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Edith's Words to Live By

wharton's library offers a peak into her life

NICK WEDGE



Annie Leibovitz / contact **ORIGINALLY FOR VOGUE**

For an avid bibliophile, what a dream it would be to have an up-close look at some of the volumes owned by one of America's foremost authors. Well, it happened; there I was, at The Mount in Lenox, prowling through Edith Wharton's treasure trove of literature. I was about to bask in the splendor of the 1902 library (which Wharton helped design and decorate) and also discover what the books meant to her in terms of

enjoyment, enrichment, and philosophy.

After a warm greeting, librarian Nynke Dorhout said, quietly, "If you would like to touch the books, please wash your hands." My fingers passed the test, and the expedition began by getting my bearings on the library's location—at the northeast corner of The Mount's expansive first story, with an open view of the flower garden. Along the corridor to the library are the home's dining and drawing rooms—classically handsome, spacious, and inviting. They and the library open out onto a broad stone terrace that wraps around three sides of the building. Adjacent to the drawing room, Edith's sanctum sanctorum beckons. It is nothing less than a triumph of good taste over ostentation—of good books arranged to make good company. The 20-by-25-foot library soars to an impressive 12-foot height, softening what might otherwise be a rather box-like shape. Its paneled walls are of finely grained oak, embellished with decorative carvings. Bookcases, six in all (each about eight feet tall) are set flush with the paneled walls. The library has just over 230 linear feet of shelving for the treasures of Wharton's lifetime.

Restraining myself from discourse on the library's décor and furnishings, we delve into what really matters—the reading matter. My bookwormish browsing, and Nynke's informed assistance, brought much to light. The collection consists of about 2,700 books, of which 900 are housed in the library and the remainder in storage upstairs. Those "on show" are arranged by subject: natural science, philosophy, travel, biography, poetry, literature, and so on. Wharton's horizons, it seems, were limitless.

The Pulitzer Prize–winning novelist also had a wide range of languages at her command. Many of the volumes one comes upon are in French, German, or Italian—all in which Wharton was fluent from an early age. The library collection also spans every phase of the author’s life. Bookplates attest to that, showing which volumes were inherited and which she acquired herself, either in America or abroad. She was, if one looks closely for booksellers’ stickers, a committed and far-ranging book shopper.

What use did Wharton make of her beloved books? Clearly, she didn’t collect them to show off—but rather to inform herself about ideas, ideals, progress, and possibilities for the refinement of society. Marginalia, as booklovers call it, tell the story. In pencil, Edith carefully and copiously annotated many of her favorite volumes with notes, comments, and markings that signify opinions pro or con, along with symbols still to be deciphered. What a joy it is to come across her deep involvement in the works of, for example, Darwin, Dante, Goethe, Walt Whitman, Henry James, George Elliott, the Bible, John Donne, and Santayana.

Many of her books have their author’s signature or inscription—dedications to a fellow writer or close friend. Called “association copies,” they reveal how much she was admired in literary and other circles. One that particularly caught my eye was a book by Theodore Roosevelt, inscribed to Wharton. As you’d expect, the collection is inclusive of first editions of Wharton’s own works—notably *Ethan Frome*, *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*—some with her own markings in the text, and even corrections of printers’ errors. All told, Wharton wrote over 40 books in 40 years (all done in bed, in longhand).

The tale of how, in 2005 (68 years after Wharton’s death), The Mount acquired her library is long and fascinating. Here’s the short version: In the fall of 2005, The Mount began its acquisition of Wharton’s library from book dealer George Ramsden. The final transaction took place on December 12, 2005, at Ramsden’s house in York, England. On January 12, 2006, the books arrived at The Mount. The following April, Ramsden came to arrange the books on the shelves. A grand celebration took place on April 24, 2006, with First Lady Laura Bush as guest of honor.

The most stunning thing about all this is that anyone can peek into life in the Gilded Age and experience the literature, the grandeur, the relevance, and the authenticity of The Mount. Tours are held regularly; check edithwharton.org for special events, including “Wharton on Wednesdays,” when the author’s short stories are read by professional actors on The Mount’s terrace.

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