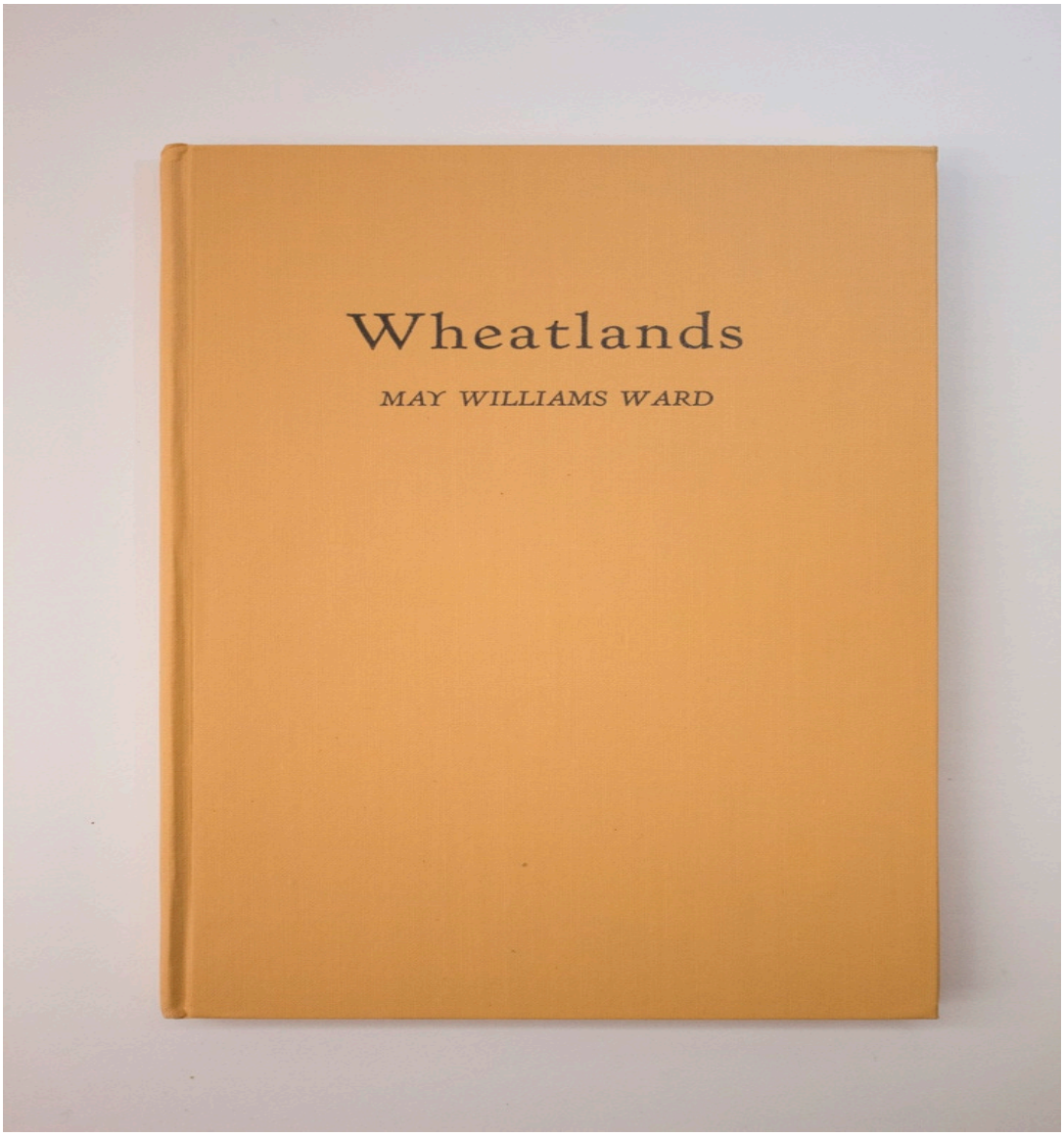
[9] *American Gothic* is currently housed in the Art Institute of Chicago. Further analysis of this painting can be found on the New York Times website: "'American Gothic': A Man, A Woman, and a Pitchfork," *New York Times,* July 10, 2005.

voice and speaks in the first person. “I work and I sweat and somehow / The complex rhythms of toil / Made contacts that brought forth the beaded wheat. / It was magic.” These opening lines of *Action,* the second poem, Ward introduces the farmer: a hard-working man who finds joy in his harvesting. This is the essence of regionalism – the celebration of the common man, the man working hard on the farm to provide for his family. Masterfully, Ward humanizes her people for urban modernists. Her “it was magic” turns the farmer from a character into a living, breathing human being, someone with passions, hardships, loves, and pains. The line allows access to the farmer’s mind and shows the magic he finds in his work. Here we do not encounter dull farm work. Ward stresses instead a transcendental experience.

Ward’s *City Backyard* similarly encapsulates the values of regionalism. “Retreat from the frontyard evening,” implores Ward, “filled / With color; electric blue shines the grass / And zinnias are floodlit when cars zoom past.” The line smacks of regionalism: the idea of retreating from urban modernity, tainting nature and distracting from beauty. “Seek backyard trees standing forest-dark,” she continues, offering an alternative to hectic city life, “Rich with shadow, dusky as dream. / In an earlier, different world they seem.” Imagining an escaping from the modern world full of flashing lights and honking cars, the narrator invites to retreat to the backyard, and revel in a secluded world where we can forget about the frency on the other side of the fence. This poem addresses regionalist readers who live outside the rural Midwest; those who yearn for the solitude of quiet wheatlands.

“All the world, as a matter of fact, is a mosaic of little places invisible to the powers that be,” claims Wendell Berry in a similar vain in the novel *Jayber Crow.* He adds, “And in the eyes of the powers that be all these invisible places do not add up to a visible place. They add up to

words and numbers."[10] Regionalism is about such little invisible paces, the places where real Americans live and lived. Ward likewise celebrates what is overlook, rural, and quotidian and makes us see them.



[10] Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000)