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BOOK REVIEWS

Edith Wharton's Lenox

By Cornelia Brooke Gilder

History Press, 2017. 224 pp. \$21.99 paper

Reviewed by Irene Goldman-Price, Independent Scholar

With *Edith Wharton's Lenox*, Cornelia Brooke Gilder adds to her impressive and comprehensive books about the social, literary, and architectural history of central Berkshire County, Massachusetts. Coauthor with Richard Jackson of *Houses of the Berkshires, 1870–1930* (2006; rev. 2011) and *The Lenox Club: Sesquicentennial History* (2014); and with Julia Conklin Peters of *Hawthorne's Lenox* (2008), Gilder has a gift for telling stories about the people who built and inhabited Lenox and its surrounding towns. She is superb at combing archives for relevant letters and documents and poring over local newspapers, and she can evidently charm strangers into producing ancient family photograph albums from dusty attics. At this point I should acknowledge that I know Gilder and have attended several lectures about the materials she has brought together in this book.

Clearly a work of local history, *Edith Wharton's Lenox* is designed as a series of short chapters about various families and events that created the fabric of life in Lenox before and during Wharton's time there, and later when Teddy remained alone. We learn about their hobbies (which ranged from breeding Jersey cows to performing cavalry training exercises, from women's softball to growing hothouse apricots), their houses and gardens, their brushes with fame, and their tragedies. Whenever possible, ties are drawn between these people and places to Wharton and her work. With a Whartonian eye for the telling detail, an instinct for irony and humor, and an abiding compassion for the subjects of her tales, Gilder vivifies the town of Lenox during the time that the

Whartons sojourned there. Clear and thorough footnotes, a comprehensive bibliography, and a list of archival materials will lead scholars to new sources. The book also offers an especially rich visual record provided by numerous photographs, drawings, and maps, with Gilder's discerning reading of them.

It is intriguing to learn, for instance, that occasions arose in which social classes intermingled, as with the Lenox cricket team, which comprised British-born tradesmen and estate staff as well as some of the cottagers and the British ambassador, Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, who spent several summers renting the house of the Whartons' physician, Dr. Kinnicutt. Teddy Wharton enjoyed watching the matches, cheering on The Mount's head gardener, Thomas Reynolds. But he preferred to participate in other sports: rare photographs of Teddy show him with a baseball mitt and in the act of swinging a golf club.

Another opportunity for Edith to meet local business people and working-class villagers came because she and several of her friends took an interest in the French Reading Room in Lenox Dale. A neighboring town, Lenox Dale housed workers who serviced the estates or labored in the paper, iron, and glass industries. Many of them had emigrated from Brittany and wanted to read in their native language; Edith was happy to curate and supply materials. Serving on the Board of the Lenox Library, she made friends with the librarian, Kate Spencer. Additionally, Trinity Church, the Lenox Improvement Society, the Lenox Horticultural Society, and the local Shakespeare society all provided opportunities for cottagers and villagers to interact.

Households of the cottagers were connected, not just by cousinages among owners, but also by marriages among the servants: Thomas Reynolds had brothers-in-law who worked for the Sloanes at Elm Court, and we learn that one of the motivations for Wharton's frequent picnics was to give the interrelated servants time off together. Gilder supplies accurate accounts of the coasting accident that left Kate Spencer scarred and deaf—and inspired the critical scene in *Ethan Frome*—and also of the carriage accident that killed Wharton's friend Ethel Cram and gave fuel to *The Fruit of the Tree*. Stories of other neighbors who may have influenced Wharton in her writing are embedded in the short chapters, including a village librarian whose courtship by a Brooklyn historian may have been a model for Charity Royall's summer romance. "Angel at the Grave," Gilder suggests, was more likely inspired by Miss Georgiana Sargent's devotion to her father's memory than by Sally Norton's, whose father didn't die until well after the story was written. While never insisting on her interpretations, Gilder makes intriguingly suggestive remarks about local people and events that might have infiltrated Wharton's imagination.

