



Edward Harrison May, *Edith Jones*, 1881

Edith Wharton and the Hudson Valley

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When she summoned up one her earliest recollections of the Hudson Valley, Edith Wharton's memory would be drawn with a perceptible shudder to one of the darker blots upon the landscape: the mansion of her Aunt Elizabeth Schermerhorn Jones, which towered above the river at Rhinecliff. The shell of Wyndclyffe still stands there today, uninhabited since the 1960s, and still projects the stony grimness that chilled the young Edith Jones. In *A Backward Glance* she would comment on the "intolerable ugliness" of this "dour specimen of Hudson River Gothic" (28). She regretted the Victorian excess of such architecture not least because it tended to overwhelm the natural beauty for which she cherished the region. She would recall, for example, the visit to the Tom Newbolds in Hyde Park on the day after the unsuccessful opening of the stage version of *The House of Mirth* in 1906, when the bitterness of newspaper reviews could be assuaged by the "wonderful colors of foliage" on that October day (quoted in Lewis 172). Her familiarity with local landscapes, both cultivated and uncultivated, no doubt was enhanced by weekend excursions she and her husband undertook as members of the elite "Coaching Club."

In her fiction Wharton clearly affirms her connection to the Hudson Valley. Her most extensive portrait of its landscape and architecture can be found in her 1929 novel *Hudson River Bracketed*. She locates the fictional town of Paul's Landing north of New York City, a journey of about one and half hours by rail. "A long crooked sort of town on a high ridge," it resembles countless small communities hugging the Hudson, with "turfy banks sloping down" toward "lustrous... water spreading lake-like to distant hills" (39). Featuring horse-drawn vehicles and dilapidated houses, the place appears rather shabby and out-of-date, but it exudes an old-fashioned charm, nonetheless, with its flower gardens, trellis arbours, and shade-trees. Larger, costlier residences are "throned on the mountain side" above the village, where they offer spectacular views: "the precipitate plunge of many-tinted forest, the great sweep of the Hudson, and the cliffs on its other shore" (72).

The architecture and history of the old homes gracing “the feudal Hudson” are nearly as impressive as the views they command (77). Readers are reminded that these structures, some more than two hundred years old, are among the oldest in the United States, constituting an important part of the nation’s cultural legacy. One particular house exemplifying the “indigenous” Hudson River Bracketed style contributes significantly to plot as well as to setting in the novel (69). Contrasting Paul’s Landing, as a whole, to the suburban environment of the fast-growing Midwest, Wharton extols the Hudson Valley’s “soul-sufficing” natural loveliness and rich human history (77). She rejoices in its escape from the twentieth-century mania for “a standardized world,” founded on worship of the new for its own sake and a mechanistic, assembly-line sameness (221).

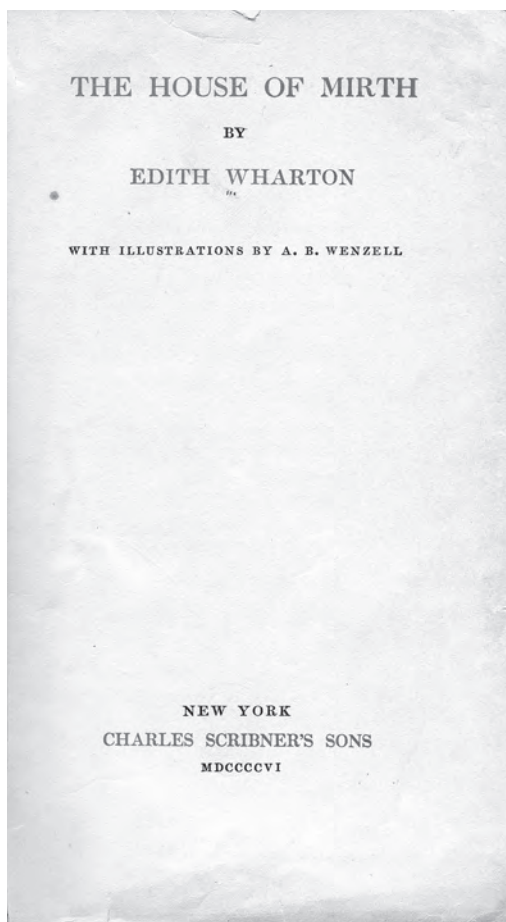
In this context, Wharton also points out that the Hudson River landscape has inspired some of America’s finest writers, including Bryant, Irving, and Whitman. The country rising from behind the river composes a variegated tableau: hills, mountains, forests, and meadows, with brooks that leap over rocky ledges “in a drip of ferns and grasses” to form delicious woodland pools (100). One of the novel’s most memorable scenes depicts in elaborate detail a sunrise viewed from “tree-shadowed” mountainous heights, a nearly overpowering “streaming of radiances” (98, 221). Generous space is devoted as well to recording the distinct intensity of seasonal change. In early autumn, for instance, “when their foliage was heaviest,” the woods are “already yellowing a little here and there, with premature splashes of scarlet and wine-colour on a still-green maple” (221). Later, during winter, “the snow clung to the hemlocks, rolled blinding white over meadow and pasture, gloomed indigo-blue on the edges of the forest, flashed with prismatic lights where a half-caught brook fringed it with icicles”; “how each shoot of bracken, each bramble and dry branch glittered and quivered with white fire!” (299) As such examples illustrate, Wharton’s rendering of elemental phenomena, of flora and fauna, is characterized by passionate enthusiasm and detailed familiarity.

