Chapter 1

Life

My childhood & youth were an intellectual desert. ('L&I' 1089)

Edith Wharton always portrayed the New York of her origins as dull and provincial, 'a place in which external events were few and unexciting' ('LGNY' 287); but, somehow, she emerged to create her own world as a woman and as a writer. In this short outline, I can hope only to convey something of the sweep and energy of her life, from her birth in Manhattan during the Civil War, in January 1862, to her death in France, not long before another war, in August 1937.

Although many aspects of her experiences remain opaque, Wharton's life has been well documented; and my outline is indebted to the work of her modern biographer, R. W. B. Lewis, and of those who have followed (see 'Critical reception'). In trying to sketch the wider picture within the smaller compass of this *Introduction*, I also draw on original contemporary sources – many of them now available to general readers online. Even the briefest encounter with these gossip columns, travellers' tales or advertisements of Wharton's day can give snapshots of her period, and bring alive the voices of her culture, refracted and debated in writings throughout her career. Wharton's own autobiographical writings serve as another set of reference points: her dignified memoir, *A Backward Glance* (1934); her emotionally vivid fragment, 'Life and I'; and 'A Little Girl's New York' (1938), published the year after her death. While all her reminiscences must be read with caveats, the colouring of her memories helps to convey something of her impressions of the contours of her formative years; and biographers have generally taken at her word her sense of a disjunction between her inner and outer worlds, and her reflections on feeling a stranger in her culture. These are features which will appear, reshaped, throughout her work.

Edith Wharton (1862–1937): biographical overview

Though as an adult, Edith Wharton awed friends with her energy and authority, the young Edith Newbold Jones was 'a painfully shy self-conscious' child ('L&I' 1089). Arriving on 24 January 1862, some dozen years after her two brothers, Freddy and Harry, she was an only daughter, and she grew up regarding herself the least important, and certainly 'least attractive-looking', member of the family ('L&I' 1089). Nicknamed in her family 'Pussy', 'Lily' and 'John', she recalled her brothers teasing her about her red hair, and remembered, with most warmth, her Irish nurse, Hannah Doyle ('Doyley'), and George Frederic Jones (1821–82), her 'dear kind father' ('L&I' 1094); throughout her memoirs, her mother, Lucretia Stevens Rhinelander Jones (1825–1901), appears ever-critical and sarcastic. Like many girls of her class, she had no formal schooling, but, spending six years in Europe as a child, she acquired fluent French, German and Italian, and became formidably well read – 'saturated', as she put it ('L&I' 1095) – in European literature, culture and aesthetic values. Her return to the United States at the age of ten filled her with dismay at what she saw as its 'deadly uniformity of mean ugliness' (*ABG* 55), and impressed her with a lifelong sense that she was 'an exile in America' ('L&I' 1081). Thereafter, she was drawn to the idea of Europe, as a less philistine and conformist world. Many of her reflections, in letters and in memories, dwell on the differences:

> the contrast between the old & the new, between stored beauty & tradition & amenity over there, & the crassness here. My first few weeks in America are always miserable, because the tastes I am cursed with are all of a kind that cannot be gratified here.
>
> (5 June 1903: *Letters* 84)

These contrasts would be central to her writing.

The rest of her growing up took place in America – within the 'tiny fraction' of New York society which would inspire *The Age of Innocence* and many of her most memorable writings. Her perspectives, she said, were limited – those of a 'much governessed and guarded little girl – hardly less of a child when she "came out" (at seventeen) than when she first arrived on the scene, at ten' ('LGNY' 282, 283). At eighteen, however, her horizons expanded. After making her early social debut, she broke off her second season to return to Europe: 'I was going to see pictures & beautiful things again, & [. . .] I went without a backward glance' ('L&I' 1094). Although her father, for whose health this change was made, failed to recover, dying in

France, the tour confirmed her strength of feeling; and gave her the urge, in her writings, to capture 'things which the average Baedeker-led tourist' missed ('L&I' 1095). But having returned to the States with her mother, she resumed her life as a young lady in society. Following one broken engagement (with Harry Stevens), she met the future lawyer Walter Van Rensselaer Berry; the association seemed promising, but failed to blossom into romance. Renewed in later years, their friendship lasted lifelong; and Berry became 'the one comrade of my soul' as she hinted in her seventies (Diary (1934); Beinecke/51.1523). But at twenty-three, she accepted Edward (Teddy) Robbins Wharton, a socially suitable Boston gentleman, in his thirties, and married him in a quiet wedding in 1885.

