

# Charles Erskine Scott Wood (1852-1944)

## Thinker / Founder of our Modern Oregon

David Milholland © 2000 [re-edited 2012]

# C.E.S.

Wood has been well described a Renaissance man. Like so many Oregonians, he made a conscious choice to live here, doing so during his vital middle years, from 1883-1919. What follows examines key elements of

Wood's thinking and creative action which continue to reverberate in our day-to-day lives as Oregonians.

Raised here myself since early childhood, near Wood's beloved Harney and Malheur counties in the distant SE Oregon community of Lakeview, I lived briefly in Washington state during my high school years. Reaching majority, I chose freely to return to Portland, where except for sojourns in Latin America, I've made my home since 1964. Though our state shares borders and early history with Washington, Idaho & California, our culture evolved into a significantly different animal. Not always choosing the easy path, nor always making the best short-term economic decisions, we've preserved the right to stumble toward our destiny on our own terms. Let's consider how Wood himself has influenced that journey.

From his earliest years in the U.S. military, Wood learned to work within a structure he often found confining. He was introduced to the great Oregon desert, lived in close contact with officers and men from around the nation, and over time became deeply involved with the Indians the Army was sent here to check and control. It seems clear from his writings that Wood learned as much from these cross-cultural encounters as he did from decades of formal studies. He grew to respect and espouse the Native American's complete integration into the natural world, which saw human beings as no less or more valuable than the birds, trees, insects, flowers, or even just the raw land where they made their homes. Wood found his own gods in this vast, overpowering natural world, gods he celebrated by visiting these wide open spaces whenever possible. Oregon remains the most unchurched state in the nation, a place where, in Wood's words:

The elder gods are dead –  
But still there shall be gods.  
Dogwood delicately uplifts a sacrament;  
Purple and yellow violets embroider a shrine.  
Even now a wren is praying,  
Unseen and at a hidden alter.



C.E.S. Wood in Harney County  
early 20th century

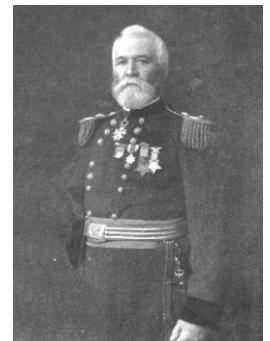
**T**hat's a sentiment I share with the children of the loggers with whom I grew up, as well as those who've come to hike the hills, run the rivers, and generally find renewal in our wild places, no matter how city-bound our lives become. This makes our state the environmental haven it's been since Wood's days, with our Oregon Beach law, river restorations, bottle bill, and ongoing efforts to solve our problems through legislation and working dialogue among concerned parties. We're far from perfect, far from delivered, but talking. That's good.



**Wood's life-long friend  
Chief Joseph the Younger**

Like most Oregonians, Wood had conflicting opinions about the role of government. As a philosophical anarchist, he was greatly opposed to the government's abridgment of personal freedom. His poetry and an entire volume *Too Much Government*, herald the individual's right to choose her or his own course. Not only did he avidly oppose Prohibition, for he loved his cup, but he also saw government too frequently operating as the central agent of control for those few rich people he felt pulled the strings. During his days here in Portland, he lashed out boldly against the war machine thrown up to expand the U.S. empire to the Philippines, using as fodder the bodies of young men whose interests were in no way served.

Though Oregon has generously and repeatedly offered her sons and daughters in battle, Wood's dubious attitudes toward war permeate our culture profoundly. We were the only state with two senators (Morse and Hatfield) outspokenly against the Vietnam debacle, and staged one of the largest outpourings nationally against the Bush-Saddam Hussein War in 1990. Even more to the point, we've resisted a military infrastructure, housing but two small air bases in Portland and Klamath Falls, and a single Coast Guard station. Compare that to a Puget Sound bristling with Army, Navy & Air Force bases, the Hanford complex, large bases and training complexes near Spokane, Yakima, and not long ago my high-school-years home Moses Lake. Enough said.



**Wood's early mentor  
General O.O. Howard**



**1888 bust of Wood by  
Skidmore Fountain  
sculptor Olin Warner**

Wood's defense of the free speech rights of Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, Portland doctor Marie Equi, and many IWW members, flowed out of this same set of beliefs — that laws restricting speech, in Equi's case during the bitter years of WWI, largely operated to protect economic privilege. It is satisfying to see Wood's efforts resurrected in the recently unveiled public art piece at our Civic Stadium stop on the Westside Tri-Met line. Our Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission presented pieces when the line opened on several Westside figures, including Wood, Equi, John Reed, Abigail Scott Duniway, even James Beard, seen in their day as outspoken, if not dangerous, and often as living outrageous lives.

Wood himself, it has often been pointed out, struggled with his need for money to raise a family and maintain a high civic profile, and his inclination to surround himself with beautiful things. A believer in beauty as a liberating influence on the soul, Wood wrote and painted as well as any regional contemporary, and treasured his friendships with artist friends in NY and the leading creators of the West. He used his money and personal influence to set the artistic tone for his chosen community. He brokered and promoted the work of Childe Hassam, Alfred Pinkham Rider, Olin Warner, and several local artists for whom there was no art market at the time. As editor, literary contributor and financial backer of the *Pacific Monthly* and writer for *The Masses*, his ideas circulated up and down the Coast and beyond.

