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Julie Olin-Ammentorp. Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War

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Olin-Ammentorp, Julie. ***Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War*.**
Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. 305 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-8130-2730-6.

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Although Edith Wharton's depictions of New York society in such works as *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* have long been recognized, her prolific depictions of France during and after World War I have virtually been ignored. Julie Olin-Ammentorp's study ends this trend by providing the first extended analysis of Wharton's war-related writings, as well as of archival and out-of-print materials. What Olin-Ammentorp retrieves is the image of a woman who worked vigorously throughout the war years, not simply as a writer but as a volunteer. Integrating the Great War into her fiction, poetry, and articles for *The New York Times* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, Wharton also engaged in a variety of wartime initiatives that ranged from visiting the combat zone and supervising hospitals to raising money for refugee and children's relief organizations, all of which gave her firsthand views of the war. That this experience profoundly affected Wharton's work as a writer underscores Olin-Ammentorp's text.

Why Wharton's war-related works have been neglected by both general and feminist scholars frames the beginning of Olin-Ammentorp's study, with the perennial question of how can a woman "legitimately write about an experience from which she is, by definition, excluded" punctuating the introductory chapter (3). What follows is an analysis of Wharton's images of war before, during, and after the war, in which Olin-Ammentorp delineates Wharton's "shifting" response to war and its impact on her creative imagination.

Olin-Ammentorp considers Wharton's nonfiction work and poetry at the outset of the war, from 1914 to 1915, and traces her romantic fascination with war as well as her growing cognizance of its atrocities. In Wharton's works from 1916 to 1918, Olin-Ammentorp believes that Wharton only appears to have "adjusted to living in a state of war," writing to a friend, " 'it is delicious just to dawdle about in the sun, & smell the eucalyptus & pines'" yet adding, "'I long to send you some flowers, but I'm afraid it's no use in war time'"(57). In her examination of *Summer*, *The Marne*, and *French Ways and Their Meanings*, Olin-Ammentorp detects a similar pattern, but with the images of war now revealing Wharton's longing to escape and to return to the old order, which she celebrates in *French Ways and Their Meanings*. Wharton's postwar novel, *A Son at the Front*, published in 1923, encapsulates the novelist's conflicted sense of war and is, Olin-Ammentorp claims, Wharton's "written" and "complex monument to the war" that "simultaneously honors the deaths of the soldiers" yet remains detached from "'the real business' of war"(153). Both satiric and elegiac, it is Wharton's "pivotal novel," which "bridges the war and the postwar years in her work" and gives her "the latitude to portray more fully than she had before both her admiration for human ability and her frustration with human flaws" (125).

Although the war appears less frequently in stories from the 1930s, Olin-Ammentorp notes that "even passing references to the war" point to its influence (211).

The final chapters emphasize this influence in *The Age of Innocence* and *A Backward Glance*, Wharton's memoir, both of which reveal how her sense of the past had been affected by war. "Her world," writes Olin-Ammentorp, "the civilization she so valued, and, paradoxically, the civilization that she and others claimed the war had been fought to preserve—was irretrievably destroyed." Both *The Age of Innocence* and *A Backward Glance* are, concludes Olin-Ammentorp, "Wharton's best hope for recreating, or at least memorializing, a portion of it" (215-16).

This carefully researched and documented study provides a rich resource for scholars and readers from all disciplines. In addition to its examination of historical and cultural aspects of the Great War and its fresh and insightful analyses of Wharton's writings, Olin-Ammentorp's text includes two appendices featuring Wharton's out-of-print war poetry and nonfiction writing samples; detailed and informative notes; and a comprehensive and useful bibliography and index. Particularly compelling is the case Olin-Ammentorp makes for the value of women's war-related writings, which she calls "the homefront novel" and which she believes Wharton helped to create. Contending that this is "as important a subgenre of the 'war novel' as the more recognized 'military novel'" (26), Olin-Ammentorp believes that the Great War was made up of "many different, yet equally legitimate war experiences" (234). Above all, this study points to the need to redefine the "war novel" and to (re)read and (re)assess the war related writings and work of Edith Wharton.