

THE END OF  
THE AGE OF INNOCENCE



Fig. 1 Edith Wharton in front of a railway car for wounded soldiers. (Courtesy of Jacques Fosse)

# THE END OF THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

*Edith Wharton and the First World War*

ALAN PRICE

St. Martin's Press  
New York



*Dedicated to the memory of my father,  
Richard C. Price, 1916-1994*

THE END OF THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

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## PREFACE

### A LIFE PUNCTUATED BY WAR

EDITH WHARTON'S LIFE WAS BRACKETED BY WARS. SHE WAS BORN DURING A bitterly cold January week in 1862, when the line of military camps stretched from northern Virginia through Kentucky to Cairo, Illinois. She died in 1937, the year that General Francisco Franco and his insurgents waged war against the Spanish Republican Army, supported by the International Brigade with its scattering of American writers. Her friend Teddy Roosevelt fashioned his public reputation during his military exploits in the Spanish-American War. Wharton's own literary career was interrupted, almost bisected, by the First World War.

She was one of a number of American writers, primarily women, who became involved in war charities during the opening months of the conflict in Belgium and France, well before the United States abandoned its official policy of neutrality. Wharton was among the 25,000 American women who volunteered for war-related work in Europe, Serbia, China, and Russia.<sup>1</sup> During the four years and three months of the war, she witnessed a transformation that saw economic and political power shift from a Europe bled white by the war (more than 10 million dead) to a United States that got through relatively unscathed (115,000 dead).<sup>2</sup>

The first chapter of this book describes how Wharton's plans for a new novel and a leisurely summer at a rented estate in England were interrupted by the opening of the war (variously called the Great War, the European War, and the First World War) during the first days of August 1914. For the next year Wharton threw her energies into organizing and raising money for several large civilian war charities, many of which bore her name.

Wharton's relief efforts began simply enough, with a sewing room. The need was obvious. Several thousand working women in Paris had been thrown out of their jobs by the military mobilization in early August of 1914. With the mobilization, hundreds of shops, cafes, and small businesses in Paris closed, leaving previously employed women without a

means of support. In her workroom Wharton offered employment to as many as ninety French women at a time. They received a nutritious lunch and a modest daily stipend. Wharton oversaw the work and secured orders from American friends. Some of the sewing women had worked for the famous couture houses on the rue de la Paix. Within a few weeks, Wharton's sewing room had established a reputation for producing fine lingerie as well as bandages for the hospitals and knitted socks and gloves for the men in the trenches.

By October and November Paris was flooded with refugees from Belgium and the invaded provinces of northern France. The French government could barely keep up with its own homeless, so the Belgians were forced to find shelter in railroad stations, in large sporting arenas, and on the streets. Again the need was obvious. With French, Belgian, and American friends, Wharton established the American Hostels for Refugees, a charity that provided housing, food, employment, medical services, education, and even Montessori classes for children of nursery-school age.

The second chapter follows Wharton to several locations on the French front, where she distributed medical supplies for the French Red Cross while collecting impressions for a series of evocative war essays that appeared first in *Scribner's Magazine* and were later collected in her book *Fighting France* (1915). By the summer she had begun another literary project, *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), an elaborately illustrated anthology with contributions from the leading writers, artists, and composers of the period. A detailed history of the creation and production of this gift book shows the breadth of Wharton's reputation as well as her extensive organizational skills.

Her charities continued to grow during 1915. The Belgian government, so impressed by Wharton's work with the adult refugees, asked if she could care for a small group of orphaned and abandoned children from Flanders. She said yes. With less than twenty-four hours' notice, she received sixty young girls. She had barely settled them when she received two hundred more. Soon the Children of Flanders Rescue Committee was caring for more than six hundred children and another two hundred aged and infirm Flemish refugees. Realizing that the children would return to Belgium after the war and would need to make a living, Wharton set up lace-making, gardening, and carpentry classes.

The work with the charities frequently left her exhausted. She began to take periodic rest trips in 1915 to get back to her writing. A cycle of

exhaustion and recovery was soon established. She would perform administrative and fund-raising tasks for the war charities in Paris until she reached a point where ill health and fatigue would force her doctor to send her away, usually to the south of France, for several weeks. The rest cures, however, rarely accomplished their goal. Often she had barely gotten her first wind when the deaths of close friends or the needs of the charities would shatter her peace and drive her back to Paris more tired than when she had left.

The third chapter looks at how official recognition for her war work—the French Legion of Honor awarded in March of 1916—was quickly overshadowed by private griefs—the deaths of her dear friends Henry James and Egerton Winthrop. She was slowly able to get back to her first love—writing fiction. During the summer and the autumn she wrote the novella *Summer*, which with its passion she called her “hot Ethan.”

