

Keeping it Together

Purchasing Edith Wharton's library *en bloc* nearly bankrupted the National Historic Landmark that she once called home, but the tide has turned

For all the opulence and Gilded Age grandeur of Edith Wharton's magnificent summer home in the Berkshires, the most compelling literary attraction, it is safe to say, is the author's library of 2,600 books, which after many decades abroad was repatriated in 2005 for the widely publicized price of \$2.6 million, about twice their appraised value, but proving over time essential to the estate's survival as a major cultural attraction.

There are many rewards to be found throughout the airy house and impeccably manicured 113-acre estate Wharton called the Mount, and the variety of top-tier cultural events presented during the summer months make repeated visits a truly worthwhile exercise. About 50,000 people a year come calling, a most respectable figure given that the Lenox, Massachusetts, attraction is only open to the public daily from May to October, and on weekends through February.

But for scholars interested in the creative process of an author who had no formal education outside of her own reading, this remarkably eclectic selection of a primary resource—her precious books—is especially revealing, and by itself a major inducement. In her foreword to a 1999 catalogue of the library prepared by the British bookseller George Ramsden, Hermione Lee, whose critically acclaimed *Edith Wharton* was published in 2007, described these books as “a form of writer's autobiography,” noting that “Edith's library provides a key to her intellectual journeys and connects at every point with her writing. Her library is her education, inspiration and workshop.” Indeed, the forthcoming book, *What a Library Means to a Woman* by Sheila Liming, assistant professor of English at the University of North Dakota, focuses exclusively on this

facet of Wharton's life.

It was Ramsden, owner of Stone Trough Books in York, England, who had rescued Wharton's books from certain dispersal in 1984, and negotiated the sale twenty-plus years later that returned them to the United States. Drawing intense media attention was Ramsden's no-wiggle-room price, the appraisals of Maggs Bros., Sotheby's, and Christie's notwithstanding. Ramsden, who died in April 2019, was adamant in his valuation, according to Susan Wissler, executive director at the Mount.

“He was absolutely implacable over the asking price

for twenty-five years, and it was 1.5 million pounds—take it or leave it. Every appraisal that came in was somewhere between 750,000 and a million pounds, and his response was that his bringing the collection together and preserving it had added value,” said Wissler. “The additional payment was for his decades-long services to put it together and properly catalogue it. It wasn't for the value of each book individually, but the collection as a whole.”

A full five years before he made the deal with the Mount, Ramsden explained why he

had maintained such a hard line. “The whole tendency of the book trade is to break up libraries,” he told the British bookseller Sheila Markham. “I'm frustrated by dealers who are only interested in picking out the plums, the big books with auction records. This approach misses the significance of an author's library, where ‘humble’ items have their own importance taken in context. This is especially true of Edith Wharton whose libraries and books were at the heart of her homes in America and France.”

For reasons that have been well chronicled—an uncertain financial future that involved the very real threat of



Nicholas A. Basbanes, author of *On Paper: The Everything of Its Two-Thousand Year History*, was recently awarded a NEH Public Scholar fellowship for a dual biography of Henry and Fanny Longfellow, to be titled *Cross of Snow*. His other books include *About the Author*, *Editions & Impressions*, *A World of Letters*, *A Gentle Madness*, *Every Book Its Reader*, *Patience & Fortitude*, *Among the Gently Mad*, and *A Splendor of Letters*.

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imminent foreclosure and sale of the property to developers—acquisition of the books was viewed by some as a strategy that just might give the Mount a new lease on life, which over time has proven to be precisely the case. When Wissler, a former corporate attorney in New York, took over as executive director in 2008, the debt was more than \$8.5 million; seven years later, she announced they were debt free “and more robust than ever.”

Though Wharton only lived in the Mount for nine years, from 1902 to 1911, she adored everything about it, first and foremost, perhaps, because she was intimately involved in every detail of its creation, having worked closely with the noted Beaux Arts architect Ogden Codman, Jr., with whom she had collaborated in the writing of her first published book, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897). Drawing on another book of hers, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904), she supervised the creation of the

two decades to filling out the holdings and compiling the catalogue.

Wharton was a prolific writer, a detail readily apparent with the design of a clever poster available for purchase in the Mount bookshop picturing first-edition covers of her books, seven rows, with seven each, forty-nine in all. Her Pulitzer Prize winner, *The Age of Innocence*, which observes its hundredth birthday in 2020, was not written here, but *The House of Mirth*—the novel that transformed her into a bestselling author—was, along with the novella *Ethan Frome*.

Wharton sold the property after divorcing her husband of twenty-five years and moving to France, where she lived for the rest of her life. In the years ahead the house functioned variously as a residence, a dormitory for a private school for girls, and home of Shakespeare & Company, a theatrical group. Its current owner, the Edith Wharton Restoration, Inc., a non-



Though tastefully appointed with period furnishings and accessories, very few objects inside the Mount—with the notable exception of the books in the gorgeous first-floor library—bear an Edith Wharton provenance.

majestic grounds, leading Henry James, a frequent guest, to call the Mount “a delicate French chateau mirrored in a Massachusetts pond.”

At Wharton’s death in 1937, the library was split, and a component containing her art, archaeology, and travel books went into storage; it was destroyed in World War II during the London blitz. The other part was willed to Wharton’s godson, Colin Clark, the son of historian Kenneth Clark. His family later sold most of the books to Maggs Bros. in London, who in turn sold them to Ramsden for £45,000; he devoted the next

profit, has returned much of the property to its original condition, including a \$2.5-million makeover of the gardens. “I’m a better landscape gardener than novelist,” Wharton once wrote to a friend. “And this place, every line of which is my own work, far surpasses *The House of Mirth*.”

In her 1934 memoir, *A Backward Glance*, she put her feelings for the place, designated a National Historic Landmark in 1971, in sharp perspective. “I liked New York well enough,” she wrote, but “it was only at the Mount that I was really happy.”