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EDITH WHARTON IN CONTEXT

Edith Wharton was one of America's most popular and prolific writers, becoming the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1921. In a publishing career spanning seven decades, she lived and wrote through a period of tremendous social, cultural, and historical change. Bringing together a team of international scholars, this volume provides the first substantial text dedicated to the various contexts that frame Wharton's remarkable career. Each essay offers a clearly argued and lucid assessment of Wharton's work as it relates to seven key areas: life and works, critical receptions, book and publishing history, arts and aesthetics, social designs, time and place, and literary milieux. These sections provide a broad and accessible resource for students coming to Wharton for the first time while offering scholars new critical insights. Of interest to English and American studies departments, the volume will also appeal to researchers in gender studies, film studies, book history, art history, and transatlantic studies.

LAURA RATTRAY is Senior Lecturer in American Literature at the University of Hull. She is editor of the two-volume *The Unpublished Writings of Edith Wharton* (2009) and *Edith Wharton's The Custom of the Country: A Reassessment* (2010). She is on the editorial board of the *Edith Wharton Review* and has recently been awarded a Leverhulme Fellowship for a new study of Wharton and Genre.

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Hill since 1988; she recently retired. The recipient of Guggenheim, Rockefeller, National Endowment for the Humanities, and other fellowships, she received the Hubbell Medal for lifetime work in American Literature in 2011. She wrote several books on Wharton for the Twayne series and edited *The Portable Edith Wharton* for Penguin (2003). Her biographies include books on Zelda Fitzgerald, Sylvia Plath, Gertrude Stein, Barbara Kingsolver, and Ernest Hemingway.

Abbreviations

EDITH WHARTON PRIMARY SOURCE ABBREVIATIONS

- AI* *The Age of Innocence* (New York; London: D. Appleton and Company, 1920).
- BG* *A Backward Glance* (New York; London: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934).
- CC* *The Custom of the Country* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913).
- CSI* *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1891–1910*, ed. Maureen Howard (New York: Library of America, 2001).
- CSII* *Edith Wharton: Collected Stories 1911–1937*, ed. Maureen Howard (New York: Library of America, 2001).
- DH* *The Decoration of Houses* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897).
- FF* *Fighting France, from Dunkerque to Belfort* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915).
- FWM* *French Ways and Their Meaning* (New York; London: D. Appleton and Company, 1919).
- HM* *The House of Mirth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905).
- IB* *Italian Backgrounds* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905).
- Letters* *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, eds. R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988).
- LI* "Life and I," *The Unpublished Writings of Edith Wharton*, vol. II, ed. Laura Rattray (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009).
- Poems* *Edith Wharton: Selected Poems*, ed. Louis Auchincloss (New York: Library of America, 2005).
- TS* *Twilight Sleep* (New York; London: D. Appleton and Company, 1927).

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- VD *The Valley of Decision* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902).
WF *The Writing of Fiction* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925).

SECONDARY SOURCE ABBREVIATIONS

- Benstock Shari Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994).
CR *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews*, eds. James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer, and Margaret P. Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
Lee Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).
Lewis R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).
Wolff Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Preface

January 2012 marked the 150th anniversary of the birth of Edith Wharton. While many economies continued to flounder, this author's stock proved notably resilient. Anniversary events included radio dramatizations, day-schools, interviews with enthusiasts and scholars, newspaper and magazine articles on both sides of the Atlantic, a major academic conference in Florence for the Wharton Society, and an online birthday tribute. (Edith Wharton is, of all things, an established Facebook and Twitter presence.) In an article for the *Sunday Telegraph* to mark the occasion ("A 'lonely-hearted' heiress with a fearless eye"), Anita Brookner even targeted the British literary grail to propose Wharton as "a corrective to the national obsession with Jane Austen."¹

