

Patricia Fra López, ed. 2011: *Edith Wharton: Back to Compostela/Regreso a Compostela*. Santiago de Compostela: U de Santiago de Compostela and Xunta de Galicia. 191 pp. ISBN 978-84-9887-721-2.

TERESA GÓMEZ REUS

Universidad de Alicante

mt.gomez@ua.es

For American scholars in Spain, and in particular for those who are interested in Edith Wharton, the publication of *Edith Wharton: Back to Compostela/Regreso a Compostela* is exciting news. Lavishly illustrated, this elegantly edited book includes a facsimile of Wharton's 'Last Spanish Journey with W. : Spain 1925', otherwise known as the 'Spain Diary', together with an undated manuscript piece, 'Back to Compostela', also in facsimile, written some years later. The book is the outcome of a research project undertaken by Patricia Fra López, in which she contextualizes material stemming from two extensive trips Wharton made in 1925 and 1928 along the Way of St James, which culminated in an emotionally charged visit to Santiago de Compostela. The facsimile edition has been carefully transcribed and profusely annotated by Patricia Fra. Moreover, in addition to the original English, the volume contains translations of all its contents into Spanish and Galician. The colourful preface by Marta González is also published in trilingual form, as is the informative introduction by the author of the project, entitled 'The Woman, The Writer, The Way: Wharton's Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela 1925-30', which discusses Wharton's trips along the Way of St James and the unpublished texts that emanated from this experience.

Edith Wharton's relationship with Spain is both intriguing and hard to pin down. She lived in Europe from her fourth to her tenth year, travelling extensively with her family across Spain, France, Italy, Germany and England, with long periods of residence in Rome, Florence and Paris. As an adult, Wharton came to believe that her intellect and her artistry might expand more readily in Europe than in the United States, and for this reason in 1907 she set up residence in Paris, where she found the community for which she yearned —a community that "stimulated [her] intellect, fed her craving for enlightened conversation, and provided a place where her talents were praised and where she herself was valued" (Benstock 1986: 63). Wharton felt a special affinity for France and Italy and she used various strategies to explore the "background of beauty and old established order" (Wharton 1934: 44) she felt she had found in these countries. She wrote a historical novel about Italy, *The Valley of Decision* (1902), an aesthetic description of *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904), two cultural travel books, *Italian Backgrounds* (1905) and *A Motor-*

Flight through France (1908), and an appreciative account of the nuances and intricacies of France in *French Ways and their Meaning* (1919).

The writer's unquestionable love for France, her country of adoption, and the admiring accounts she wrote about France and Italy have led critics to believe that her European interests encompassed only these two countries, bypassing Spain altogether. Richard Warrington Baldwin Lewis, for example, has remarked that "Spain [was] a country that Edith Wharton found it hard to make her way into, imaginatively" (1975: 362). Eager to put Spain on the map of Wharton scholarship, in 1993 I wrote an article in which I called attention to the extended trips the writer had made to this country, in particular in the last fifteen years of her life, and speculated about the possible reasons for this later interest. The article, which disclosed the existence of a four-page typescript called 'A Motor-Flight through Spain', held at the Beinecke Library in Yale University, argued that the cultural collage we call Spain, with its "hybrid and overlapping cultures" (1993: 203), appealed to what Lewis had called the two contradictory sides of Edith Wharton, "the nun and the wild woman in her" (1975: 510), or, put in another way, her religious and her sensual nature. Patricia Fra's beautiful edition calls attention to the mystical side, which is never far from the epicurean and the secular. By making available these unpublished materials, Fra has enlarged our view of Wharton's engagement with Spain, while throwing a sidelight on the writer's interest for the Catholic faith and its rituals. As Fra reminds us, Wharton, an alleged agnostic, was overwhelmed by the "mysterious power" of Compostela (Wharton 1934: 371), and there exists a previously unpublished letter, reproduced in this volume, that suggests that, in her old age, Wharton felt tempted to convert to Catholicism (Fra López 2001: 34). Patricia Fra touches upon this intriguing question in the introduction, without reaching any conclusion for lack of documentary evidence. Although Fra remarks on the fact that Wharton attended several religious ceremonies, like the *Angelus* at Santiago Cathedral (34), there is little in the 'Spain Diary' and in 'Back to Compostela' that suggests that Wharton's interest in the Way of St James went any deeper than the historical and the artistic.