The couple lived first in Lucretia's New York house, and at Pencraig cottage, in the grounds of the family house at Newport. But, with marriage, she seized the chance to extend her travels. She deepened her knowledge of Italy, England and France; and a chartered private steam-yacht (the *Vanadis*) took the pair, in 1888, as far as North Africa and the Ionian Islands. For many years, they divided their time across the Atlantic, in an annual routine: in Europe living in Paris, and touring, and in the States spending winters in Park Avenue, and summers in Land's End, their Newport home. In the 1890s, Wharton seems to have suffered some depression and illness (how seriously is still a matter of debate) – what she called in 1899, 'my almost continual ill health & mental lassitude' (*Letters* 39); and she would always, regularly, take spa treatments. But in these years she also began to shape the spaces where she could settle to work. At Land's End, with the advice of a fashionable architect, Ogden Codman Jr, she redesigned the interior, and created the first of several stunning gardens. In 1901, seeking tranquillity, she bought a 113-acre estate at Lenox in the Berkshire Hills; here she oversaw the building of The Mount (Figure 1), modelled on Belton House, a stately home in Lincolnshire; landscaped and replanted its elegant grounds; and settled into the discipline of writing.

An indefatigable correspondent and generous host, she drew together, in this summer home, a cosmopolitan circle of writers, intellectuals, artists and aristocrats – most significantly, Henry James and Walter Berry. Her friendship with her sister-in-law, Mary (Minnie) Cadwalader Jones, had outlasted Freddy and Minnie's divorce (1896); and she remained close to her niece, Beatrix (Trix), who helped her to draw up her plans for her estate. (Under her married name, Beatrix Farrand, Trix herself became known as a distinguished landscape gardener.) Wharton read aloud to guests her work in progress, and swept them off on motor expeditions into the Massachusetts hills. With Teddy, she shared a love of the outdoors, and a passion for animals (she was photographed, lifelong, with her decorative pet dogs, and

Figure 1 The Mount in winter.

she worked with Teddy on animal welfare); when in Europe, the couple enjoyed bicycling in Italy; but, as outsiders had long remarked, they had little else in common and the marriage deteriorated. In her forties, Wharton became involved (as had many others) with the American journalist Morton Fullerton, the Paris representative of the London *Times*. The affair dazzled and tormented her, as the elusive Fullerton drifted off, between his other complicated liaisons; and she poured her feelings into her letters and a secret love diary. Meanwhile, Teddy's increasing mental and emotional disturbances drained her energy and her resources, and, with his adultery and embezzlement of her finances, matters came to a crisis; The Mount was sold, and the marriage ended with a discreet divorce in 1913. Wharton retained her married name and title, and would be sharp with correspondents who were unfortunate enough to try addressing her as 'Miss'. She flirted with moving to England, but adopted France as her permanent home. On the onset of war, she remained in Paris, devoting her energies to relief-work with refugees and orphans, fundraising and rousing public feeling to bring the United States military into the Allied cause. Her efforts made her a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honour; and, in 1921, *The Age of Innocence* brought her the Pulitzer Prize for the novel (a female 'first'). At war's ending, she moved to the outskirts of Paris. Here, at Pavillon Colombe, and at Ste-Claire, Hyères, her Riviera home, she carried out her visions for yet more extraordinary gardens; she welcomed guests and planned new journeys (including chartering, with friends, a second Mediterranean cruise, in 1926).

