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Between Literary Criticism and Pleasure Reading: Newspaper Reviews of Edith Wharton in Early Twentieth-Century Britain

Today people generally turn to national newspapers or magazines for their reviews of fiction, but in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, reviews took up a large proportion of all provincial newspaper columns, and newspapers published in towns and cities across Britain published original and probing reviews of literature, history, travel books, and science. Since these were often published before reviews came out in weekly journals like the *Athenaeum*, the *Speaker*, or the *Spectator*, and long before reviewers printed their judgments on the pages of monthlies or quarterlies, one can assume that newspaper reviews played a large role in helping readers select which books to order in the circulating libraries or purchase themselves. The review was an expected and respected ingredient of the daily press during the daily press's golden age, before the national dailies could be shipped to the provinces in time for breakfast, and thus before the concept of a national paper was a daily reality. Databases like *British Newspapers 1600-1930* and *British Newspaper Archive* have made newspapers available to researchers in a new and powerful way, and researchers would be wise to take advantage of this resource to trace popular as well as literary taste of the texts they are researching.

The genres of the newspaper book review and periodical book review began to diverge between the 1870s and the 1910s. In the 1870s, there was little qualitative distinction between a book review in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and provincial papers like the *Wrexham Advertiser*. In all cases, reviewers discussed a novel's structure, its style, the quality of its characterisation, and its topical significance. By 1900, fewer provincial titles discussed art or literature. Their newspaper reviews were short, personal in tone, and designed to help the pleasure reader. Self-consciously, reviewers mourned the fashion of unhappy endings, complained about long factual expositions in historical fiction, or criticised plots on the grounds of implausibility. We can see this if we compare reviews of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* (1911) across some of the main outlets for reviewing in the country at the time with reviews that appeared in papers like the *Yorkshire Post* or the *Manchester Courier*.

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