A Man Is More Than His Work

Charles Erskine Scott Wood (1852-1944)

Robert Hamburger

When the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission invited me to join this CES Wood Symposium, I jumped at the opportunity. For one thing, my talk today gives me the opportunity to publicly acknowledge my immense debt to various descendants of Wood who helped me with my research and who encouraged me every step of the way. My book has its origins in my long and treasured friendship with two of Wood's great-grandchildren— Bruce and Lisa Livingston; and as work got underway, I was in frequent contact with Wood's granddaughter, Catherine Livingston, and to a lesser degree with her siblings, Nan Johns and Kirk Smith, and with one more of Wood's grandchildren, Marian Wood Kolisch. Wood's force of soul and his great love for his family was such that my contact with all these people brought me closer to Wood himself. So thank you, all of you, thanks for everything.

Another reason I've looked forward to speaking to you today is because, after working on Wood for a solid chunk of the past 8 years, I have all kinds of thoughts surrounding my work that I'd like to try to give voice to. Here, with a presumably sympathetic audience, I have the opportunity to comment on some of the responses my manuscript received when I first submitted it for publication. I'm not particularly thin-skinned about criticism, but these responses are useful in helping me explain how I view Wood and what I think my book is about. A second issue I'd like to address, at least in part, is the bond and the tension between myself and my subject. Nowhere is the relationship between biographer and subject better dramatized than in Vladimir Nabokov's wonderful novel, *The Gift*. On the one hand, there is something sacrosanct about the life of a biographical subject— the feeling that any narrative account is sure to fall short; that any interpretation is impertinent given the rich reality of the life itself. In Nabokov's novel, Fyodor, a young biographer puts it this way:

> All these months while I was making my research, taking notes, recollecting and thinking, I was blissfully happy: I was certain that something unprecedentedly beautiful was being created, that my notes were merely small props for the work, trail-marks, pegs, and that the most important thing was developing and being created of itself, but now I see, like waking up on the floor, that besides these pitiful notes there is nothing. What shall I do? ... I have realized, you see, the impossibility of having the [narrative] of his life germinate without contaminating [it] with a kind of secondary poetization, which keeps departing further and further from the real poetry [of his life]. (250-251)

Yet, later in Nabokov's novel, young Fyodor faces the dilemma that many biographers confront in one way or another— an impulse that is virtually the opposite of the kind of paralyzing respect I have just described. Fyodor's dilemma arises out of his wish to take the dross of life and shape it to make a better story— to have the events of his subject's life conform to his own wishes and expectations. Fyodor undertakes a biography of Chernyshevski, a Russian radical of the mid 19th Century and author of the revolutionary book: *What Is To Be Done?* But poor Fyodor is unhappy with what he judges to be a wasted portion of his hero's life— the 20 years Chernyshevski suffered in Siberian exile seem a depressing anticlimax to his bold and active youth— so Fyodor chooses a novel solution: he imposes himself on Chernyshevski's life, bringing it to an abrupt, fictitious halt with a public execution at the height of Chernyshevski's fame. (293) I'll say more about this in a few minutes. Suffice it to say that I have not read Nabokov's novel in 35 years, yet Fyodor's transgression was fresh in my mind as I wrote my narrative of Wood's life.

Finally, I want to address the simple question that anyone might ask: What is there about CES Wood that's worth all the fuss? I'd like to think that the best answer to this question is the book I've written. Even so, I hope that by addressing the other issues I've raised, I'll be able to clarify and justify my interest in Wood and to explain why I've chosen to call this talk: "A Man Is More Than His Work"

But now I'd like to tell you all a few stories of Wood's life. The first story takes us back to Portland in 1913. In mid-July, the I.W.W. launched a strike against the Oregon Packing Company and all hell broke loose. The police silenced Tom Burns, the Wobbly leader, by hauling him off to jail. Many of the Packing Company cannery workers were women— poorly paid and forced to work in dangerous, unsanitary conditions— and this incited Dr. Marie Equi, a woman whose ferocious passion for justice sometimes carried her to the brink of madness. Equi grew so indignant at police behavior that she slugged a deputy sheriff and declared that she would return the next day with a hatpin dipped in a deadly virus. Any officer who tried to silence her would "die a slow lingering death."