Wharton as a writer is also considered in portraits of two of Wharton's editors, Jim Barnes of Appleton and Richard Watson Gilder of *Century*. Both of them had residences in the area and actively encouraged her writing. In his memoir Barnes recalled, "Mrs. Edward Wharton . . . had not yet burst on the public as a great novelist and perhaps the greatest stylist among women writers of the English language. . . . No one suspected the power that was behind that well-formed forehead or the strength and scope of visualization that was to be translated into the written words by those slender—almost fragile—fingers" (17). For Richard Gilder, Wharton wrote the poem "Moonrise over Tyringham," memorializing a sunset from the terrace of The Mount, where she could see the hills of the town in which the Gilders lived.

A particular strength of *Edith Wharton's Lenox* is Gilder's comprehensive knowledge of architecture and landscape design and of the various practitioners who built, renovated, and enhanced the cottages. Six years before Edith and Teddy bought land from the Sargent family (and during the time Wharton and Ogden Codman were working together on *The Decoration of Houses*), Codman was invited to create a new reception room for Adele Kneeland, a remote relative of his who presided over a large house in the heart of town. Examples of noted landscape designers with ties to Lenox include Fletcher Steele and Frederick Law Olmsted, whose firm designed the grounds of Elm Court and three other properties. Beatrix Farrand, Wharton's niece, designed gardens for Eastover as well as for The Mount. Readers interested in gardens and houses will find details of both as well as two appendices with information about public buildings created in Wharton's time and other buildings whose style may have been influenced by The Mount. A helpful list of cottages, their owners, and their present-day status is also included.

Perhaps most compelling for Wharton scholars is the portrait of Teddy Wharton that emerges when he is considered within the context of his own social circle before he married Edith Jones. "The Whartons before Edith" enlightens us about Teddy's family and his revered place in it, the youngest child who remained at home as a cheerful and loving support to his mother, a woman essentially widowed by her husband's long absence in a mental hospital. Renowned from his youth for his rescue of two smaller cousins who fell through the ice in Jamaica Pond, Teddy was admired for his bravery and his genteel ways. His marriage to Edith was, to one aunt, "a tremendous loss out of his house" (28).

Readers may be surprised to learn that the Whartons were, when Teddy was a child, Francophiles who took their son with them for extended stays in

Europe. Thus Teddy was already an experienced and cheerful traveler before he married Edith. Further, Teddy, like Edith, had a near-fatal childhood illness while abroad with his family. And both of them lost their fathers at a young age. Pairing this information with Edith's happy letter to Anna Bahlmann announcing her engagement, what emerges is a picture of a couple who had much in common when they came together, and a husband with a kind heart and a sunny disposition who only later deteriorated mentally and physically.

Gilder's book encourages us also to reconsider Teddy's role in providing Edith with social and intellectual contacts while they lived in Lenox. The Wharton family had been spending summers in Lenox for nearly thirty years before Edith and Teddy built The Mount. Thus the younger couple came to Lenox society with a place already assured, not by *her* family, but by *his*. And we are reminded that several important introductions which benefited Edith as a blossoming writer, including the ones to the Bourgetts and to Charles Eliot Norton, came from Teddy's family. Scholars will continue to revise depictions of Edith Wharton's marriage as they consider Gilder's contributions.

Gilder is right when she observes that Edith Wharton's biographers have given little attention to Wharton's connections to the Lenox community. By bringing Lenox and its inhabitants to life, she offers us new perspectives through which to explore Wharton and her work.

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman and a Woman's Place in America

By Jill Bergman

University of Alabama Press, 2017. 228 pp. \$59.95 cloth

Reviewed by Lauren Christie Navarro, LaGuardia Community College

For those of us who study the writing of fin-de-siècle women in the United States, the home has long been the object of critical fascination. Literary and feminist critics peer inside the home to conceptualize the spaces outside of it. Edith Wharton scholars have often used a materialist lens to analyze Wharton's depictions of public and private spaces as bound up with her social critique.