



I came to Edith Wharton later in life. (I entirely blame an Australian school system that revered English literature—meaning the literature of *England*—above all others.) I had managed to find and fall in love with the novels of Henry James (albeit a lapsed American) on my own, but did not have the happy chance to fall upon the works of Edith Wharton until I was introduced to them through a literature discussion of her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Age of Innocence* at the C. H. Booth Library just a few years ago.

I was immediately enamored by the intelligent and satiric voice that called out from the novel and knew at once that I had found an American novelist to rival my early love of Jane Austen's prose. The novels of Jane Austen had been my adolescent confidantes; I was drawn to Austen's delicious wit and her keen observation of the social "ropes of life" within the confines of small English villages. In *The Age of Innocence*, I heard a similar ironic voice; however, it had been expanded by a wealth of experience, by a life fully lived, having experienced marriage, divorce, European travel, politics, and war.

I had found my American Jane.

As readers, what a rare delight it is when we stumble upon an author we recognize instinctively as a kindred spirit. In the words of Wharton herself, I felt that I had found a writer whose work represented "an expansion, an interpretation, of one's self" and that "the same deep understanding drew us together." And how could one not fall in love with a writer who as a young girl had not only secretly written a thirty-thousand-word novella titled *Fast and Loose*, but had also written a scathing mock review of her own work, which she imagined would be published in the *Nation*: "It is false charity to reader and writer to mince matters. The English of it is that every character is a failure, the plot a vacuum, the style spiritless, the dialogue vague, the sentiment weak and the whole thing a fiasco."

When Kim Weber, the C. H. Booth Library

Programs Director and fellow fan of Julie Stern's lectures, informed the discussion group that the country home of Edith Wharton, known as the Mount, was open to the public through the summer months, and just "up the road" in Lenox, Massachusetts, it was more than just a visit, it was a *pilgrimage* that was in order! Henry James, one of Edith Wharton's closest friends, once said that "no one fully knows our Edith who hasn't seen her in the act of creating a habitation for herself." I headed out on the first day of the summer season to visit Edith Wharton's country home piqued with a desire to know her more fully.

The Mount Estate and Gardens is a pleasant two-hour drive north from Newtown, Connecticut, through the Berkshire Hills. Unlike so many other authors' homes and birthplaces that are considered to be literary touchstones, the Mount is not just a house that Wharton happened to reside in for part of her life. The Mount Estate and Gardens were meticulously designed and built—one might even say birthed—by Edith Wharton herself. In a letter to Morton Fullerton she writes, "I am amazed at the success of my efforts. Decidedly, I'm a better landscape gardener than novelist, and this place, every line of which is my own work, far surpasses *The House of Mirth*."

Edith Wharton was more than qualified to design and build her own home and gardens. She had become a recognized authority on house architecture and design after the groundbreaking book *The Decoration of Houses*, which she co-wrote with the architect Ogden Codman, Jr., was published in 1897. It was her first published book; it sold out immediately, was highly sought after in England and Europe, inspired the development of interior design as a profession, and continues in print to this day. The noted critic Edmund Wilson described her as "the pioneer and poet of interior decoration." The book became so popular that Wharton recalls in her memoir, *A Backward Glance*: "It became the fashion to use our volume as a touchstone of taste, and I was often taxed by my friends with not applying to the arrangement of my own rooms the

The House That Edith

The Estate and Gardens of Edith Wharton

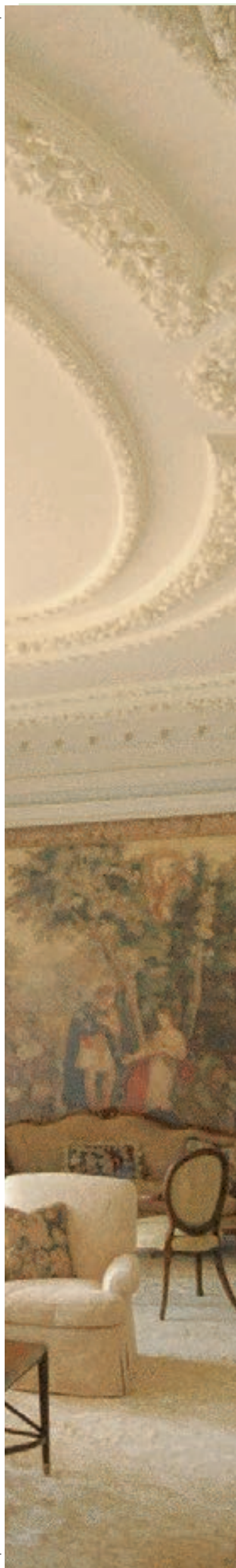
Georgia Monaghan

OFF MAIN STREET



Built





rigorous rules laid down in *The Decoration of Houses*."