The Portland city council went to bizarre extremes to curtail the IWW demonstrations. Mayor Albee forbade all public speech except on religious issues, and the police were instructed to arrest anyone wearing a red necktie (red, symbolizing the blood of exploited working people, was the I.W.W. color). They were also instructed to arrest anyone unable to show himself in possession of $10. Wood, who was 62 at the time, refused to countenance the city government running roughshod over fundamental First Amendment rights. On July 17, he stepped out of his office in the Commerce Building dressed in a solid red silk tie, a red handkerchief poking prominently from his coat pocket, and draped across his shoulder he flaunted a splendid red shawl he borrowed from his wife Nannie's wardrobe— and, yes, he made a point of emptying his pockets— he did not have the $10 demanded by the mayor's edict.

Straight through the city streets he marched till he came to the steps of City Hall. There he spoke eloquently and extemporaneously about the glory of the American Constitution, of its cherished Freedom of Assembly and Freedom of Speech. Then he read the city ordinance prohibiting red neckties. "Let us see who has the greater wisdom," he taunted, "Thomas Jefferson and the founding geniuses of our great nation, or Mayor Albee with his peculiar aversion to the color red." Wood was promptly arrested and thrown in jail. He refused to post bond— and while he bided his time behind bars, his story was picked up by the news services and spread across the nation. The mayor and his obedient city council became the object of universal ridicule. They withdrew their outrageous law; Wood was released and the I.W.W. applauded his courageous support.

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Here's another story. In 1915 Matthew Schmidt and David Caplan, two young labor radicals, faced trial for helping the McNamara brothers dynamite the Times building in Los Angeles in 1910, an explosion that killed twenty people. When the McNamara brothers were tried in 1911 for masterminding the bombing, Clarence Darrow had invited Wood to join in the defense. But Wood refused for two reasons: first of all, he suspected that the McNamaras were guilty— he believed that they were ill-suited for the role of martyrs into which they'd been cast by the national labor movement. Secondly, he was wary of Darrow's tactics. He believed— and events proved him right— that when Darrow realized the McNamaras' guilt, he would stop at nothing to squeeze victory out of a losing cause. Wood was certain that Darrow's behavior would hurt labor. The cause of Labor had Justice and Truth

on its side— Wood warned the McNamaras' clamorous supporters that Labor must never taint a just cause with corrupt practice.

Now, with Schmidt and Caplan facing trial, Wood was given an opportunity to conduct a defense in his own way. These were difficult times for Wood: his lavish lifestyle had created a huge personal debt; his legal practice placed constant demands on his time; and his personal life was torn asunder by his divided love for two women. He could only take on the Schmidt-Caplan defense at great sacrifice. He wavered, he quibbled over details, he withdrew... but eventually he dropped everything and threw himself into defending the two men.

At the outset, he told the defendants that they must take responsibility for their actions— that radical Labor could not create a better world built on lies and violence. Bolstered by Schmidt and Caplan's agreement to admit their guilt, he used the trial to put their terrible deed in perspective. Militant labor had chosen the Times building as a target because of the machinations of General Harrison Gray Otis, the newspaper's publisher who took it upon himself to keep Los Angeles free of union organizing. Without condoning the dynamite bombing in any way, Wood brought forth a stream of witnesses whose personal accounts depicted the suffering and hardship that honest working people faced in a city where business and government, so closely aligned, did as they pleased without facing the countervailing power of unionized labor. General Otis's Los Angeles was a city where wealth controlled both politics and law — and overwhelmed the democratic process. On more than one occasion Wood reminded jurors that these were not unlike the circumstances that provoked the America's founders to assert that the people of any nation have the right to "alter or to abolish" a government that denies them their inalienable rights.