Also in 1916 she could see that all of her humanitarian efforts would waste away in the scourge of tuberculosis unless something were done immediately, and on a large scale, to limit its sweep. Wharton had already established a number of convalescent homes to care for the ill among her own refugees, but the disease was rampant among the soldiers coming out of the damp, rat-infested trenches. She joined several other prominent Americans in France as a vice president for the *Tuberculeux de la Guerre*, a large charity with official French government sanction. She set up demonstration sanatoriums using the American method of fresh-air cures for tubercular French soldiers and civilians.

The fourth chapter details the coming of America into the war and Wharton’s subsequent struggle with a charity octopus—the American Red Cross. While her salvation might have come with its arrival in the summer of 1917, it did not. Wharton never publicly revealed her disagreements with the organization. However, her unpublished letters, an especially rich source for understanding the politics of American relief aid during the First World War, reveal her growing frustration. Moreover, they make clear that Wharton’s disillusionment with the American Red Cross after 1917 was representative of what other American women in France felt. Scores of private relief agencies organized and administered by American women during the first three years of the war were unceremoniously swallowed up in a vast centralizing wave. Fourteen months after America entered the war and only three weeks before the Armistice, Wharton told her sister-in-law Mary Cadwalader Jones, “the feeling

against the Red Cross is not only as strong as it was but far stronger within the last two or three months . . . and apparently their purpose is to strangle all the independent war charities."<sup>3</sup>

The fifth chapter shows Wharton withdrawing increasingly from the management of the charities. She was still officially recognized: She had meetings with General John Pershing and Woodrow Wilson's representative, Colonel Edward M. House. But she moved to the Pavillon Colombe, a small estate in the village of St. Brice-sous-Forêt some twenty miles from Paris, and into a private imaginative space with her brief war novel *The Marne* (1918).

The conclusion of this book looks at the use Wharton made of the war in her later fiction. She regained her satirical edge to portray the frequently less than noble motives that prompted civilian volunteers to join war charities. The fiction she wrote during the war and that uses the war as a subject investigates themes of incest and social politics.



Though Wharton's humanitarian war work was widely recognized—the Legion of Honor from the French and the Queen Elizabeth's medal from the Belgians—her writing from the war years has been largely dismissed by literary historians as an embarrassing passage during which she fell prey to propaganda. Blake Nevius, her first serious critic in the generation following her death, contends that Wharton's war fiction "adds nothing to her laurels; on the contrary, it proves that a novelist whose detachment was always precariously maintained could, when confronted with reports of German atrocities, lose her head as easily as the average newspaper reader."<sup>4</sup> Stanley Cooperman in his sweeping survey of American novels about the First World War contends, "Miss [sic] Wharton combined gentility with bloodthirst, the manners of the social novelist with the matter of the recruiting poster."<sup>5</sup> Even her most ardent admirers are left with uncomfortable questions: How did a sophisticated social satirist turn so quickly into a partisan war propagandist? What led Wharton, with her rich sense of irony, to turn her pen to sentimental fiction and propaganda essays?

This book first offers a historical context for Wharton's humanitarian and literary activities during the war. In addition, it probes her decision to adopt genres and literary voices she once condemned. We need to remember that the phenomenon of American authors turning from fiction to propaganda to sway a neutral American reading public and to aid war charities was not uncommon between 1914 and 1917. Dorothy

Canfield Fisher, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Gertrude Atherton, Alice B. Toklas, and Gertrude Stein participated in and wrote about relief activities in Belgium and France. Even that most detached of social observers, Henry James, wrote public letters to American newspapers and propaganda pamphlets urging support for the Norton-Harjes ambulance units in France and for the Belgian refugees in London.

For James and Wharton, the proposed imposition of German *kultur* (used by German intellectuals to justify the war) was an unconscionable violation of cultural boundaries. As expatriates and as writers of exquisite sensitivities, James and Wharton used their isolation from their native culture to heighten perception and contrast. For them the idea of Germany imposing a master culture on France or England or Italy was not just a political and military invasion, it was an assault on the cultural gradations that made their art possible.