Of particular curiosity to the scholar is the complete publication of the 'Spain Diary', now in possession of Lilly Library in Indiana University. The journal documents a motor-expedition Wharton undertook with her long-time friend Walter Berry in September 1925, in which they toured Aragón, Navarra, Lérida, Guadalajara, the North of Castille, León, Asturias and Galicia. Although written in a rather terse manner, the diary displays in a rudimentary form what has come to be considered the hallmark of Wharton's most compelling travel writing: her cultural expertise, her rare erudition, her distrust of restored monuments (which she had inherited from Ruskin), her tenacity of purpose and her appreciation of nature. As usual in her travelogues, Wharton does not follow the familiar sight-seeing routes; on the contrary, she practises what she describes in *Italian Backgrounds*, as "one of the rarest and most delicate pleasures" (1905: 85) of the tourist and the traveller: to circumvent the guidebook —that ubiquitous intertext that funnels travellers through a preordained set of places— and take instead the "by ways",

the “parenthesis” of travel in search of the recondite or unexpected treasure. And she uses the motor-car as her accomplice, occasionally supplementing it with a horse or a mule to gain access to those neglected places that would allow her to instil some novelty into the (then already) hackneyed genre of travel writing. Wharton’s ability to fuse “the excitement and unpredictability of exploration . . . with the pleasure of historical and aesthetic knowledge” (Schriber 1991: xlv) infuses her Spanish diary with energy and insight. Not without interest are the more personal details that crop up in the course of her journal, such as the writer’s comments on the quality of the food and lodgings, which we rarely find in her published travel writing.

‘Back to Compostela’, the other manuscript Fra has rescued from oblivion, was presumably going to be part of a travelogue Wharton considered writing about Spain. We do not know exactly when this essay was written —Fra suggests that it was in 1930, after the writer’s second visit to Compostela in 1928. It is held among her papers at the Beinecke Library, together with the already mentioned typescript called ‘A Motor-Flight through Spain’, whose title clearly mimics that of *A Motor-Flight through France*. It is difficult to conjecture why the project of a book on Spain was begun and never completed. Fra suggests that the effort of composing a book on Spain shortly after the death of Walter Berry, the man Wharton called the “love of her life”, may have proved too painful for the aging writer (32). It could also be, as Sarah Bird Wright surmises, that Wharton tried to relive the pleasure she had experienced in composing *A Motor-Flight through France*, but then became too busy with fiction to complete it, or she simply lost interest in it (Wright 1997: 69). Or perhaps Richard Warrington Baldwin Lewis was right after all and Spain *was* a country Edith Wharton “found it hard to make her way into, imaginatively”. Both the ‘Spain Diary’ and ‘Back to Compostela’ are full of Wharton’s admiring comments on Spanish art and architecture. The medieval churches, cathedrals, paintings and sculptures she found on the Pilgrims’ Way gave her endless aesthetic delight. In Oviedo, for instance, she considered the Holy Chamber “one of the most beautiful [rooms she] ever saw” (Fra López 2011: 82) and in Santiago, after a visit to the cathedral, she wrote: “I saw eternity the other night —applied to the portico” (163). Yet we never find in these texts the kind of elated remarks about contemporary life which abound in her French and Italian travel books. Astorga, she found: “indescribably squalid, dusty, degenerate with streets unpaved or miserably cobble-stoned, filth everywhere —& rising from all this misery, a glorious rosy-red cathedral, tinged with gold like a pomegranate tree growing in a dung-hill. I have never seen anything more typically Spanish than that contrast!” (92-93). When visiting the old cathedral of Salamanca she exclaimed: “one beautiful tomb after another . . . What riches —again in a dung-hill!” (95). And in Santiago she found her way to the “curious little Romanesque” church of Sta. Maria de Sar “through usual slums” (88). Nothing in these pages suggests the presence of what she most appreciated in a European culture: an aesthetically coherent world, a world made up of a constant interchange between life and art, the past and the present (see St Laurent 1993: 172-73). This symbiotic relationship between the life of a country and its artistic productions she felt she had found in Italy and

France allowed her to generate the texts she called *Italian Backgrounds* and *A Motor-Flight through France*. What she saw in many Spanish towns and villages in no way confirmed her idea of a harmonious culture, and the enormous contrasts she experienced there may have prevented her from writing Spain into shapes that were meaningful to her. For Fra, comments such as those above should not be read as signs of cultural snobbery; on the contrary, she reminds us, Wharton “had the ability to appreciate beauty in its just value, but she was also capable of denouncing what was ugly and wrong” (32). A final contributing factor in Wharton’s apparent lack of empathy with some of the towns and villages she visited must have been her inability to speak or understand Spanish. Incapable of communicating with the people, her impressions of Spain are largely confined to the visual.