Wood expressed anguish at the bombing and its consequences, but the flow of testimony he gathered supported his argument that Schmidt and Caplan's act of violence was conceived as retaliation to the greater violence of a plutocratic system. What need did General Otis have for bombs when he controlled millions of dollars? When he had the Los Angeles city government and police force in his pocket?

The jury was moved by Wood's defense and by the stoic dignity of the two young men who admitted their crime and apologized for the unintended destruction of innocent lives of fellow workers. Schmidt and Caplan were convicted of manslaughter, the lightest charge possible. Half a century later, Wood's defense strategy was still being used by lawyers defending civil disobedience cases during the civil rights movement and the years of radical protest against the Vietnam War.

Finally, a report of what I found in Wood's literary archives. As many of you know, Wood revised his epic poem *Civilization* several times— changing its name to *The Poet In The Desert*; acting on second and then third thoughts about how directly to press its didactic content; tinkering with it again and again to get it right. In truth, many of Wood's closest friends — Sara Bard Field, Max Eastman, John Cowper Powys, and Lincoln Steffens — thought little of the poem. And though their criticism was muted by the affection they felt for Wood, Wood got their message. He remained devoted to his ambitious work, but he came to understand that high-blown rhetoric, blunt didacticism, and a kind of Cecil B. DeMille panavision perspective were not necessarily the most effective means by which to pass on his wisdom and his passion for social change.

.... So he returned to his greatest subject— he set to work to complete his autobiography. He described his childhood on the banks of the Erie-to-Pittsburgh Canal, his glimpse of president-elect Lincoln on his somber journey to Washington, his rail journey West as a 2 lieutenant. His days exploring the Alaskan coast and his idyll with a Tlingit princess. There are the Nez Perce and Bannock campaigns, of course, as well as vivid portraits of the great Civil War generals who guided the U. S. Army in its military suppression of our Indian people. We see Ryder, Hassam, St. Gaudens and other artists of the times. We see Steffens, Darrow, Emma Goldman, and other radical

leaders — not merely as historical figures, but as personal friends described with a keen eye for telling details revealed in everyday encounters. What makes Wood's autobiography so valuable is that the entire narrative is enriched by his radical vision of the many forces that limit freedom and self-expression. He understood as well as any person in his time that as America grew to fulfill its so-called Manifest Destiny it ran roughshod over cherished liberties, moving further and further from its glorious ideals. All in all, Wood's autobiography gives a human dimension to issues that divided and defined our changing nation from the Civil War up to the beginning of World War II.

What's more, Wood was a riveting storyteller, and his autobiography has real merit as a literary text. In its fusing of the personal and political, and in the vast arc of American experience his life encompasses, Wood's autobiography is destined to establish itself as an American classic worthy of comparison with *The Education of Henry Adams* and Lincoln Steffens *Autobiography*.

Alas, as many of you know, my account of Wood's unpublished masterpiece is a fiction, a bit of wishful thinking on my part — as are the two other stories that preceded it. Why, you might ask, have I taken up your time telling you what Wood did not do in his life when, in fact, he did so much?

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Let me explain. In the course of my research and writing on Wood's life, I sometimes came to critical moments where I saw opportunities for him— situations where a different attitude or a different course of action might have led to achievements that would have realized his extraordinary potential. Put another way, I came upon situations in Wood's life where he could have done better. In other words, I found myself tantalized by the same longings faced by the fictitious biographer in Nabokov's *The Gift*.

