

EDITH WHARTON: AT THE MOUNT

A
Conference
of the
Edith Wharton
Society



June 7-10
1987
Lenox, Mass.

The Mount C. 1983 Photographer: Warren Fowler. Photo courtesy of Edith Wharton Restoration.

“... Meanwhile we soon left London to take up again the Italian wanderings which we both enjoyed, and out of which, in 1904, “*The Valleys of Decision*” was to grow.

Before this happened, another change had come. We sold our Newport house, and built one near Lenox, in the hills of western Massachusetts, and at last I escaped from watering-place trivialities to the real country. If I could have made the change sooner I daresay I should never have given a thought to the literary delights of Paris or London; for life in the country is the only state which has always completely satisfied me, and I had never been allowed to gratify it, even for a few weeks at a time. Now I was to know the joys of six or seven months a year among fields and woods of my own, and the childish ecstasy of that first spring outing at Mamaroneck swept away all restlessness in the deep joy of communion with the earth. 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 with a grape pergola, a little farm, and a flower-garden outspread below the wide terrace overlooking the lake. There 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. But meanwhile the Mount was to give me country cares and joys, long happy rides and drives through the wooded lanes of the 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. The Mount was my first real home, and though it is nearly twenty years since I last saw it (for I was too happy there ever to want to revisit it as a stranger) its blessed influence still lives with me.”

Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 1936.

During the years 1911-1942 The Mount belonged to a succession of private owners, including Albert Richardson Shattuck and later Carr Van Anda, retired managing editor of *The New York Times*. In 1942 it became the property of The Foxhollow School for Girls. When the school closed in 1976, the Mount was in a sad state of disrepair. In 1980 The Mount was purchased by Edith Wharton Restoration, a non-profit organization dedicated to restoring the Mount for the public. The house and gardens are currently undergoing restorations with funds from individuals, state and federal sources. A National Historic Landmark, The Mount is open from June to October for tours of the property and programs dedicated to Edith Wharton and is hosting the first all-Wharton conference.



Professor McDowell gets admiring glance from Professor Lewis as she listens to her accolades.



Professor Lewis is either pleased with his award or shocked to see Edith Wharton standing in the doorway of her French home in her nightgown. Professor McDowell shows her pleasure too.

Edith Wharton Hosts Session and Dinner

One of the most successful special sessions The Edith Wharton Society has so far sponsored took place at the Annual MLA Convention in New York on December 29, 1986. Entitled "Edith Wharton and Her Men," the session attracted two and three times the 40-seat capacity of the meeting room. Much of the success of the session must be attributed to the lead speaker, Professor R. W. B. Lewis, most currently editor of the forthcoming *Letters of Edith Wharton*. In "Lovers and Friends: More from More Letters," he commented on the rich and varied correspondence Wharton conducted. When asked why it is taking so long for the letters to see print, Lewis remarked that Wharton was so learned that it has taken him many years to trace and account for her allusions and references. Professor Judith Saunders of Marist College in "Is Wharton Just a Minor James?" pressed the uniqueness of each writer and the injustice of always coupling and comparing them, usually to the detriment of Wharton. James' forte lay in the subtle discovery of the emotional cages people build for themselves, knowing they can leave but also knowing they never will. Wharton limns the more inextricable bonds society forges on a individual's choices and the doomed limitations they exact. One of the most stimulating papers was Deborah Carlin's

paper, "The Trajectories of Desire: Incest and Authority in *The Children*." As Professor Lewis later commented, it was remarkable to see a room full of people arguing over the meaning of the next to last line of this once rarely read novel. Professor Annette Zilversmit chaired the session.

After the session, 26 members of the Edith Wharton Society went to a dinner at the Cafe de France to honor and award Professor Margaret B. McDowell and Professor R.W.B. Lewis for their early and long contributions to Wharton studies. Professor Katherine Joslin presented them with rare candid pictures of Wharton encribed from The Edith Wharton Society.

CALL FOR PAPERS FOR THE NEXT WHARTON SPECIAL SESSION AT MLA CONVENTION IN SAN FRANCISCO, DECEMBER 1987. The topic will be "Edith Wharton and Women" and will be in response to the provocative *New York Times* book review by Janet Malcolm of The Library of American edition of Wharton. The review was headlined as "The Woman Who Hated Woman." 1-2 page proposals should be sent by March 10 to Dr. Carol Singley, Box 1852, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912.

EDITH WHARTON'S OLD NEW YORK

A three hour walking tour of Edith Wharton's fictional and real worlds will be given by members of the staff of The Mount and The Edith Wharton Society on Sunday, May 17. It will begin at one o'clock at the Washington Square Arch and move through Union Square, Gramercy Park and Madison Square. It will end with a reception to celebrate this 125 anniversary of Wharton's birth at St. Sava's Church (West 26 Street Broadway) where Wharton was married in 1885. Cost is \$8.00. Further information call (413) 637-0067 or (212) 724-8372.

Edith Wharton at The Mount



Edith Wharton at The Mount in about 1905 doing what Lily Bart and other proper women dare not to. Photo courtesy of The Beinicke Library, Yale University.

"The stopping of the train at Garrisons would not have distracted her from these thoughts, had she not caught a sudden look of distress in her companion's eye. His seat faced toward the door, and she guessed that he had been perturbed by the approach of an acquaintance, a fact confirmed by the turning of heads and general sense of commotion which her own entrance into a railway-carriage was apt to produce.

