



# **An Author and a Gardener: The Gardens and Friendship of Edith Wharton and Laurence Johnston**

*Allan R. Ruff*

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In August 1937 a small group of Edith Wharton's intimate friends gathered to pay their last respects at her funeral in France. Among that small group of people was her friend for many years, Lawrence 'Johnnie' Johnston, the creator of two famous gardens, at Hidcote Manor, Gloucestershire, in England and Serre de la Madone, Menton, on the Côte d'Azur in the south of France. Wharton and Johnston shared not only a love of nature and gardens but also a shared experience of life. Both were private people who had had very similar childhoods, experiencing the loss of their fathers at an early age. Yet there was one aspect of their lives in which they were very different. Wharton, the writer, chose to expose her innermost thoughts and feelings and was continually in the public eye. Johnston, however, wrote nothing about his gardens, hardly permitted photographs of himself or his gardens and, though he kept an engagement diary, these, with two exceptions, have not survived. As a result Johnston remains a shadowy figure upon whom light occasionally falls from within the diaries kept by Edith Wharton. Her diaries also provide an illuminating insight into both her gardens at St-Brice, and at Hyères, in the south of France. Wharton was a passionate gardener – an aspect not yet fully explored in previous biographies - early in her life after she had made her first garden at The Mount, at Lenox, Massachusetts in the United States, she claimed she was a better landscape designer than novelist. As fellow gardeners, Edith and Johnnie spent many hours together visiting each other's gardens, staying as house guests, plant-collecting in the Haute Massif and travelling by car to nurseries and gardens throughout England and France.

In this major new critical biography Alan Ruff has brought the two together, calling upon his lifetime's knowledge of landscape and garden design to assess the influences and techniques employed in the gardens of these two remarkable people, all set against a long-vanished, high-society background.

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