All of the stories I've told you might have happened. Wood was in Portland at the time of the absurd ban on red neckties— but perhaps he was too busy with his legal practice; or maybe he was at the Arlington Club that day voicing his support for the strike in the company of the city's movers and shakers — as they all digested a hearty lunch. Or maybe, in spite of his professed anarchism, he simply could not bring himself to commit an act of civil disobedience. As for the Schmidt-Caplan trial, Wood was invited to defend the two young men. He was sorely tempted — indeed, Sara Bard Field implored him to take the case, but in the end he used a dispute about his legal fee as an excuse to drop out. "I am also a wage slave," he wrote to the two men in jail. But a man with a $100,000 debt created by years of living high on the hog was surely not suffering the same hardships as the "wage slaves" for whom Schmidt and Caplan undertook their campaign of sabotage and destruction. As for Wood's autobiography, it exists only in fragments — and it stops before his journey West in 1874, when he was 22. The overriding fact of Wood's life is that this man, who believed so fervently in human liberty was, himself, not a free man. For most of his adult life his words and deeds were measured against economic imperatives brought on by his lavish lifestyle.

My purpose in presenting these unrealized possibilities is not to diminish Wood, but to suggest in some small way the hurdles that arose when I sat down to write a book that would convey the force of his personality. For

Wood, you see, is in some ways an unconventional subject for a biography. He was an extraordinary person, without question, yet he did not leave his mark on his times as did many of the remarkable people who came to know him. General Howard, Chief Joseph, Ryder, Hassam, Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, John Reed, Steffens, Darrow, John Cowper Powys, Ansel Adams — all these men and women left legacies of far greater achievements than Wood. And, typically, historians and biographers focus their research on the overachievers. Seen in this light, a fascinating figure like Wood is often relegated to historical anonymity— or, at best to the status of a "local hero."

Indeed, when I submitted an early draft of my manuscript to a handful of commercial publishers and to several distinguished university presses, their general response was that there was little point in making much of a fuss about such an insignificant fellow. Having decided that Wood himself was lacking in historic merit, some editors even suggested various analytic points that they thought I ought to make to enhance my narrative.

One reader decided I'd blown an opportunity to "reconfigure regionalism" and present a "new view of the West." Another felt I should have presented Wood as a man who tried to "cut himself loose from the encumbering ties of the Victorian gentleman, and at the same time, in this modernizing push, hold onto class and gender privileges." All this is well and good — or maybe it isn't — but it was never my intention to encumber my narrative with that kind of interpretive baggage. There may be numerous engrossing and illuminating critical projects that Wood's life might suggest, but they are not what my book is up to.

A good biography ought to stimulate all kinds of responses — perhaps my work will spur others to have their say from divers points of view. I'm well aware, for example, that although *Two Rooms* is Wood's story, in important ways it is merely my version of his life. To write a biography one must make countless choices: omission and commissions; choices in information, language, structure, and context — innumerable factors that give Wood's life shape and meaning. The result is a narrative, an act of storytelling. Not fiction, but nonetheless a shaping of reality that's open to correction, emendation, and challenge. Some readers or some future biographer might choose to give different emphasis to Wood's poetry, to his legal career, his life with Nannie, or to his contributions as a social critic. Others might criticize Wood more sharply for what they see as his womanizing, or his elitism, or his devoted service to capitalism. However, I've done my best not to over-interpret Wood's life— or rather to present his story in a manner that allows readers to draw their own conclusions.

But back to the initial resistance my manuscript encountered: the assumption that Wood had not accomplished enough to merit a fall-blown biography. The fact that the historical luminaries mentioned a few minutes ago all loved and admired Wood and that in some cases they depended on his wisdom and guidance appeared to be irrelevant. What had Wood done? What had he made of lasting importance? The questions these unimpressed editors asked pointed to a self-evident fact — that they had not heard of him — and this in turn led to two conclusions: that Wood must be obscure and that there was little point in turning out a book on this un-famous, relatively unimportant man. Yet I couldn't help but feel that their reaction did not reveal some grievous flaw in Wood, so much as it indicated that people were simply asking the wrong questions.