Through all this time she wrote – preferably in bed, before launching into her day's activities, leaving her secretary to type up her manuscripts for revision. Feeling 'driven' to tell stories, she worked in a 'fever of authorship' (*ABG* 125); at the same time, she kept a sharp eye on her publishers, chivvying them at any sign of slackening. Self-deprecating letters to her editor, while preparing her first collection (1899), give place after publication to protests about the firm's low-key advertising – 'I do not think I have been fairly treated' (*Letters* 37). While she enjoyed an independent income, from family trust funds, supplemented by various inheritances, as a best-selling author she came to command substantial earnings. But disappointed with Scribner's advances and, as she saw it, failure to improve her publicity, she began to break off their long association; and her secret deal with Appleton's, over the advance for *The Reef* (1912), shocked her long-time company: 'Mr Scribner is mortally hurt by my infidelity', she wrote to Morton Fullerton (*Benstock* 250).

Disciplined, dedicated, Wharton was enormously productive. She had begun as a child, when her 'story-telling', to use one of her favourite terms,

fired her energies, along with avid reading in her father's library. She was first published in her teens – with *Verses*, poems privately printed when she was sixteen – and, in 1879–80, achieved what many an established writer would have envied: having her poems accepted by William Dean Howells, novelist, and editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, America's leading literary journal. After a gap in the 1880s (the years of her social debut and early married life), poetry took her back into print, and stories and books followed. By the time she published *The House of Mirth* (1905), an unprecedented best-seller for Scribner's, she had become a well-known author: with her first book, on domestic interiors, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), co-authored with Ogden Codman; her first novel, *The Valley of Decision* (1902); and seven other volumes behind her. She regarded her work on *The House of Mirth*, however, as her professional debut, bringing her 'the kingdom of mastery' over her tools (*ABG* 209).

In some forty years, she would publish over forty books, including more than twenty novels and novellas, around a dozen collections of short stories, as well as plays, poetry, travel-writing, autobiography, criticism and reviews. She began to earn sums which stirred Henry James to envy; she garnered acclaim as America's most brilliant novelist and cultural commentator; and her non-fiction gained her high regard. She was passionate about automobiles, and her first 'Motor-Flight' through France, chauffeured in her open-topped Panhard, introduced readers in 1906–8 to this very new excitement, which had 'restored the romance of travel' (*MFF* 1); her forays into the Massachusetts hill country in the hinterland of The Mount inspired *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*; her tour of French military hospitals in 1915 brought Americans unique reports from the war-zone. Visiting Morocco in 1917 (and housed by the French Resident General in the rooms of the former harem favourite), she thrilled to the challenge of a '*country without a guide-book*' (*IM* 3, opening sentence).

After the war, she came to regard the New York of her youth as 'a Babylonian tomb' recording its 'fragments' in her writings ('LGNY' 274). Although she never renounced her American citizenship, she found the States increasingly alien; after 1913, she returned only once, in 1923, to collect an honorary degree from Yale (the first to be awarded to a woman) and to revive impressions for her novels. She tried to capture the impact of new forms of society she found monstrous; and her stories of restless, rootless individuals, broken families and multiple marriages, of fads and fashions, in a new makeover culture, increased her fame. Popular magazines printed her works, though they found some of her material too downbeat or explicit. Disturbed by the social (and socialist) climate of the New Deal, she began to feel that her

generation had been swept away; outliving Walter Berry and many friends, and mourning their deaths, and those of Catherine Gross, her housekeeper, and other long-time servants, she nevertheless kept writing. Holding, as ever, different projects in play, at the end of 1933 she reminds Rutger Jewett, her Appleton's editor: 'As you know, I usually interrupt the writing of a long novel to do two or three short stories, or a novelette' (Beinecke/35.1073) – a casual glimpse into her habitual industry. Although not all her projects came to fruition, and magazines began to refuse some of her writing, she saw *A Backward Glance* published in 1934, to respectful reviews. After bouts of illness, heart trouble and a first stroke (in 1935), she went on to make new plans, for work and for travel. In her last year, she sent her final story, 'All Souls'', to her agent in February, and with her novel *The Buccaneers* still in process, and jottings for characters still in her notebooks, she died of a stroke, at Pavillon Colombe, on 11 August 1937. She was buried at Versailles, in the Cimetière des Gonards, alongside Walter Berry.