She knew the symptoms at once, and was not surprised to be hailed by the high notes of a pretty woman, who entered the train accompanied by a maid, a bull-terrier, and a footman staggering under a load of bags and dressing-cases.

"Oh Lily — are you going to Bellomont? Then you can't let me have your seat, I suppose? But I must have a seat in this carriage — porter, you must find me a place at once. Can't some one be put somewhere else? I want to be with my friends. Oh, how do you do, Mr. Gryce? Do please make him understand that I must have a seat next to you and Lily."

Mrs. George Dorset, regardless of the mild efforts of a traveler with a carpet-bag, who was doing his best to make room for her by getting out of the train, stood in the middle of the aisle, diffusing about her that general sense of exasperation which a pretty woman on her travels not infrequently creates.

She was smaller and thinner than Lily Bart, with a restless pliability of pose, as if she could have been crumpled up and run through a ring, like the sinuous draperies she affected. Her small pale face seemed the mere setting of a pair of dark exaggerated eyes, of which the visionary gaze contrasted curiously with her self-assertive tone and gestures; so that, as one of her friends observed, she was like a disembodied spirit who took up a great deal of room.

Having finally discovered that the seat adjoining Miss Bart's was at her disposal, she possessed herself of it with a farther displacement of her surroundings, explaining meanwhile that she had come across from Mount Kisco in her motor-car that morning, and had been kicking her heels for an hour at Garrisons, without even the alleviation of a cigarette, her brute of a husband having neglected to replenish her case before they parted that morning.

"And at this hour of the day I don't suppose you've a single one left, have you, Lily?" she plaintively concluded.

Miss Bart caught the startled glance of Mr. Percy Gryce, whose own lips were never defiled by tobacco.

"What an absurd question Bertha!" she exclaimed, blushing at the thought of the store she had laid in at Lawrence Selden's.

"Why, don't you smoke? Since when have you given it up? What — you never — And you don't either, Mr. Gryce? Ah, of course — how stupid of me — I understand."

And Mrs. Dorset leaned back against her traveling cushions with a smile which made Lily wish there had been no vacant seat beside her own."

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905)

Short papers for small sessions are still being considered. Send 1-2 page proposals by March 12 to: Prof. Annette Zilversmit, Dept. of English, Long Island University, Brooklyn, NY 11201. Conference fee: \$100.00. Accommodations and Meals: \$198.00. Reservations: \$50. Make checks to Edith Wharton Restoration and send to Scott Marshall, P.O. Box 974, Lenox, MA 01240. For further information contact: Prof. Katherine Joslin, Dept. of English, 203 Ross Hall, Iowa State Univ., Ames, Iowa 50011.

TENTATIVE CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Sunday, June 7, 1987

1:00-4:00 P.M. Registration
 6:00 P.M. Cocktails and Dinner
 7:00 Katherine Joslin, Iowa State Univ., Keynote Address, "Edith Wharton at 125."
 7:30 Herbert Fierst, Lawyer, Edith Wharton Estate. "R.W.B. Lewis, The Biographer"
 7:45 R.W.B. Lewis, Yale University, "Edith Wharton's Transatlantic Crossings"

Monday, June 8, 1987

9:30 A.M. Amelia Peck, Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Restoration of the Interiors of The Mount: The Challenge of a Literary Landmark"
 10:30 A.M. Guided tours of the House and Garden
 12:30 P.M. Lunch
 1:30 Cynthia Griffin Wolff, MIT, "Hot Ethan, Cold Ethan"
 3:00 Small sessions of prepared papers on Wharton's fiction and life
 6:00 Dinner
 7:00 Margaret B. McDowell, Univ. of Iowa, "Edith Wharton's *The Old Maid*." The 1939 film *The Old Maid* with Bette Davis and Miriam Hopkins will be shown.

Tuesday, June 9, 1987

9:30 A.M. Elizabeth Ammons, Tufts Univ. "Multiple Images: Wharton through the Lens of the Literary New History"
 10:30 A.M. Small sessions of prepared papers
 12:30 A.M. Lunch
 1:30 P.M. Marilyn French, novelist and critic, "Muzzled Women"
 3:00 P.M. Small sessions of prepared papers
 6:00 Dinner
 7:30 Judith Fryer, Univ. of Mass. "Whose Body? *Tableaux Vivants*, Harems and Other Scenes"
 9:00 Screenings of new and old filmings of works by Wharton

Wednesday, June 10, 1987

9:30 A.M. Annette Zilversmit, Long Island Univ., "The Haunted Houses of Edith Wharton: Some New Directions
 10:30 Open discussion
 12:30 Lunch
 1:30 P.M. Optional Walking Tour of Edith Wharton's Lenox.

CALL FOR NEW ESSAYS FOR WHARTON COLLECTION

Professor Alfred Bendixen of Barnard College has contracted with Garland Press to publish a major collection of new essays on Edith Wharton early in 1988. The book will also include reprints of a selection of the best essays on Wharton from journals and conferences in the last ten years. Professor Annette Zilversmit is co-editor. Manuscripts of 2500-6000 words (with old MLA style footnoting) will be considered, and should be sent by September 30 to: Prof. Alfred Bendixen, Department of English, Barnard College, New York, NY 10027.

(The issue is partially funded by Andrew Mellon Fund of Long Island University, Brooklyn Campus)