

Edith Wharton

To Download this book in many format Visit :

<https://wocoentala.org/source1/2ee80506f50e4053eb99d14c386911af>

The definitive biography of one of America's greatest writers, from the author of the acclaimed masterpiece *Virginia Woolf*.

Delving into heretofore untapped sources, Hermione Lee does away with the image of the snobbish bluestocking and gives us a new Edith Wharton—tough, startlingly modern, as brilliant and complex as her fiction.

Born in 1862, Wharton escaped the suffocating fate of the well-born female, traveled adventurously in Europe and eventually settled in France. After tentative beginnings, she developed a forceful literary professionalism and thrived in a luminous society that included Bernard Berenson, Aldous Huxley and most famously Henry James, who here emerges more as peer than as master. Wharton's life was fed by nonliterary enthusiasms as well: her fabled houses and gardens, her heroic relief efforts during the Great War, the culture of the Old World, which she never tired of absorbing. Yet intimacy eluded her: unhappily married and childless, her one brush with passion came and went in midlife, an affair vividly, intimately recounted here.

With profound empathy and insight, Lee brilliantly interweaves Wharton's life with the evolution of her writing, the full scope of which shows her far to be more daring than her stereotype as lapidarian chronicler of the Gilded Age. In its revelation of both the woman and the writer, *Edith Wharton* is a landmark biography.

Hermione Lee is the first woman Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature at Oxford University. Her books include a major biography of Virginia Woolf; studies of Elizabeth Bowen, Willa Cather and Philip Roth; and a collection of essays on life-writing, *Virginia Woolf's Nose*. Also a well-known critic, Lee served as the Chair of Judges for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction, 2006. She lives in Oxford and Yorkshire. Chapter One: An American in Paris

In Paris, in February 1848, a young American couple on their Grand Tour of Europe found themselves, to their surprise, in the middle of a French revolution. Up to then, the travels of George Frederic Jones and his wife of three years, Lucretia Stevens Rhinelanders Jones, with their one-year-old son, Frederic, had been undramatic. They had a lengthy European itinerary, the usual thing for Americans of their class, backed by the substantial funds of the Jones family, one of the leading, old-established New York clans. Starting in England and Paris in April 1847, they had "done" Brussels, Amsterdam, Hanover, Berlin and Dresden, Prague, Linz, Salzburg and Munich, Frankfurt, Cologne, Coblenz, Friburg, Geneva, Lake Como and the major Italian cities. George Frederic, at twenty-seven an experienced traveller (his father had taken him on his first European tour when he was seventeen), was able to indulge all his appetites for architecture, scenery, paintings, collectable objects, shopping, theatre, entertainment and seeing life. "Lu," though more limited by looking after little Frederic and by her frequent illnesses and "her tremendous headaches," was very definite about what she liked and did not like on her first trip abroad: "Lu rather disgusted with the Catholic ceremonies." [1]

George Frederic voiced his own prejudices confidently all over Europe. "More disgusted than ever with London . . . London prices are fearful . . . Decidedly disgusted with Milan." In

Amsterdam, "the smell from the canal in most parts of the city fearful . . . Drove to the Jewish synagoage [sic] . . . but as soon as the carriage stopped, we were surrounded by such an infernal-looking set of scoundrels that we gave it up in disgust." (But he enjoyed the Breughels.) In a Berlin restaurant, "the company mostly men, all hard eating, hard drinking, loud talking and very little refinement anywhere." In the Dresden picture gallery, he was "much pleased" with the card players of Caravaggio, and a head of Christ by Guido. (Just the sort of thing that the "simpler majority" of nineteenth-century American tourists always liked and bought copies of, Edith Wharton would remark.)[2] In the Prague Cabinet of Antiquities, "the cameos were particularly beautiful, one, the apotheosis of Augustus, is said to have cost 12,000 ducats." In Venice he was very pleased with the Palace of the Doges [the Palazzo Ducale]. In Florence he rated the Pitti Palace "a much finer gallery than the other."

But his heart belonged to Paris. When they first landed at Boulogne at the start of the trip, he wrote: "Glad to be again in France." Once they settled into their rooms on the Champs-Élysées, everything interested him: the Palais Royal, the Louvre, the riding at Franconi's, the flower market, a new ballet at the Académie Royale ("some pretty grouping but on the whole rather tedious"), the Hôtel des Invalides where they were building a chapel to contain the remains of Napoleon. Meanwhile, Lu, as her daughter would note, was buying clothes, among them "a white satin bonnet trimmed with white marabout and crystal drops . . . and a 'capeline' of gorge de pigeon taffetas with a wreath of flowers in shiny brown kid, which was one of the triumphs of her Paris shopping." [3]

