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After a Century, an American Writer's Library Will Go to America



Stephanie Copeland of the Mount, Edith Wharton's estate, and the bookseller George Ramsden examining a volume from Wharton's library.

By ALAN COWELL

SETTRINGTON, England, Dec. 12

In an English house in this small Yorkshire village, a defining moment in American letters unfolded on Monday, rounding a circle begun a century ago when Edith Wharton, the writer, packed up and left the United States to live in France.

With a toast of Champagne and a lunch of roast pheasant (shot by the host himself), George Ramsden, a British bookseller in a pinstripe suit, signed a \$2.6 million agreement to sell the 2,600-volume Edith Wharton library to the custodians of the Mount, the writer's estate in Lenox, Mass., which she designed, built and finally left forever in 1911 as her marriage unraveled.



Edith Wharton in a 1905 Portrait
(Courtesy of Edith Wharton Restoration)

"It is the most important acquisition we could possibly make," Stephanie Copeland, head of the Mount's restoration project, said in an interview just before she signed the deal.

The sale ended a remarkable period of uncertainty, not just for the future of the collection and the keepers of the Mount but also for Mr. Ramsden, who bought the bulk of the library in 1984 for £45,000, then worth around \$80,000, and has devoted much of his life to completing and cataloguing it.

The library has rarely been on public view since the writer's death in France in 1937, and its return to the Mount will provide scholars and Wharton aficionados with an opportunity to view the volumes that not only shaped Wharton's

development but also reflected the broad sweep of her interests, from classical French theater and German drama to the novels of her peers and the delights of the then new-fangled automobile.

Annotations in the volumes offer a window into her world. There is an inscribed volume from Morton Fullerton, her journalist lover in Paris, said by scholars to have been Wharton's most significant romantic partner. He dedicated a copy of "Problems of Power," a study in international politics, to "Edith Wharton, but for whom this book would never have been written." Theodore Roosevelt inscribed a copy of his 1915 "America and the World War" with the words: "To Edith Wharton from an American-American!" And there are, of course, books signed by

Henry James, which throw some oblique light into the deep friendship she maintained with him. ("To Edith Wharton - in sympathy," James wrote in "The Golden Bowl" in 1904).

Hermione Lee, a prominent scholar at Oxford University, who is preparing a new Wharton biography, called the library "a form of writer's autobiography" in the 1998 foreword of a catalog of the collection prepared by Mr. Ramsden.

"Her whole social milieu, her private affairs and her literary career can be discerned from her collection," Ms. Lee wrote. "Wharton's flyleaves show her progression from Edith Jones to Mrs. Edward Wharton to Edith Wharton, as she turns herself from a society girl into the much-admired and somewhat daunting internationally famous author."

The setting for the sale at Mr. Ramsden's home near York - the house, dating to 1716, is called the Old Rectory - was hardly the opulent world of old New York depicted by Wharton in many of her novels. There were no footmen or bejeweled grandes dames (though there was, fittingly, an English lord). There were none of the couches and opulent paneling of the original library at the Mount, which Wharton moved into in 1902.

Indeed, the sale itself was part of a more complex - and strictly modern - financial transaction. The purchase of the library, Ms. Copeland said, was financed by a loan from an anonymous benefactor, whom she would identify only as a businessman.

Once the library is reinstalled at the Mount, in the original library on the first floor, Wharton admirers will be encouraged to "adopt" a book for a set price. The most expensive at \$1 million, Ms. Copeland said, will be Wharton's copy of "The Decoration of Houses" - the first work of prose published under her name in 1897, with her co-author, Ogden Codman Jr. Lesser titles will be available for adoption for as little as \$1,000. The aim is to pay back the purchase price and create a \$35 million restoration fund for the Mount, Ms. Copeland said.

How Edith Wharton's characters from upper-crust Old New York might

have shivered at such public discussion of money!

For many years, the sale had been at an impasse. Mr. Ramsden was ready to sell, but the Mount had no money to buy, Ms. Copeland said. Only a series of apparent coincidences last year and earlier this year undid the deadlock. But that was after the collection had already endured many vicissitudes.

Edith Wharton collected the books, including first-edition copies of her own works, that will be going to Lenox, Mass.

After Wharton's death in 1937, the library was split and part was destroyed in storage in London during the World War II. The rest was inherited by Colin Clark, the son of the British historian Sir Kenneth Clark and Wharton's godson. That part was integrated into Kenneth Clark's own library at Saltwood Castle in Kent, in southern England. The Clark family sold the collection and Mr. Ramsden



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(Courtesy of Edith Wharton Restoration)

bought the library from Maggs, a prominent London bookseller, in 1984, but it was incomplete and he spent many years revisiting Saltwood to look for missing volumes and buying other books to complete the library. (Alan Clark, Sir Kenneth's other son, told him his quest for missing books at Saltwood was "admirable but a thundering nuisance," Mr. Ramsden said.)

"The unique thing about this library is that she wrote about it in her autobiography," Mr. Ramsden said. "She really tells you what books really meant to her. Even before she could read, she could be found alone with a book upside down in her hands. The

physical presence of books continued to mean a lot to her.

"The library reflects her life so well," he said.

Mr. Ramsden kept the books in a simple upstairs room in his old house, and he was determined to maintain them together. He depicted his long years in communion with the books as something of a single-minded and not always easy passion.

"My family have had a rather stressful time," he said. "Various people wanted to buy bits, and I had to resist," he continued. "The entire history of the book trade is the dispersal of libraries, not gathering them together."

The deadlock over the library began to ease in the summer of 2004 when Ms. Copeland, the president and chief executive of the Mount restoration project, happened to meet Christopher Tugendhat, an English lord visiting friends near the Mount in Massachusetts.

Lord Tugendhat, a former journalist, politician, European Union commissioner and current investment banker, is also an avid collector of rare first editions and has, he said, an almost complete collection of Wharton's works.

Last February, he traveled from London to Settrington and met with Mr. Ramsden, becoming a go-between for all the parties involved. He concluded, Lord Tugendhat said in an interview, that "George has really done something considerable here." The library's cataloging and completion, he said, was a "life-work" worthy of recognition.

The British peer also met with the anonymous benefactor after he made his financing offer last August. Ms. Copeland said: "As our ambassador, as someone who could appreciate and understand George, his contribution to this was critical."

And so, on Monday, the principals gathered around a long dining table for their lunch of pheasant and raised their glasses not just to Edith Wharton but to the absent - and still mysterious - benefactor who had, like a novelist reaching a long-gestated yet titillating denouement, brought them, finally, together.