

REVIEW

Past and Present in Edith Wharton's Travel Writing

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Kovács, Ágnes Zsófia. *The Memory of Architecture in Edith Wharton's Travel Writing*. Routledge Research in Women's Literature. New York and London: Routledge, 2025. xiii + 212 pages. ISBN 9781032580265. Hb. £150.

Published in the Routledge Research in Women's Literature series in 2025, *The Memory of Architecture in Edith Wharton's Travel Writings* is a thought-provoking contribution to both travel writing and Wharton studies as well as to American intellectual history. It was written in response to Gary Totten's 2022 call to Wharton scholars to dig deeper into her travel accounts old and new. And therein lies one of the many strengths of the book: Ágnes Zsófia Kovács discusses Edith Wharton's travel texts published in her own lifetime as well as the ones recently found in archives and made available since the early 1990s. This is important since Wharton lives on in the American literary canon not as a travel writer but primarily as a novelist and social commentator, and, of course, as the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for literature. In *The Memory of Architecture*, Wharton also comes across as a prolific travel writer and art historian, on the basis of publications covering some 50 years of her active life, from the now freely available travel diary of an Aegean trip in 1888 (penned at the age of 26) to her autobiography published in 1934 (three years before her death).

The book itself is composed of an introduction, seven topical chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction first explains the evolution and current state of Wharton scholarship (4–13) and travel writing studies (13–24), then introduces the publication history of the texts covered (24–27). It is here that Kovács makes it clear that we are reading a unique combination of travel accounts and art history theory covering many of the major regions of Western civilization in Europe. For Wharton, a New York aristocrat, Medieval European architecture represents continuity with the past, which she thinks was absent in her own America; but it does so with a twist: architectural restoration and wartime destruction (for instance, that of the Reims cathedral during World War I) break up continuity and, therefore, both are counterproductive. Italy and France are treated to two chapters each, while North Africa, the Aegean, and Spain account for the remaining

three. Each chapter presents the subject matter, explains critical reaction to and contemporary reviews of the texts, recites the publication history of the texts, offers a map of Wharton's travels in the given area, and then elaborates on "the synergies of architecture, cultivated landscapes, and natural landscapes" (203) in correspondence with the various works of John Ruskin, whose books on art history were the go-to texts for American travelers of Wharton's social class.

The two chapters on Italy cover Wharton's *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904) and *Italian Backgrounds* (1905). In the case of the former, travel is but an excuse to produce an academic treatise on Italian architecture and gardens, while in the latter travel is combined with Wharton's preferred means of looking at art. Published a year apart, the two texts are so different, Kovács argues, that they deserve separate treatment. *Villas* was meant to be a semi-academic handbook, while *Backgrounds* is more theoretical. It is here that Wharton challenges Ruskin: she questions his choice of prioritizing Gothic over Baroque and argues for the need to blur "the boundary between real and imagined, present and past" (85). One of the strengths of Kovács's book is that she recounts the story of the publication of each text. Wharton was commissioned to write about Italian villas and gardens by *The Century Magazine* in 1902 but was allowed much less freedom with the texts and illustration than Kennan had enjoyed in the 1880s when writing about the exile system in Siberia for the very same publication. The debates between author and publisher about the texts and the illustrations clearly show that even a woman of Wharton's social standing had to meet certain expectations and had to yield on many of them. Though the book was a strange hybrid (44), it had to be a commercial success because her next project was published within a year. Six of the nine chapters in *Backgrounds* were reprints of articles for *Scribner's Magazine* published between 1895 and 1903, and she added three essays. This time, Kovács tells us, Wharton had her way: one reviewer even complained that her "writing is not that of an American of today, not even of a woman, but merely of the art-antiquarian" (71). When Ruskin did the same thing some 50 years before or when Henry James did it simultaneously with Wharton, it was alright, although Kovács does not say it explicitly, because they were men. But when a woman does it, it somehow becomes dry and boring.

Chapters 3 and 4 analyze Wharton's trips to, and admiration for, France from 1908 and 1915. *A Motor-Flight Through France* from 1908 introduces new means and new experiences of travel (by car), and Kovács elegantly explains why and how this opened up new possibilities for

travelers. *Motor-Flight* unveils Wharton's uncritical admiration for France and French culture, and she reconciles here with Ruskin's "cathedral tour" of mostly Gothic historical sites. *Fighting France* from 1915 is one of her best-known pieces, usually interpreted (correctly) as wartime propaganda. The French government granted Wharton and her companions the privilege to travel to the war zone and report on the destruction (especially of the Reims cathedral) brought by the German invasion. It coincided with another iconic piece of wartime atrocity propaganda, James Bryce's *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* (also from 1915), and the two combined to help swing American public opinion towards the Allies in the war. While the *Bryce Report* offered graphic details of alleged German atrocities against Belgian civilians, Wharton presented wartime destruction through the demolition of buildings, which she interpreted as a break in the continuity that architecture represents between past and present.

Wharton visited North Africa on multiple occasions and wrote about these trips in some detail. Here, however, she seems to be out of her depth (although Kovács would never admit this): she comes across as a dreamer in fairyland (Oriental tales and mystique, bazaars, and harems) rather than the art connoisseur on a study trip that she indeed was in Italy and France. Her bias for France is apparent here, too: she represents French colonial administration in North Africa as an exclusively positive civilizing force. The posthumously published diary of an 1888 trip to the Aegean reveals her admiration for Homer, and *Osprey Notes* from 1926 add but little because the text is fragmented. This is where Wharton scholarship is at a loss: with more complete notes from 1926 we could have traced her perception of ancient (and modern) Greece over a period of some 40 years. Her Spanish travel accounts seem to be a mixture of the Ruskinian "cathedral trail" of historical sites from *Motor-Flight in France* and the dreamer in fairyland of the North African accounts, now directly invoking one of Wharton's favorite texts, Washington Irving's *Alhambra* (1832). A tight conclusion and a comprehensive index round out the volume.

So what do we learn about Wharton the travel writer from Kovács? Above all, she was a willing and professional traveler with an academic mindset going on well-researched study trips. She first wrote for magazines and then collected these articles into printed books, sometimes coming across as "unwomanly"—which in turn shows the limits set for a woman author even of her social class. Her admiration for Europe's constructed cultural legacy (primarily architecture) is often contrasted with the provincialism of her native United States. She escapes the East Coast for

Europe, like Hemingway and others of the Lost Generation, like Frederick Faust (also known as Max Brand, one of the most prolific cowboy western writers), who bought a villa in Florence, and like Royall Tyler (a banker, politician, and Byzantine art expert), who bought a home and settled in Burgundy, and whose wife was there at Wharton's death bed in 1937. With her writings on Italy and France, she contributed to the American intellectual tradition of viewing European art and architecture as a key to Western civilization, which would get a new impetus from Columbia University launching an MA in museum studies (requiring multiple field trips to European museums) in the 1920s and which would culminate in the establishment of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives unit of the US Army in World War II to preserve and protect Europe's material cultural heritage even in the war zone in 1944–1945. This is indeed a thought-provoking book to read and enjoy.

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