After the long tour, back in Paris early in 1848, they were all set to resume their busy schedule of pleasurable activities. But on 22 February 1848, walking down from their hotel, the Windsor in the Rue de Rivoli, to the Place de la Concorde at 11 a.m. to see the results of the Reform Banquet, George Frederic found it had been put a stop to, and that an immense and very excited crowd had gathered. (Opposition parties, prevented from calling large-scale political meetings, had set up "reform banquets" all over France, where speeches were made against the government and toasts to reform were drunk. The one scheduled in Paris was prevented by order of Louis-Philippe and his regime: that was the spark for the upheaval.) By 4 p.m., barricades were being built and troops were out "in immense numbers." "Matters in a state of great uncertainty," George Frederic reported. On the 23rd, he heard of "considerable fighting" and of the resignation of François Guizot, the chief minister, and his government. On the 24th, there was heavy fighting, and they could see much of the action from their window: "The whole city in a complete state of insurrection." The National Guard had joined the uprising. He "took Lu out to see the state of things, but she was so much frightened that we could not go far." On the way back they heard a great firing in the Place Vendôme and so "had to beat a hasty and most undignified retreat through the side streets." Louis-Philippe abdicated and fled with his wife across the Tuileries gardens, witnessed from their balcony by the Joneses. (Her mother, Wharton said, was more interested in what the queen was wearing than in the political crisis.) The people pillaged the palace, and a provisional government was declared. "Immense enthusiasm for the Republic. The tricolor cocarde [sic] universally worn." By 28 February, order was restored, but George Frederic Jones "had no confidence in the present state of things. Think the French entirely unsuited to a Republic."

The next day, he (and Paris) were beginning to get back to normal: an evening show at the Palais Royal, followed by dinner at the Trois Frères; an Italian opera (where the "Marseillaise" was sung between the acts); a masked ball at the Grand Opera, very amusing; letter-writing, an outing to the vaudeville. But there was "not so much refinement as before—everything too democratic and republican." At the opera, he found "a great change in the appearance of the audience—everyone very little dressed." And it was more and more difficult to procure money through letters of credit. On 15 May there was a massive street demonstration in support of revolutionary governments in eastern Europe ("Another remarkable day in French history . . . deep-laid conspiracy to overthrow the government . . . great alarm . . . Paris looked like a besieged city"). But the Joneses were leaving for "stupid and uninteresting" London—and then home to New York. "Leave Paris with great regret, which, changed though it is since the Revolution, is more agreeable than any place I ever was in." [4]

Nearly seventy years later, a lifetime away, Edith Wharton was in Paris at the outbreak of the European war of 1914, watching the behaviour of the people in the streets, gauging the political and social temperature, and coming to her own firm conclusions about this nation in wartime. As she watched the mobilisation of conscripts and volunteers, the throng of foot-passengers in the streets, the incessant comings and goings of civilians under martial law, the crowd's quiet responses to the first battle news, and, gradually, the influx into the city of "the great army of refugees," she was struck by the "steadiness of spirit," the orderliness and "unanimity of self-restraint" of Paris at war. The contrast with 1848—or 1870—was extreme: "It seemed as though it had been unanimously, instinctively decided that the Paris of 1914 should in no respect resemble the Paris of 1870." As war conditions became the norm, she noted that the Parisians had started to shop again, to go to concerts and theatres and the cinema. But she noted, too, a consistent look on the faces of the French at war—grave, steady and stoic. [5]

Wharton set to, and did what she could for France in wartime, including writing that account, "The Look of Paris," mainly for the benefit of an American public as yet unsure about joining the battle. For the next four years she sacrificed much of her life as a writer and a private citizen to her work for war victims and to proselytising for France. She became—it was not surprising to those who knew her—a high-powered administrator and benefactor. And though this was her period of greatest involvement with French public life, for which she was honoured with the Légion d'honneur in 1916, her attention and commitment to "French ways and their meaning" continued. As an old lady, long since disgusted with post-war Paris, hardened in her political opposition to anything that smacked of "Bolshevism," living in seclusion in her winter house on the Mediterranean, she listened intently in February 1934 to the news on the wireless of the bloody anti-government demonstrations in Paris. She feared for her property and for the future of her adopted country. "I do find it rather depressing to sit alone in the evenings & wonder what's happening in Paris," she wrote from Hyères to her friend Bernard Berenson. [6]

Between these nineteenth- and twentieth-century American versions of Paris in crisis is the gap of a generation, of historical change, and of widely differing personal knowledge and experience. Edith Wharton turned her back on the genteel dilettantism of George Frederic and Lucretia Jones. She was a knowledgeable inhabitant and lover of France, not a tourist;

a writer, not a leisured traveller keeping a diary. In this, as in many other ways, she broke with her parents' attitudes and customs, and created a different kind of life for herself. No wonder there is a much-repeated rumour that Edith Jones was not George Frederic's daughter at all. (Wharton's own fictions of illegitimacy, adoption and hidden parentage fuel these intriguing stories.) In her accounts of her childhood, she seems a stranger in the house, a changeling child. That is how she described her parents' view of her in the unfinished, unpublished version of her autobiography. "...

Other Books

In Morocco, "[...] VIII. NOTE ON MOROCCAN ARCHITECTURE IX. BOOKS CONSULTED INDEX[...]"

⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ ⌘ . "[...] VIII. NOTE ON MOROCCAN ARCHITECTURE IX. BOOKS CONSULTED INDEX[...]":"