In the pithy phrasing on the website of the author's home, The Mount, "After all of these years, Wharton still packs a cultural wallop." In the twenty-first century, the writer, born during the U.S. Civil War, infiltrates contemporary popular culture to a remarkable degree – and one imagines Wharton, insistently attuned to the marketplace and the "regular click of coin in [her] savings-box" (*Letters* 592), would have appreciated the financial, if not always the artistic, rewards. Her name, image, and writings inflect a wide array of popular cultures, spanning television, film, radio, music, and magazines. These range from *Gossip Girl*, *Entourage*, and the *Gilmore Girls*, to *The Nanny Diaries*, *Vogue*, the entertainment guides of Martha Stewart, the writings of Candace Bushnell, and the music of Suzanne Vega. Julian Fellowes' transatlantic television success, *Downton Abbey*, invited fruitful parallels to his predecessor, providing a cultural shorthand for its socially elite world, and Fellowes has cited Wharton among his favorite writers.

Long after her death in August 1937, Wharton remains a marketable asset. A collection of her letters sold at a Christie's auction in June 2009 for \$182,500, while the surviving half of her library raised an eye-watering \$2.6 million in 2006. Mass-marketed gift items, such as key rings, bookmarks,

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and photograph frames on sale in bookstores in the United States, carry two beautifully conceived lines from her dramatic monologue, “Vesalius in Zante”: “There are two ways of spreading light; to be / The candle or the mirror that reflects it” (*Poems* 43). “In context,” however, the lines swiftly lose their consumer-friendly allure. The assertion, after all, is not “Wharton’s,” but that of the physician-scientist speaker whose death-bed “confession” to the dissection of a girl still living (“pinioned hand and foot”) admits no regrets: “Think what she purchased with that one heart-flutter / That whispered its deep secret to my blade!” (*Poems* 36).² While on the one hand chillingly inappropriate, on the other the marketing line provides an apt reminder that Wharton’s work, especially when it comes in period camouflage, is not always as it first seems.

In terms of Wharton scholarship, Helen Killoran labeled the years 1938 to 1975 “The Lull,” while Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in the revised 1995 edition of her biography, hailed the “dazzling resurrection” of the writer’s reputation.³ Hermione Lee offered a more nuanced appraisal in 2007, concluding in her acclaimed biography that “[f]or all this massive interest among general readers and academics, much still remains to be done with the posthumous life of Edith Wharton” (Lee 758). *Edith Wharton in Context* addresses one such omission, by bringing together Wharton scholars to provide the first substantive volume focused exclusively on the social, literary, cultural, and historical contexts that produced the writer and her long and prolific career. The collection considers the question of context through seven sections: Life and Works; Critical Reception; Book and Publishing History; Arts and Aesthetics; Social Designs; Time and Place; and Literary Milieux. Contributors include the authors of: *Edith Wharton’s Women: Friends and Rivals*; *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*; *Edith Wharton’s Writings from the Great War*; *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts*; *The Cambridge Introduction to Edith Wharton*; *Displaying Women: Spectacles of Leisure in Edith Wharton’s New York*; *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion*; *Apart from Modernism: Edith Wharton, Politics and Fiction*; and *Edith Wharton and the Conversations of Literary Modernism*. Also writing for the volume are the co-editor of the *Edith Wharton Review*, members of the Wharton Society board, the co-director of the sesquicentennial Wharton international conference, and the editors of *The Portable Edith Wharton*, *Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors: Edith Wharton and Material Culture*, and *The Unpublished Writings*. All leading Wharton scholars, their focus spans archival research, biography, publishing history, material culture, performance and the visual arts, gender studies, sociology and politics, and cultural studies. Each writer

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brings his or her expertise to build collectively the most sustained attempt to deepen our understanding of the ways in which Wharton lived and worked with, through, and sometimes against the contexts that impressed themselves upon her.

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NOTES

1. A. Brookner, "A 'lonely-hearted' heiress with a fearless eye," *Sunday Telegraph*, January 15, 2012, 28.
2. My thanks to Clare Colquitt for alerting me to this marketing campaign.
3. H. Killoran, *The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2001), 6; C. G. Wolff, *Edith Wharton: A Feast of Words* rev. ed. (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1995), xxiii.