My biography of CES Wood is my 4th published work — and all three predecessors were devoted to the lives and narratives of unknown, supposedly unimportant people. It may sound corny, or wildly idealistic to some of you — certainly it would probably sound that way to the skeptical editors who rejected my Wood manuscript — but I think that any life, closely observed and skillfully narrated, is worthy of attention. In its largest sense, History is not merely a chronicle of so-called major events, nor is it an accounting of the deeds of some kind of "A" list of great people — but rather it is the totality of everything that happens, literally a Book of Life. For example, I believe that a well-written biography of some Chinese laborer caught up in Portland's anti-Chinese demonstrations of 1886

could be as disturbing and meaningful as the finest Zola novel. And I can easily imagine that a first-rate biography of Dr. Marie Equi would enrich us every bit as much as yet another book on John Kennedy or Marilyn Monroe.

Every life is unique and every life reverberates with the spirit of the age. For a person like CES Wood, who lived so long, who was so finely attuned to the forces that shaped the world around him, who engaged in his world so fully, so enthusiastically— for a person like this, his life was his greatest work. Surely, this is what his devoted friend, John Cowper Powys, was getting at when, on the occasion of Wood's 80' birthday, he said:

> **A man is more than his work; else his work is but a small thing.** And you, my dear lord, who paint life and the old sweet look upon the face of life, you who sing of death and the old strange look upon the face of death, are more than these things; more than the best of these things.

At the heart of Powys' effulgent praise were sentiments many of Wood's friends shared: that Woods stature derived, not from any single accomplishment, but from the caliber of the man himself. His involvement in worthy causes, his vocal criticism of injustice, his writing, his generosity, his sympathy, his abiding love of life — none of these attributes alone accounted for the affection he inspired, the strength and hope he gave others.

There were times in my research— especially in the early going as I was still discovering the shape and texture of Wood's life — that I found myself a kind of volatile spectator, rooting for him in moments of duress, sharing his adventures, wincing at his self-indulgence, and urging him on to higher achievement. The three counterfeit stories I've told you embody my wish that Wood could have seized more opportunities to act boldly and creatively in ways that might have secured him a place in history comparable to that of his two comrades— Steffens and Darrow.

But, more importantly, they point to aspects of Wood's inner life that can only be approached through intuition and sympathetic imagining. In his novel, *The Counterlife*, Phillip Roth challenges his readers to acknowledge the duality forced upon us by the countless choices all of us make in our words and actions. What we say and what we do defines the Self — but, as Roth understands, it is not the entire Self.

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Roth's novel gives life to our second, subliminal Self denied expression in our active lives, but which still asserts its vital existence in a counterlife sustained by imagination and psychic energy. Put simply, our counterlife is the life of our repressed nature. Here, at last. our silenced Self says what we neglected to say; our restrained Self urges us to do what we refused to do or were unable to do... I hope you see the relevance— perhaps "poignancy" is more accurate — of this idea as it applies to Wood. He lived under immense pressure brought about by conflicting needs, responsibilities, and aspirations. It is impossible to claim that the stories I've told accurately represent his specific wishes in those specific situations — but I do think they embody the checked impulses that make Wood's life so interesting and revealing. Of course, one cannot write a biography about what a person did not do — but I think any biographer of CES Wood would surely misrepresent his subject if he failed to see that at every point in Wood's life his counterlife churned within him, strong and insistent —a force for transformation, but also, it must be said, a force that created contradiction, confusion, and anguish — for Wood and for those who loved him. Yet

for me it was this very tension between what Wood did and what he wanted to do that brought me close to him. And I felt too that in some way Wood's divided existence embodied many of the contradictory forces that drove our nation during the 70 years of his active life.

To narrate the story of such a man was both a privilege and a challenge. I hope that people who read my biography of Wood will take from it something far more valuable than an assemblage of facts and anecdotes. For beyond the details of Wood's life, beyond his deeds, is the story of one person's difficult quest for justice and wisdom and personal transformation. Wallace Stegner would have seen how Wood's story dramatizes certain large themes of the American experience. And I like to think that Herman Hesse would have seen in Wood's story an archetype of the questing human spirit. All this is to say that Wood's life is both quintessentially American as well as profoundly universal.