Questions of how reviewers and critics viewed Wharton's achievements will feature throughout this guide; but on first encounter, readers might prefer to keep in mind one of her own jottings (quoted *Lib* 153):

> My ruling passions:
>
> Justice – Order
> Dogs –
> Books –
> Flowers
> Architecture –
> Travel –
> a good joke – &
> perhaps that should have come first –.

Growing up in old New York: family and social contexts

Looking back on herself as a 'child of the well-to-do, hedged in by nurses and governesses' (*ABG* 57), Wharton admits to only vague recollections of her parents' routine and world. The claim is surprising, as time and again in all her writings, readers encounter sharply realised details of her ancestors, her family and of Manhattan leisure-class life, as she knew it when growing up after the Civil War, in the 1860s–1880s. These minutiae of its habits, artefacts, geographies and rituals are underlying contexts throughout her work. This was the milieu she later memorialised, like the ruins of Troy, in her

fiction. It is the world of *The Age of Innocence* – one, she said, with a 'blind dread of innovation' (*ABG* 22); and the interplay between ideas of constraint and of stability are central to her writing. In this section, then, I return to Wharton's early years, to her own accounts and, in passing, to other writings of the period, in order to draw out more details of this narrow social group and of the currents of change she calibrated in her narratives.

Edith Jones's upbringing was shaped by the expectations of her class, whose lives she described as, 'with few exceptions, as monotonous as their architecture' ('LGNY' 280). This group's geographies were narrow; it occupied an exclusive habitat extending only a few blocks north from Washington Square. This world, the enclave of the well-to-do, would itself soon be overwhelmed, as, from the 1880s, with the influx of new money, the city would stream uptown, with the building along Fifth Avenue of ever more grandiose and attention-seeking residences. As a commentator wrote in *Vogue* (7 March 1895), anticipating Wharton's own later 'backward glance':

> The change in New York manners has been so swift and radical from the quiet dignity and formality habitual to the late thirties, forties and early fifties, that present-day customs and usages, together with our advanced social point of view, seem to have cast off all past relation to the old order [. . .] this is merely a backward glance at strong contrasts existing between old and new [. . .] The new rich element was then unknown, and such large fortunes as we are now familiar with were simply impossible, had no existence [. . .] While the houses of wealthy New Yorkers were kept up with becoming dignity, and oftentimes with elegance, there was no such luxury dreamed of as has become quite general in these days. Drawing-rooms were severe and simple, and resembled each other like peas in a pod, in their mirrors, their mahogany and rose-wood carvings, their gaudy and large-flowered carpetings, crystal chandeliers, sconces, candelabras, girandoles.

So, in Wharton's childhood, the identical brownstone houses dominated; and, within her group, she said, everything was 'ordered according to convention' ('L&I' 1092). Her parents were both from long-established families, and, though Lucretia had grown up with a relatively reduced income, her marriage assured her prosperity. George Frederic lived on an allowance, coming into his independent fortune on his father's death. Drawing income largely from property and land rentals, the family suffered occasional dips in their revenues, as in the 'bad times' ('L&I' 1071) after the Civil War, when currency depreciated. The Joneses' response – to rent out their houses, and live more cheaply in Europe (1864–72) – gave their daughter the six years of travel which transformed her perspectives for life. Though Wharton later

mused on her father's probable financial difficulties ('LGNY' 282), he and other men in the family, like her own husband later, existed as 'men of leisure'. Describing this species in *A Backward Glance*, published during the Great Depression, she anticipated her audience's responses: that it would 'probably seem unbelievable to present-day readers that only one of my own near relations, and not one of my husband's, was "in business" ' (*ABG* 56).

