

C. E. S. WOOD CHAMPIONED FREEDOM IN POETRY AND SOCIETY

By Tim Pfau

Oregon's first free-verse poet, Charles Erskine Scot Wood (1852-1944), was also a West Pointer, a veteran of two Indian Wars in Oregon, and a pacifist.

It was Wood who gave us, from notes scribbled in pencil, the great surrender speech of Nez Perce Chief Joseph. The two were friends to their deaths.

He was a founder of Portland society and culture, a leader in the creation of such cultural fixtures as the Skidmore fountain, the Art Museum's Impressionist collection, the Arlington Club, the Rose Festival, and the Multnomah County free library.

He oversaw creation of the road from Corvallis to Ontario, the road that opened central and eastern Oregon to development. For his work on that project, he collected the first million-dollar legal fee in Oregon.

While he befriended and cultivated the powerful and wealthy, he also championed anarchists, pacifists, suffragettes, free-lovers, unionists, class warriors, and revolutionaries, giving passionate support to their causes, all of which he shared.

When the Oregon Bar refused to admit a black man, he resigned from it. For the love of a suffragette poetess, he abandoned social status, family, wealth, and Oregon itself. The two ran away together to California and lived with happily ever after.

He spent his life balanced on such contradictions of principles and was the lasting friend of most great figures of American literature between 1870 and 1944, from Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) to John Steinbeck.

In his writings, he personified Nature as the fountain from which all beauty and justice poured. In the wild, especially in eastern Oregon, he found reflections of himself and his radical beliefs.

In his best known book, *The Poet in the Desert*, he applied his fine eye for detail to stunning descriptions of the eastern desert:

Have you not heard the utterances of the guardian rocks
And the low psalming of the mountains,
The bare hills, flashing skies and clouds?
The hushed communion of the brotherhood
Under the snow?
The drums of the sea and trumpets of the wind?
Each may receive his separate message,
If he will.

The Poet in the Desert can be found in the State Library's Oregon Poetry Collection. More details on the man and his fascinating and conflicted life can be found in the Oregon Encyclopedia at http://oregonencyclopedia.org/entry/view/c_e_s_wood/.