Every stage of his life is marked by engagement, struggle, self-expression, enlightenment, and growth. It is truly thrilling to see him, late in life, actively challenging new threats to human freedom. There he was, well on in his 80s— a vigorous defender of America's fundamental values; yet he was also a great believer in the humane vision of Communism and in the great potential of the Soviet Union to fulfill that vision. And then, in the mid-1930s, he became outraged at the Stalinist show trials in Moscow and at the boneheaded defense of Stalinist tyranny by American Communists. Yet even as he criticized Communism run amok, he became one of the targets of a "red scare" launched by Martin Dies and the House of Representatives' Special Committee on Un-American Activities. Wood saw two great nations, both of which carried the hope of mankind, betraying their revolutionary faith in human rights — and he spoke out courageously.

I hope all this talk of Wood's counterlife and of thwarted possibilities does not leave you with the impression that I'm somehow disappointed with Wood. That's not it at all. He was a charismatic agent for hope and change— and many people, myself included, valued him for just that. If, in his own works and deeds, he never rose to the prominence and notoriety of several of his closest friends, those who knew Wood never questioned his stature. As Powys understood, Wood's greatness lay in his gift for living and the vibrant life-affirming energy that seemed to emanate from him. Rich life experience, broad learning, lively sensuality, diverse friendships, and an acute sensitivity to creativity and the active life of the human soul — these are some of the currents that account for the Wood's charisma. In the language of present day Aquarians, Wood was very "evolved." Even when he sought silence and privacy in his later years, he remained responsive to the great conflicts of his time. Not only to great public issues but to specific human ordeals as well.