Shades of difference, in breeding and in levels of income, were always central to Wharton's fictions; and in her late career, she took pains to emphasise that her family circle had not enjoyed vast fortunes. This group, she claimed, was content to remain merely comfortable, uninfected by the 'harsh desire for profit'[1] of the new speculators, entrepreneurs and industrialists in the post-Civil War 'Gilded Age'. (The inroads of new wealth – presented in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country* – would eventually overturn Wharton's society.) The Joneses and their associates were neither New York aristocracy (those who could trace their lineage back to the aristocracy of their British or Dutch colonial origins), nor rising multi-millionaires still busy increasing their fortunes; but were descended from prosperous bankers, lawyers and ('mainly') merchant shipowners (*ABG* 10). Money-grubbing was despised as the sphere of trade. When her brother Freddy went briefly into business, the twelve-year-old Edith quipped:

> we have a great many jokes about buying candy & cabbages & standing behind the counter but he has not yet dropped the 'Esquire' from his name & is not absolutely a tradesman, so you need not be horrified at the announcement. (*Letters* 30)

Even the most exclusive retail dealers were excluded from New York polite society until long after she was grown up (*ABG* 11). Her descriptions in *The Age of Innocence* struck a chord with her editor in 1920, who, too, remembered how his old grandmother, 'used to murmur incredulously at my descriptions of the growing city by saying, "Oh, no, my dear boy, do not tell me that trade has invaded Fifth Avenue!" ' (letter, Rutger Jewett, 13 November 1920, Beinecke/33.1032).

In this world, Wharton said, 'one of the first rules of conversation was the one early instilled in me by my mother: "Never talk about money, and think about it as little as possible"' (*ABG* 57). The group prided itself on its uprightness, inflicting 'relentless social ostracism' (*ABG* 21) on the families of those believed to have lapsed from strict fair-dealing. To the outsider, defining oneself as of the rank just above 'plain people', rather than as 'the very apex of the pyramid' as *The Age of Innocence* expresses it (*AI* 46), might seem hair-splitting. Now, social historians sometimes play down the

importance of such claims. As Eric Homberger emphasises, the Joneses belonged to leading New York clans, and Edith Wharton always moved in 'the highest social circles'.[2] Theodore Roosevelt was a distant cousin, and during his presidency Wharton dined at the White House and counted him as one of her intellectual kin. However, while Wharton's late-life chronicles of her family might seem tinged with over-defensiveness, such fine tuning is crucial to her fictional narratives. She teases out origins, places a detail of behaviour and registers the social status of rising or falling characters, in the precise cultural analysis which critics view as parallel to the anthropologists and new sociology of her day (more details will follow in context).

Wharton's memories of Lucretia's social pronouncements have counterparts in the many nineteenth-century commentaries which challenged myths of a classless America. Such discriminations (defining one's exact rank in the social scale) were essential to a group under threat: as the new rich advanced, old money appealed to lineage, to mark out its exclusiveness. As a visiting French woman, 'Madame Blanc' (Theresa Bentzon), observed:

> I have now the measure of the social divisions which exist in the land of equality. To cope with the insolence of newly-won wealth, one must be able to point to pre-Revolutionary ancestors, or at least to ancestors who distinguished themselves during the Revolution. Those who can boast of a Dutch or Swedish name established in the country before the English rule, feel all the pride of a Rohan or a Montmorency; and even those who do not possess these great advantages hasten, as soon as possible, on any pretext whatsoever, to draw the line as distinctly as possible between themselves and common mortals [. . .] Never, until I went to America, did I understand how humiliating it may be to bear the name of Smith or Jones.[3]

Lucretia Jones staved off possible confusion: it is said that, in response to inquiries about which Mrs Jones she was, she always asserted: 'I am *the* Mrs Jones' (*Lewis* 12). Like Mrs Archer in *The Age of Innocence*, she regretted the passing of the days when she knew 'everyone who kept a carriage' ('LGNY' 275).

In the 1870s, however, the excesses of new kinds of affluence were beginning to create another powerful class, which would amaze all spectators with demonstrations of undreamed-of heights of luxury – a social phenomenon which would permanently transform the Joneses' New York, and provide one of Wharton's richest fields of fiction. Her novels 'think about' money to an extent that would have appalled Lucretia. When we look at the *nouveaux riches*, in *The House of Mirth* or the novels of the 1920s, Wharton's demurrals about her clan's lifestyle come more clearly into perspective: 'How