Edith Wharton, it is true, wrote at the top of her voice during the early war years. She learned during the course of the war, however, to modulate her pitch and to hit and hold "the tremolo note" when its effects served her ends. The shift in rhetorical registers is instructive. When the war began, her dominant tone had been satire, with a strong secondary suit in irony. She and Henry James were swept uncritically into a total and totalizing condemnation of Germany, and in German *kultur* they foresaw "the crash of civilization." They quickly concluded that they could not remain silent in the face of wider American neutrality. Peter Buitenhuis in his study of the influence of British, American, and Canadian writers during the First World War concludes, "Expatriate American authors like Henry James and Edith Wharton were influential catalysts of American opinion."<sup>6</sup>

Both Wharton and James were aware of the shift in language generally and the dramatic dislocation in their own writing in particular. A few months into the war, James described the war's effect upon language. During a rare interview, where he insisted that his exact punctuation be taken down as well as his words, James asked the correspondent from the *New York Times* to consider the overwhelming fact that during a twenty-minute period, there had been as many as 5,000 casualties on the Western Front. James pondered the enormity of the statistic for a moment in a stunned silence. Then, anticipating by more than a dozen years Hemingway's statement in *A Farewell to Arms* about the decline of language, he continued: "One finds it in the midst of all this as hard to apply one's words as to endure one's thoughts. The war has

used up words: they have weakened, they have deteriorated like motor car tires; they have, like millions of other things, been more overstrained and knocked about and voided of the happy semblance during the last six months than in all the long ages before, and we are now confronted with a depreciation of all our terms, or, otherwise speaking, with a loss of expression through an increase in limpness, that may well make us wonder what ghosts will be left to walk.”<sup>7</sup>

With her keen sense of noblesse oblige, Wharton makes an especially illustrative case of the tension American writers felt between the disinterested code of their craft, on the one hand, and their sympathy for allies and the refugees, on the other. Wharton’s unpublished correspondence with her editors from the war years reveals a writer who had previously rejected the subjects and techniques of popular fiction now testing the boundaries of her literary identity.

Part of Wharton’s reaction to the cataclysm of the war was social and aesthetic. “Propriety,” “social grace,” “good breeding”—these are terms not in favor today. Yet for an understanding of Wharton’s actions during the war, such terms are important. She felt very strongly that private things should be kept private and public things made public. An example from her daily life may help.

During the mornings she wrote in her bedroom. Sometimes she would break off from her business writing to pen a quick note to one of her frequent houseguests. Those unpublished, and unmailed, notes were carried along the corridors of her rue de Varenne apartment by maids or her butler to the guest’s bedroom. Yet even these little notes, frequently setting luncheon appointments or suggesting afternoon diversions, which were scribbled in relaxed moments during her writing mornings, would be inserted in envelopes and carefully addressed to, for example, Bernard Berenson, Esquire. The notes within often showed her great sense of fun. But the envelopes themselves observed an outer courtesy and an attention to good manners.<sup>8</sup>

Wharton had a keen sense of rhetorical and literary registers. Her observation that she had to sound the “tremolo note” in her frequent appeals for money for her charities reflects her self-conscious attention to voice and tone, especially during times of financial and social stress. The phrase itself comes from a letter to Elisina Tyler, her able lieutenant in the war charities. In the letter Wharton describes her struggle to overcome her long-standing reluctance to showcase pathetic individual cases of need to raise funds. “The Report [an annual report on the charities] is

exactly the contrary of what I approve in that line, but I always get money by the 'tremolo' note, so I try to dwell on it as much as possible."<sup>9</sup> The tremolo note, with its quavering pitch and its easy emotional appeal, initially stuck in Wharton's throat. Its obvious appeals to sentimentality and bathos struck her as inauthentic—it was making a private situation public. (In part, her objections to the literary modernism of James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence grew from what she saw as their inappropriate reversal of the private and the public.) Yet if stooping to a sentimental appeal would save the lives of the children and aged refugees for whom she had assumed responsibility, then Wharton could sustain a vibrato that would shake dollars from the pockets of a neutral American public.

It is easy to see how her appeals written during the war years have struck her readers as startlingly out of her literary character. Even during her best years, Wharton had a well-earned reputation for prickliness. Acquaintances, knowing her emphasis on propriety but missing her keen sense of fun and curiosity, were often overprotective. Those who knew her only by reputation were especially sensitive about offending Mrs. Wharton. F. Scott Fitzgerald, during a drunken pilgrimage after the war to her suburban home, could not bring himself to finish his story about the time he and Zelda mistakenly rented a room in a brothel on their first visit to Paris.<sup>10</sup> Even her friend the French novelist Paul Bourget stopped interrogating André Gide about homosexuality, for example, when Wharton entered the room.<sup>11</sup> Wharton, however, would have gladly listened to both conversations and participated. It was not the bawdy or sexual elements of life that offended her sensibility; it was the destruction of life and culture that she found blasphemous.