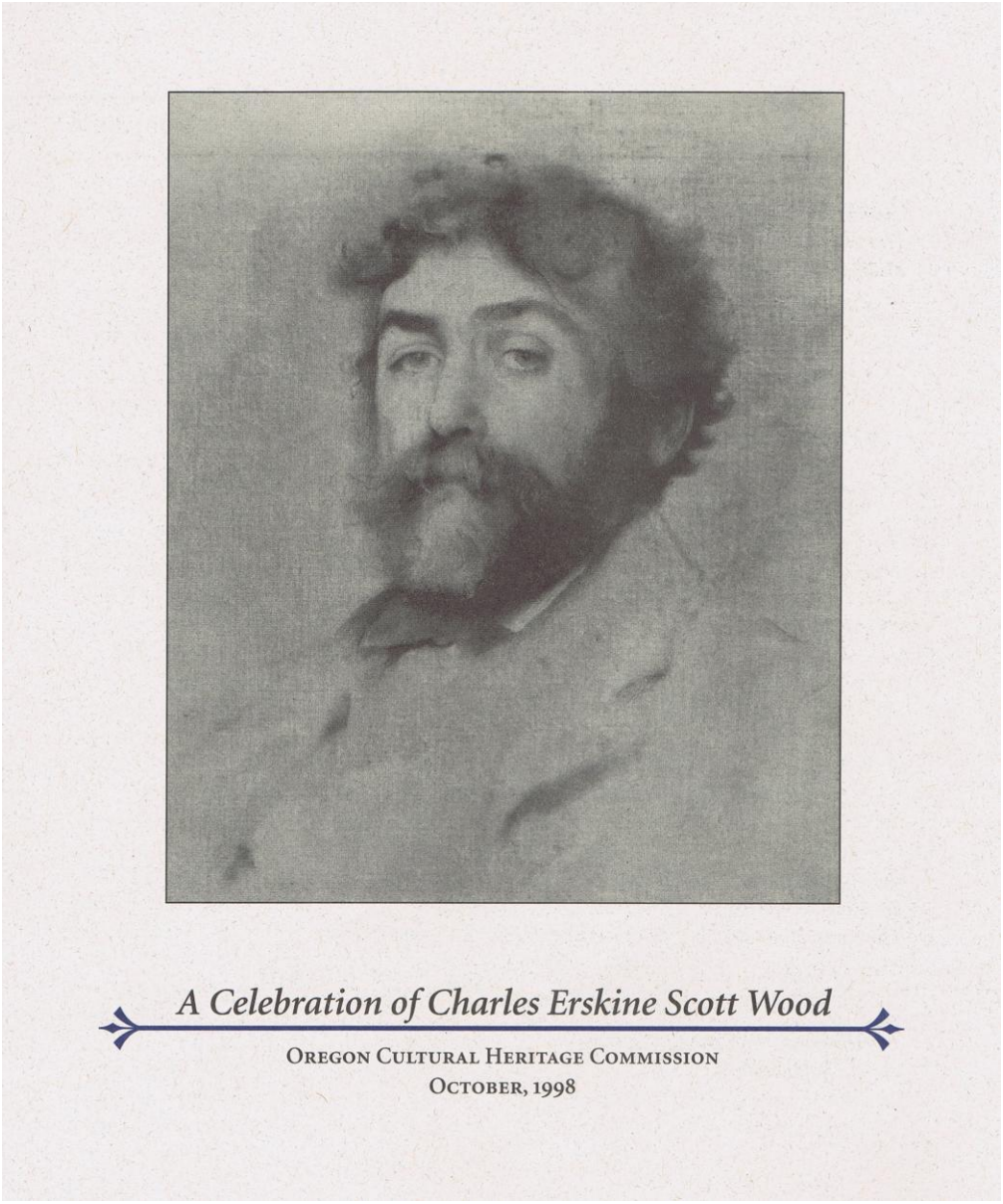
By 1941 Wood was virtually blind and he was weakened by a series of blows to his health. In spite of this, he devoted his dwindling strength to the dilemma of Takezo Shiota, a San Francisco art dealer with whom he'd done business for close to 40 years. Shiota had left Japan in his teens, back in 1894, and he became one of the most respected dealers of oriental art on the West Coast. He advised several museums and he assisted The U.S. Customs Office in appraising Chinese and Japanese art. Nonetheless, at the outbreak of World War II, Shiota and his family were interned with hundreds of other Japanese Americans in Poston, Arizona — where temperatures sometimes rose above 110°. As the war continued, Shiota was transferred to Missoula, Montana, then relocated to Fort Still, Oklahoma, and later to Camp Livingston, Louisiana — a merciless shuttling of a helpless people, not unlike the diaspora of the Nez Perce some 75 years before.

Through it all, Wood doggedly wrote to various government offices, personally guaranteeing Shiota's loyalty— brandishing his record as a patriotic American, and that of his father's, as a kind of voucher. His efforts came to nought; but it was a point of honor for Wood to stand up for his friend and to denounce this baseless

spectacle of racial discrimination. This is the kind of action that does not enter our history books, yet it defines Wood's generosity and his passion for justice. His life was filled with such events.

One final observation. It's interesting, revealing I think, that several friends who read my manuscript and saw the striking photographs of Wood said virtually the same thing to me: "He must have been a big man!" He wasn't. Family members tell me he was under six feet tall. But in the ways that mattered, he was very big indeed. He led a long and productive life — but in the end nothing he did was as big as who he was, nothing he wrote is as grand as his own life story.

Author Robert Hamburger's 4th published work, *Two Rooms: The Life of Charles Erskine Scott Wood* [The University of Nebraska Press, 1998], is to date the sole full-length biography of Wood. This talk was delivered October 10, 1998 right before the book's publication at the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission *A Celebration of Charles Erskine Scott Wood* symposium. Two days earlier, events opened with the installation of the OCHC-produced CES Wood Memorial — compleat with an edition of the Olin Warner 1888 bust of Wood — unveiled at the Multnomah County Central Library, where this presentation was offered.



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