Wharton credits a "happy misfortune" for the early formation of her aesthetic taste and values. In her memoir she explains that "the depreciation of American currency at the close of the Civil War had so much reduced my father's income that . . . we had gone to Europe to economize." She recalls moving to Europe for six years during her most formative years and living in France, Italy, Germany, Spain, and England, which gave her, for the rest of her life, "that background of beauty and old established order." She wrote that she did not know how deeply she "had felt the nobility and harmony of the great European cities till our steamer was docked at New York. . . . The squalor of the New York docks dismayed my childish eyes, stored with the glories of Rome and the architectural majesty of Paris." Wharton experienced an acute sensitivity to her aesthetic surroundings from a very young age. She recalls that "my visual sensibility must always have been too keen . . . my photographic memory of rooms and houses . . . was from my earliest years a source of inarticulate misery, for I was always vaguely frightened by ugliness."

The Decoration of Houses was a direct rebuke aimed at the "ugliness" of Victorian interior decoration: rooms heavily curtained and crammed with overstuffed furniture, "lambrequins, jardinières of artificial plants, wobbly velvet-covered tables littered with gewgaws, and festoons of lace on mantelpieces and dressing tables." Instead, Wharton proposed creating rooms based on the classical design principles of proportion, symmetry, suitability, and harmony. She sums up her design philosophy by saying: "The supreme excellence is simplicity. Moderation, fitness, relevance—these are the qualities that give permanence to the work of the great architects."

Just in case the reader had not fully grasped Wharton's explanation of the importance of simplicity in decoration and design, she dedicates the entire last chapter of *The Decoration of Houses* to instructing the reader on the use of bric-a-brac. Wharton may excuse "the weary man" an ugly chair on which to sit or "the hungry man" an ugly table at which to dine, but she has no tolerance for ugly "objects of art" since, as she points out, "it is quite possible to go without them." Wharton insists that the absence of "useless trifles . . . improves even bad rooms or at least makes them less multitudinously bad." Wharton believes that "the first obligation of art is to make all useful things beautiful." And one cannot help but agree with her that "were this neglected principle applied to the manufacture of household accessories, the modern room would have no need of knick-knacks."

In building the Mount in the hills of Massachusetts in 1902, Wharton was able to create from the ground up a country house that expressed in physical form the classical principles she championed in *The Decoration of Houses*. Wharton writes in her memoir, *A Backward Glance*: "At last I escaped from [Newport] trivialities to the real country . . . for life in the country is the only state that has always completely satisfied me." Wharton describes the beauty and benefits of her new home: "On a slope overlooking the dark waters and densely wooded shores of Laurel Lake we built a spacious and dignified house, to which we gave the name of my great-grandfather's place, the Mount. There was a big kitchen garden, a little farm and a flower-garden outspread below the wide terrace overlooking the lake. . . . The Mount was to give me country cares and joys, long happy rides and drives through the wooded lanes of that loveliest region, the companionship of a few dear friends and the freedom from trivial obligations which was necessary if I was to go on with my writing." Despite moving in to the Mount at age forty, after having lived in numerous homes in New York, Newport, and Europe, she called the Mount her "first real home." Within the year Wharton reports, "Lenox has had its usual tonic effect on me, and I feel like a new edition, revised and corrected . . . in the very best type."

After arriving at the Mount, I headed toward the Main House on foot, passing the original gatehouse and greenhouse before quickly coming upon a large, perfectly symmetrical two-story classical building exhibiting fine architectural details, including three cupolas. It required restoration to be sure, but it was a beautiful building all the same. I could immediately imagine the Bennet family from *Pride and Prejudice* living here. However, on closer inspection I realized that this was not the home of Edith Wharton as I had assumed—this was her stables!

Following a winding, maple-lined drive planted on either side with ferns and pretty blue ground covers, I finally came to a walled courtyard and had the sense that I had arrived at the servants' entrance. This was no accident; Wharton discouraged uninvited visitors. The house is not visible from the road, and the facade that greets the eager visitor is rather uninviting, with windows strategically placed to allow no view into the main living areas of the house. The house is built entirely toward the view of Laurel Lake and the Berkshire Hills on the opposite side of the house. The elevation facing the private view is

grand and impressive, but able to impress only those personally invited to walk the grounds.

Upon entering the house, I discovered one of the most delightful things about visiting the Mount: there are no ropes cordoning off furniture or large sections of the rooms. Although the furniture is not original, it is in keeping with Wharton's style, and visitors are free to sit and repose in the same rooms as Wharton and her inner circle of literary friends. Another of the charms of visiting the Mount is that after your informative tour of the house and gardens, you are free to wander and enjoy the elegant rooms and gardens just as Edith Wharton did.

The only exception to this rule applies to the library—the reason being that each of the 2,600 books contained on the shelves are Edith Wharton's very own. They were purchased by the Mount from a Yorkshire bookseller for 1.5 million British pounds and were returned to the Mount in 2006 after almost a century in the hands of private owners and booksellers in Europe. The head of the Mount's restoration project said that it was the most important acquisition they could have possibly made. Many of the books are inscribed with notes to Wharton by luminaries of the time, such as Henry James and Theodore Roosevelt. The collection comprises Wharton's first-edition copies of her own works, including one of the most valuable books in the collection, Wharton's own first-edition copy of *The Decoration of Houses*.