The war was an obvious assault on the order of life, on decorum. In a passage from one of her war essays collected in *Fighting France*, she describes the destruction of the Flemish city of Ypres. Aside from being gracefully written, the passage reveals the way the war had turned the public and the private worlds inside out:

But Ypres has been bombarded to death, and the outer walls of its houses are still standing, so that it presents the distant semblance of a living city, while nearby it is seen to be a disembowelled corpse. Every window-pane is smashed, nearly every building unroofed, and some house-fronts are neatly sliced off, with the different stories exposed, as if for the stage-setting of a farce. In these exposed interiors the poor little household gods shiver and blink like owls

surprised in a hollow tree. A hundred signs of intimate and humble tastes, of humdrum pursuits, of family association, clung to the unmasked walls. Whiskered photographs fade on the morning-glory wall-papers, plaster saints pine under glass bells, antimacassars droop from plush sofas, yellowing diplomas display their seals on office walls. It was all so still and familiar that it seemed as if the people for whom these things had a meaning might at any moment come back and take up their daily business. And then—crash! the guns began, slamming out volley after volley all along the English lines, and the poor frail web of things that had made up the lives of a vanished city-full hung dangling before us in that deathly blast.<sup>12</sup>

Wharton was essentially a social and philosophical conservative, in the root sense of “one who conserves or maintains.” As Shari Benstock, Wharton’s most recent biographer, notes: “New wealth posed a dangerous threat to American society, she claimed, because it came ‘without inherited obligations, or any traditional sense of solidarity between the classes.’”<sup>13</sup> Wharton believed in a general sense of fitness in life. She was not an obvious snob about family lineage or aristocratic titles, but she was a snob about breeding and learning. She preferred an oligarchy of taste and erudition, a meritocracy of learning. She favored a society that would protect, if not favor, the connoisseur: Walter Berry, Robert Norton, Royall Tyler, Bernard Berenson, John Hugh Smith, Percy Lubbock. She celebrated the past. After her trip to Morocco in the fall of 1917, she playfully insisted that her host, Bernard Berenson, should supply her nightstand with books on the history of North Africa. But with her interest in the past, it should be noted that she was no technological Luddite. She loved what the automobile had done for travel, and she embraced the telephone.

Wharton has been an obvious and, it would seem, easy target for those who resented her strong personality. Percy Lubbock, who early enjoyed her hospitality and support, characterized her as “one of the few people I have ever known who used to do what severe ladies used to do so regularly in novels: she ‘drew herself up’—”<sup>14</sup> Shifting to nautical imagery, he remembered Wharton as a “full-rigged ship under sail, with an eye for every detail and time for every claim.”<sup>15</sup>

Some of the most lasting characterizations of Wharton by her contemporaries were based on hearsay that was largely untested by fact. Take, for example, Janet Flanner’s poisonous profile in the *New Yorker*

*Magazine*, which presented Wharton as a conqueror: "Later, still pursuing her policy of Continental expansion, she purchased a charming Cistercian monastery near Hyères on the Mediterranean, where she summers. Finally, for permanent residence, she acquired an eighteenth-century villa, the Pavillon Colombe, at Saint-Brice-sous-Forêt, about eighty motor kilometers from Paris. It was here she collected her half-dozen adopted war orphans, left from the six hundred she housed during the war when she gave her property to the government and devoted herself to French and little Belgian refugees with a patriotism of which only an expatriated American who dislikes children is capable."<sup>16</sup> This acid portrait of Wharton as an aloof, acquisitive aristocrat was largely unchecked by the facts. Wharton spent her winters, not her summers, in Hyères. It was earlier, not later, that she bought the Pavillon Colombe in St. Brice, which is thirty kilometers, not eighty, from Paris. She never turned over her property, either in Paris or elsewhere, to the government during the war. In fact, she owned no property in France at that time. She never adopted a half dozen of the remaining war refugees. Nor, as the evidence shows in a number of cases, did she dislike children.

Wharton entered one type of world and witnessed the emergence of another after the First World War. Even though England and France won the war, the world Wharton valued was largely lost. It was obliterated by the mass world, a world without taste, a world without an aristocracy of intellect. Finally, the convergence of historical forces that transformed Wharton from an ironic social satirist into a partisan war reporter provides one of the few periods in her life when she was not in control of what happened. The war was not just a shock; it was a catastrophe that threatened one's ability to make a world. For a novelist who made fictional worlds and for a woman who created aesthetic spaces (her houses and their gardens), the loss of control was potentially devastating. The First World War ushered in the true end of the age of innocence.