Patricia Fra’s scholarly introduction provides the reader with valuable information both about the manner in which Wharton travelled along the Way of St James as well as about the sites she visited. She brings together a rich array of both published and unpublished material to appraise Wharton’s trips in northern Spain and its textual implications. She documents the careful way in which Wharton planned and undertook these tours: always well-equipped, as was her habit, with art books, such as Georgiana King’s *The Way of Saint James* (1920) and Arthur Kingsley Porter’s voluminous *Romanesque Sculpture in the Pilgrimage Road* (1923). Fra also explores the role that the motorcar plays in these narratives, liberating Wharton as it does from the tedium of the beaten track. She discusses with acumen Wharton’s preference for little-visited places, her aesthetic discrimination and her deep distrust of restoration, which emerges in Wharton’s disapproving comment on the “over-restored” church St Martin de Tours in Frómista, Palencia (31, 76).

Some minor biographical inaccuracies may have escaped the author’s attention: Edith Wharton, for example, did not rent an apartment in the fashionable Faubourg St. Germain in 1906, as Fra states (28), but in 1907, and she settled permanently in France before, not after her divorce from Teddy Wharton. In spite of these imprecisions and the lexical errors that have eluded the proof-reader of the English version, the introduction will prove useful both to those who are interested in Wharton’s travelogues and to those who wish to see the Way of St James through the eyes of a great American writer.

The volume has been complemented with an impressive array of illustrations. Apart from some snapshots of Edith Wharton and Walter Berry in the introduction, in the section containing the Spanish and Galician translations of the manuscripts Patricia Fra has inserted a compendium of photographs and postcards from the 1920s. These illustrations have the effect of transforming the book into a kind of *Baedeker*, and one Edith Wharton would have approved of: competent, tasteful, erudite and useful. The abundant footnotes offering a wealth of information on the historical and artistic significance of the places the writer visited further contribute to this effect. It may be argued that a number of these footnotes are redundant and of dubious critical relevance, elaborating on the Pilgrims’ Way rather than on Wharton and her voyage. Nevertheless, in general I found Fra’s manner of integrating the three elements, “the woman, the writer and the way”, rather effective. With

her unusual book, Patricia Fra has been in part pilgrim, re-enacting Wharton's tour, in part guide, inviting us to follow Wharton's steps, and in part scholar/archaeologist, excavating unknown texts, itineraries and works of art.

One of the main motivations for editing *Edith Wharton: Back to Compostela/Regreso a Compostela* is, as Fra herself states, "to try and add another page to Wharton's scholarship regarding her relationship with Spain" (24), and I have no doubt that this handsome volume will serve its purpose. Last but not least, Patricia Fra has been anxious to "vindicate the existence —and the relevance— of women who came to Santiago, as pilgrims or as tourists" (25), such as Georgiana King or Edith Wharton herself, whose names, as the author reveals, do not feature in any literary chronicle of the city, in striking contrast to Hemingway or Torrente Ballester. When Wharton paid her visits to Spain in the 1920s she was already a well-known writer on the international scene and *The House of Mirth* (1905) had been translated as *Los millonarios de los Estados Unidos, o el país del placer* (n.d.), with a review by Carmen de Burgos (1912).¹ However, her visits to this country aroused no public interest. By making available this forgotten material Patricia Fra has done much to rectify the previous neglect while at the same time broadening our view of Wharton, the inveterate traveller and the travel writer. It is to be hoped that the appearance of this volume will provide an impulse for further enquiry into Wharton's pilgrimages in Spain and the contrasting manners in which this country both stimulated and put a dampener on her creative powers.

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¹ It would be interesting to observe that Edith Wharton was translated earlier than Henry James, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane or Scott Fitzgerald. The first work by James that appeared in Spain was *The Aspern Papers* (1944), followed by *Washington Square* (1952). Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* did not appear until 1954 (see Gómez Reus 1992: 23).

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Teresa Gómez Reus is Associate Professor of English at the University of Alicante, where she teaches American literature and women's fiction. Her current research focusses on women's writings from the First World War and she has recently published a study of Mary Borden's war memoir *The Forbidden Zone* (1911) and the edited book *Mujeres al frente: Testimonios de la Gran Guerra* (2012).

Address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Universidad de Alicante. Campus de San Vicente del Raspeig. Ap 99, 03080 Alicante, Spain. Tel.: +34 965 203591. Fax: + 34 965903800.