In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton recounts that her many close friends, "the most divergent intelligences," among them writers, professors, curators, linguists, and playwrights, gathered in her library at the Mount around the fire and talked "together like gods." Wharton recalls that "one of our great joys was to get a book from the shelf, and ask one of the company to read the passage aloud. . . . One night someone alluded to Emily Brontë's poems. Immediately [Henry James] took the volume from my hand, and his eyes filling, he began to read. . . . Another day someone spoke of Whitman and . . . "Leaves of Grass" was put into James's hands and all that evening we sat rapt while he wandered from 'The Song of Myself' to 'When lilacs last in the door-yard bloomed.' . . . We talked long that night of 'Leaves of Grass,' tossing back and forth treasure after treasure."

Despite the prominent photograph in the library of Wharton sitting at her well-equipped desk in the library, she rarely, if ever, wrote her works of fiction there. Instead





Above: Edith Wharton, Henry James, and Howard Sturgis on the terrace at the Mount.

she preferred to write in bed, allowing each page she finished to float gently to the floor to be picked up and catalogued by her secretary. It was in her bedroom at the Mount that she wrote the widely acclaimed *The House of Mirth*. Wharton wrote that "the country quite stimulated my creative zeal." It was here at the Mount that she came into her own as one of America's greatest writers.

A long, wide stone terrace wraps around three sides of the Mount, and all the principal rooms on the main floor, including the library, drawing room, and dining room, open on to it through French doors that take in views of the gardens and the Berkshire Hills. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton writes that her memories of "evening talks on the moonlit terrace" come back "with a mocking radiance." She fondly remembers summer evenings with "Henry James and the nucleus of what I have called our inner group . . . when we sat late on the terrace at the Mount, with the lake shining palely through the dark trees."

A Palladian staircase leads down from the terrace to a lime walk of linden trees connecting two main garden rooms: an Italian-style walled garden (funded by the royalties received from *The House of Mirth*) and a French-style flower garden. Just as the Mount's architecture was influenced by her work on *The Decoration of Houses*, so too was the Mount's landscaping design influenced by Wharton's work on the book *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904), which became a serious work on Italian villa and garden





architecture and a working manual for architectural students and landscape gardeners. Wharton believed that gardens, in the Italian tradition, should be architectural compositions, divided into rooms, and planned in concert with the house and the natural landscape. Besides writing, gardening was Wharton's other great passion, and she wrote in her memoir of her "deep joy of communion with the earth."

During the Whartons' time at the Mount they acquired an early version of the automobile, which allowed them to explore, beyond the perimeter of the Mount, "the mystery beyond the next blue hills." Together with Henry James, Walter Berry, and her husband, Edith Wharton found "inexhaustible delight in penetrating to the remoter parts of Massachusetts, discovering villages with Georgian churches and balustrade house-fronts, exploring slumberous mountain valleys." Two of Wharton's New England tales, *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, were the result of her explorations among the "derelict mountain villages of Western Massachusetts . . . still bedrowsed in a decaying rural existence, with sad slow-speaking people living in conditions hardly changed since their forebears held those villages against the Indians." Wharton believed that "Emily Brontë would have found as savage tragedies in our remoter valleys as on her Yorkshire moors."

Sadly, in 1911, the Whartons were forced to sell the Mount. Wharton recalls that "for over ten years I lived and gardened and wrote contentedly, and should doubtless have ended my days there had not a grave change in my husband's health made the burden of the property too heavy." Her memoir, published in 1934 near the end of her life, is filled with references to her life at the Mount, and she notes poignantly that "though it is nearly twenty years since I saw it (for I was too happy there ever to want to revisit as a stranger) its blessed influence still lives in me."

In a ghost story called "The Fullness of Life," published in 1893, almost ten years before the Mount was designed or built, Wharton describes a heavenly vision of a home in the afterlife that could have been a description of the Mount itself: "It seems to me that I can see our home already. Have I not always seen it in my dreams? It is white, is it not, with polished columns, and a sculptured cornice against the blue? Groves of laurel and oleander and thickets of roses surround it; but from the terrace where we walk at sunset, the eye looks out over woodlands and cool meadows where . . . a stream goes delicately toward the river."

In the same ghost story Wharton writes, "I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a house full of rooms; there is the hall, through which everyone passes; . . . the drawing-room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting-room, where the members of the family come and go; . . . but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned . . . and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits. . . ."



Although Wharton lived out her last years in France, crossing the ocean for the last time in 1923 to receive her honorary doctorate from Yale University, one can't help but sense, as one sits quietly in one of the innermost rooms at the Mount, that Wharton's spirit has drifted back across the pond to not only revisit, but to take up her final residence in the house that Edith built.

The Mount, at 2 Plunkett Street, Lenox, Massachusetts, is open daily May through October. The Terrace Café is open mid-June through mid-September. Highlights of the 2011 season include ghost tours, outdoor and indoor theater productions, a lecture series, and the Some Enchanted Evenings Jazz Café. For more information visit www.edithwharton.org.



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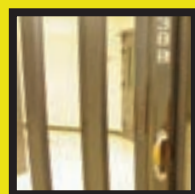
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