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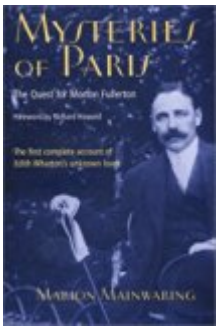
**Marion Mainwaring.** *The Mysteries of Paris: The Quest for Morton Fullerton.* Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2001. xii + 327 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-58465-008-9.




**Reviewed by** David Kidd

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In her highly idiosyncratic book *The Mysteries of Paris: The Quest for Morton Fullerton*, Marion Mainwaring at one point writes about her eponymous subject's upcoming trip to Lisbon, and she speculates: "Steeped as he was in [George] Meredith, Morton could not have been wafted to Lisbon without thinking of the novel" (p. 157). Here the novel of reference is Meredith's *Evan Harrington*, atypical for this book that often draws, as might be expected, on the fiction of Edith Wharton and Henry James. Yet the passage is typical of the book in another way, a way truer to its deeper structure. Mainwaring's study delves into the barely understood life of the mysterious and intriguing journalist, con-artist, victim of blackmail, and impresario of the sexual aspects of the Victorian compromise, Morton Fullerton, a man known mostly for his work on covering the Dreyfus affair and for being, allegedly, the paramour of novelist Edith Wharton. Though ultimately an inchoate maze of twists, dead ends, and looping narratives, Mainwaring's study gives literary biography the distinction one finds in the mature fiction of James and Wharton.

Having herself completed Wharton's unfinished novel *The Buccaneers*, Mainwaring, also the author of an important biography of Wharton, found herself fascinated by Morton Fullerton, and was unable to account for him fully. Thus, *The Mysteries of Paris* could be seen as a kind of byproduct of Mainwaring's earlier work, or, alternately a kind of indulgence in her obsession. Fullerton seems to represent the equivalent of the angler's "one that got away" for Mainwaring, and she does manage to draw the reader into her quest for this elusive man. Morton Fullerton inspired at least two major literary characters in James's and Wharton's work: Merton Densher in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) and George Darrow in *The Reef* (1912). A journalist in the Paris (where he lived until his death in 1952) office of the *Times*, Fullerton had come to Europe via Harvard, and had connections with distinguished literary personalities of the day like Wilde, James, and Verlaine. Based on letters and interviews with survivors, Mainwaring makes the claim that Fullerton and Wharton met in 1907, carried on an affair for three years, and concluded with Fullerton asking Wharton for his freedom. Henry James

joined the two for various excursions, acting sometimes as a confidant or negotiator.

With characteristic bravura, T. S. Eliot once declared that Henry James had a mind so fine that no idea could penetrate it; perhaps if he had read Mainwaring's study, Eliot might have said that it was a biography so fine that no single life seemed to be studied by it. The Penguin Lives series has responded to a trend in biography in which the most recent were overwhelmingly thorough and scholarly, resembling more a set of encyclopedias than the modest assertions of a single-volume text. Thus, Penguin gives its readers the life of Lincoln or Buddha in a scant 200 pages. Mainwaring's book responds to the modernist project of the encyclopediac biography with a different approach from the Penguin Lives series, and instead writes a book that has all of the ponderousness of a multi-volume work, distilled into the parsimonious mindset of the single volume. Furthermore, Mainwaring chooses a decidedly marginal figure for her study, a man few outside of the coterie of Wharton and James scholars could be expected to know. Her approach further differs from other conventional literary biographies and histories in that she expects the reader to step behind the curtain a bit with her to examine the apparatus of her own creation. It is as if the reader is looking over her shoulder as she pores over letters, checks the chronology, and knocks on the door of still-living distant cousins. While putting some of the machinery of the artist's work into the work itself is an all-too-identifiable postmodern technique, its use has rarely been granted to literary biography, but perhaps should be. After all, many of the book's technical features owe a debt to Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Tolklas*. If there is an anxiety of influence at work in this study it is with R. W. B. Lewis and his biographical work on Wharton (Mainwaring worked as his assistant for years), and Mainwaring attempts to fire some parting shots at what she feels to be Lewis's inaccurate assessments of Wharton and Fullerton. Yet when a writer righteously corrects the misdating of letters, one wonders if something more than the chronology of literary history is at stake.

Above all, *The Mysteries of Paris* raises at least as many mysteries as it dispels. Did Henry James know about the affair? Did Teddy Wharton know about it? Was Fullerton a collaborator during the Nazi occupation, or merely an equivocator? Though scholars of the fin de si=cle and modernism will delight most in Mainwaring's work, even the general reader will enjoy getting lost in this world of promiscuous, elite con men who circle around Parisian cafes and write remorseful letters about their assignations with famous novelists or whisper excitedly about a Portuguese opera singer or a blackmailing wife.

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