His friendships within the Portland aristocracy — the Ladds, Failings, Corbetts, Weinhardts, et al — fit consistently into this set of needs and desires. They were his legal clients, purchased his friends' art, and often bought into his wild but prescient ideas — let's make the subscription library free to public, let's buy original art for our fledgling museum, let's create a Rose Festival — on and on.

Quite often they looked another way when he railed for free speech or espoused free love. But they did talk when he practiced the same, and he was finally isolated, where once he'd been revered. His decision after WWI to go south to the Bay Area was painful but necessary.

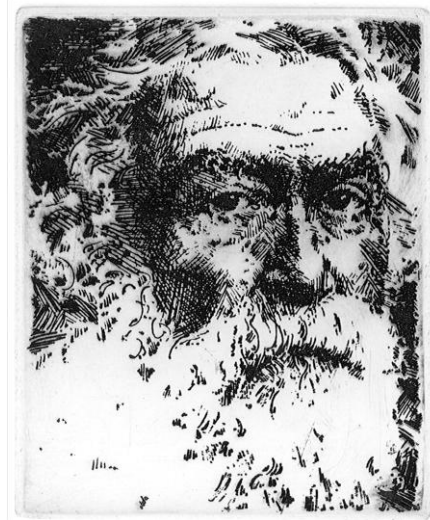
**W**ood had given himself up completely to his adopted city and state, raising our standards for beauty, helping us think far less provincially, urging our accommodation of peoples from other cultures and lands. He once resigned from the Oregon bar when it refused the admission of a black attorney to its ranks, as he later fought against Japanese internment during WWII in California. Finally he went where he found greater freedom, and a less stultifying day-to-day existence.

He never departed our hearts, nor did he leave the heart of our culture. We salute and thank him, and celebrate his nearly 40 years as an Oregonian. **May we continue to learn from and emulate this giant in our ranks.**

### **I Come From the West**

I come from the West,  
where, in a civilization  
founded on the mine and the camp,  
we believe that the saloon  
and the theater has as good  
a right to be open on Sunday  
as the church and the school.  
I come from where we think that  
it is the right of every American  
to go to hell and be damned  
if he wants to.  
That is no humor — it is the truth.

**C.E.S. Wood speech to the Manhattan Club, NYC, 1902**



**C.E.S. Wood by Stephen Leflar**

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## **Charles Erskine Scott Wood — Selected Works**

*A Book of Indian Tales*, Portland: The Attic Press, 1901, New York: The Vanguard Press, 1929

*A Masque of Love*, Chicago: Walter M. Hill, 1904

*The Mill Race Sonnets*, Eugene, n.p., 1911

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*Sonnets*, Portland: “*This is not a publication but for private distribution to members of the family,*” 1918

*Mafia, A Sonnet Sequence*, Portland: F. W. Baltes, 1918

*Circe, A Drama with a Prologue*, Portland: “*Printed for the author's convenience only. Not a publication,*” 1919

*The Testament*, “The Metolius River, Jefferson County, July 1, 1921”



*Heavenly Discourse*. New York: The Vanguard Press, 1927, New York: Penguin, 1946  
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*Too Much Government*, New York: The Vanguard Press, 1931  
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*Selected Poems by Charles Erskine Scott Wood and Sara Bard Field*, San Francisco: Grabhorn Press, 1937  
*Sonnets to Sappho*, San Francisco: "Printed by Edwin and Robert Grabhorn," 1939  
*Collected Poems Of Charles Erskine Scott Wood*. Collected, with a Foreword, by Sara Bard Field, with an Introduction by William Rose Benet, New York: The Vanguard Press, 1949

## **A C.E.S. Wood Primer**

"Col. Wood Fighter and Gentleman," Unsigned Editorial, *The Portland News*, 1915  
 "Charles Erskine Scott Wood, Portland's Radical Philosopher and Bon Vivant," Walt Curtis, *Multnomah Monthly*, 1984  
 "The Heavenly Discourse of C.E.S. Wood," Edwin Bingham, *Oregon Humanities*, 1990  
 "Charles Erskine Scott Wood and the Portland Public Library," Tim Barnes, 1996  
 "C.E.S. Wood: Portland's man of all seasons," Fred DeWolfe, *Northwest Examiner*, 1996  
 "A Circle of Words" Beth Hege Piatote, *Oregon Quarterly*, 1998  
*Two Rooms: The Life of Charles Erskine Scott Wood*, Robert Hamburger, The University of Nebraska Press, 1998  
*Childe Hassam: Impressionist in the West*, Portland Art Museum, 2004  
*Soldier to Advocate: C.E.S. Wood's 1887 Legacy*, George Venn, Wordcraft of Oregon LLC, 2006  
 "C.E.S. Wood and the Culture of Portland," Tim Barnes, monograph for an Oregon Committee for the Humanities [OCH] funded project, undated  
 "C.E.S. Wood: Frontier Humanist," Tim Barnes, monograph for an OCH funded project, undated



**Sharon & Keith Soy Red Thunder representing the Nez Perce of the Chief Joseph band at the Charles Erskine Scott Wood Memorial dedication, October 8, 1988, Multnomah County Central Library**