Hudson River Bracketed is unusual in the intensity of its focus on the Hudson Valley. More typically, Wharton shows us characters traveling to or through the region, seeking recreational and social opportunities. In the 1911 story “Autres Temps...,” for instance, the major action takes place east of the Hudson Valley proper, in the Berkshires near Lenox. A minor character in the story must travel from the Lenox house party to another in Fishkill: she makes this journey through the middle portion of the Hudson Valley by rail, readers learn, on a line running south from Albany. In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton’s 1920 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, the Valley figures prominently as a setting for holiday and weekend social occasions. A number of characters own country homes in the Rhinecliff-Rhinebeck

area, although Manhattan brownstones generally constitute their primary residences. Characters give and receive invitations to these rural retreats, traveling north by train from New York City to enjoy country air and outdoor activities. Newland Archer visits the Reggie Chiverses' "house on the Hudson," for example, where a party of guests engages in "coasting, ice-boating, sleighing, long tramps in the snow" (115). The Henry van der Luydens' property in nearby Skuytercliff is remarkable for its "Patroon's House," a four-room stone house built in 1612 by the first Dutch Patroon. Favored visitors are invited to visit this charming and historically interesting building, whose "squat walls and small square windows" are "compactly grouped about a central chimney" (118). The "homely little house" house assumes emotional importance, furthermore, in the love triangle dominating the novel (119). It serves as the setting for an

important romantic scene between Archer and Ellen Olenska and also, ironically, for Archer's honeymoon with May Welland because plumbing problems at their intended destination—the home of the "old du Lac aunts at Rhinebeck"—necessitate a last-minute change in plan (160).

The House of Mirth (1905) similarly depicts the mid-Hudson region as a rural retreat from New York City. The socio-economically elite characters at the novel's center leave their home-base in Manhattan during the summer months, seeking cooler, fresher air at manor-houses along the river-banks, or at "the elaborate rustic simplicity of an Adirondack camp" (378). Several of the larger estates serve as settings for weddings or house parties, allowing portions of the action to move forward in non-urban environments. Wealthy land-owners like



Title page from the 1905 edition of *The House of Mirth*. Courtesy Bard College Library

the Trenors or the Van Osburghs seek respite at their own second residences “on the Hudson,” while poorer members of the group accept invitations to make protracted stays in desirable locations (139). Even Gerty Farish, who is pitifully poor by the standards of her social community, spends August with an aunt on Lake George. In the second part of the novel, when Lily Bart ceases to receive invitations to out-of-town house parties, she is forced to endure the oppressive heat of the city instead; her exclusion from the community’s seasonal pattern of movement to Hudson Valley destinations serves as an important measure of her damaged social reputation.



A.B. Wenzell illustration from the 1905 edition of *The House of Mirth*.
Courtesy Bard College Library

The novel famously begins in Grand Central Station, as its heroine prepares to travel by rail to Rhinebeck for an extended visit with friends. Readers can follow the train’s northward path as it pauses to take on more passengers “at Garrisons” (35). Bellomont, the manor-house at which Lily Bart joins a party of socially prominent guests, is large and imposing. Its terrace, great-hall, and library (complete with family portraits) are almost overshadowed, nevertheless, by its extensive grounds: the house is surrounded by “a landscape tutored to the last degree of rural elegance” (77). The Hudson River features prominently in the many lovely views the grounds command: “through a long glade, the river widened like a lake under the silver light of September” (77). Wharton describes arbours and garden paths, wooded hills and meadows. Tellingly, nearly every prospect is provided with a “rustic seat” from which to admire its splendors (97). The most important romantic episode in the novel takes place in this setting. As Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden mount a “glossy verdure of shaded slopes” and reach “an open ledge of rock,” he speaks to her of his “republic of the spirit,” and they come to grips with the essential problems of their lives (101, 108). Gazing at “the sun-suffused world at [their] feet,”

they dream—briefly—of a possible future together (102). Here, as in *Hudson River Bracketed*, Wharton locates a crucial encounter between her central male and female characters high above the Hudson in a landscape whose splendors she describes in enticing detail.

At the June 2005 conference sponsored by the Edith Wharton Society at Marist College, a group of scholars gathered to commemorate the centennial of the publication of *The House of Mirth*. Exploring the historical and cultural context of the novel, they gave particular attention to Wharton's complex and enduring relationship with the Hudson River Valley. This issue of the *Hudson River Valley Review* seeks to sustain that focus. It begins with Dale Flynn's photo-essay, an illustrated tour of regional sites important in Wharton's life and writing. Sharon Kim examines Wharton's fiction for possible allusions to the work of local novelist Susan Warner, who lived on Constitution Island and produced popular fiction for the generation of Edith Wharton's mother. Jessica Campilango's feature on the Island provides further background on the place and the two sisters, Susan and Anna, who made it an important part of the region's history. Donald Anderson and Rose DeAngelis offer a detailed analysis of suggested connections between Bellomont (from *The House of Mirth*) and the Ogden Mills Estate in Staatsburg. The journal's editors hope in future to publish the results of new research by scholars who continue to probe the many-faceted connections to the Hudson Valley manifest in Wharton's work.

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