

# William Sharp and "Fiona Macleod"

A Life



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# Chapter One

1855–1881

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William Sharp was born on September 12, 1855, at 4 Garthland Place in Paisley, Scotland. He was the oldest in a family of five daughters and three sons. His father, David Galbreath Sharp, was a partner in a mercantile house, and his mother, Katherine Brooks, was the daughter of the Swedish Vice Consul in Glasgow. Sharp spent the summers of his childhood in the West country — on the shores of the Clyde, the sea coast, and the Isle of Arran. He swam, rowed, sailed, and cultivated a passionate love of nature inherited from his father. His Highland nurse, Barbara, told him tales of fairies, Celtic heroes, and Highland chieftains. These stories and the old Gaelic songs seeded his imagination with materials that came to fruition years later when he began writing the tales and poems published under the pseudonym “Fiona Macleod.” Fanciful as a child, Sharp often imagined himself a marauding Viking or a brave Gaelic warrior. He developed early the sense of an invisible world and communicated freely with invisible playmates. The God he learned about in church was “remote and forbidding,” but in the woods of the Inner Hebrides “he felt there was some great power behind the beauty.” The “sense of the Infinite touched him there.” When he was six, “he built a little altar of stones, [...] and on it he laid white flowers in offering” to a benign and beautiful Presence who ruled the natural world (*Memoir*, 6).

In 1863, when he was seven, his aunt brought her three children from London to spend some time with the Paisley Sharps who had rented a house for the summer at Blairmore on the Gare Loch in western Scotland. One of those children was Elizabeth Amelia Sharp. Years later she recalled her cousin William, who would eventually be her husband, as “a merry, mischievous little boy [...] with bright brown

curly hair, blue-gray eyes, and a laughing face [...] eager, active in his endless invention of games and occupations." Until he was eight, he was educated at home by a governess. In the fall of 1863, he was sent to Blair Lodge, a boarding school in Polmont Woods between Falkirk and Linlithgow. Four years later, the Sharps moved from Paisley to Glasgow and enrolled William as a day student at Glasgow Academy. In the summer of 1871, when he was fifteen, he developed a severe case of typhoid fever and was sent to the West Highlands to recover. There he formed a friendship with Seumas Macleod, an elderly fisherman whose tales and beliefs found their way into the stories and poems he began publishing in the 1890s as the work of another Macleod whose first name, Fiona, was an abbreviation of Fionnaghal, the Gaelic equivalent of Flora. In the fall of 1871, at age sixteen, he entered Glasgow University. An eager and perceptive student, he excelled in English literature, which he studied under Professor John Nichol who became a close friend.

His most memorable summer was his eighteenth. Wandering near the Gare Loch close to Ardentinnny, he encountered and joined a band of gypsies. Without explaining his absence or communicating his whereabouts, he roamed with them for weeks. With his light brown hair, he became their "sun-brother," and he absorbed much of their bird-lore and wood-lore and the beliefs they derived from the patterns of the stars and the winds. This magical experience, free and unconventional, informed his later publications, especially *Children of Tomorrow* and *The Gypsy Christ*. Understandably his parents were distressed upon learning their son had "gone with gypsies." When they located him, he relented and returned in the fall of 1872 to his classes at Glasgow University. Worried about his dreaming nature and interest in literature, his father at the close of the 1872–1873 academic year placed him in the Glasgow law office of Messrs. Maclure and Hanney with the hope he might take to the legal profession. Though he left the University after two years, he was found "worthy of special commendation" at the end of his second year. He had taken full advantage of the University's library, and during his two years as a legal apprentice he continued to "read omnivorously," according to Elizabeth, in "literature, philosophy, poetry, mysticism, occultism, magic, mythology, folklore." He developed "a sense of brotherhood with psychics and seers of other lands and days. His reading precipitated a radical shift from the Presbyterian faith in which

he was raised toward a belief in the unity of the truths underlying all religions.

Sharp's second meeting with Elizabeth took place in August 1875 when the London Sharps invited him to spend a week with them at Dunoon on the Clyde where they were on holiday. Of that occasion, Elizabeth wrote,

I remember vividly the impression he made on me when I saw the tall, thin figure pass through our garden gateway at sunset — he had come down by the evening steamer from Glasgow — and stride swiftly up the path. He was six feet one inch in height, very thin, with slightly sloping shoulders. He was good looking, with a fair complexion and high coloring; gray-blue eyes, brown hair closely cut, a sensitive mouth, and a winning smile. He looked delicate but full of vitality. He spoke very rapidly, and when excited his words seemed to tumble one over the other so that it was not always easy to understand him (*Memoir*, 17).

After a month in the West, Elizabeth and her sister visited the Glasgow Sharps in September, and before the end of the month, as Elizabeth recalled, she and William, both twenty years old and first cousins, "were secretly plighted to one another." They managed to spend a day together secretly in Edinburgh's Dean Cemetery where William confided "his true ambition lay not in being a scientific man, but a poet, that his desire was to write about Mother Nature and her inner mysteries." As Elizabeth recalled, "We talked and talked — about his ambitions, his beliefs and visions, our hopeless prospects, the coming lonely months, my studies — and parted in deep dejection," as they had no hope of seeing each other again until the next fall.

After Elizabeth returned to London, she received some of her fiancé's early poems, among them "In Dean Cemetery," a "pantheistic dream in fifty-seven stanzas" commemorating their day together. As the year proceeded, she received many more poems. In her *Memoir*, Elizabeth explained "why he chose such serious types of poems to dedicate to the girl to whom he was engaged." She was "the first friend he had found who to some extent understood him, understood the inner hidden side of his nature, sympathized with and believed in his visions, dreams, and aims." That sentence explains not only Sharp's initial attraction to Elizabeth, but also the foundation of their marriage which occurred several years later and lasted until Sharp died in 1905 at the age of fifty-five.

In August 1876, a year later, the two Sharp families rented houses next to each other in Dunoon which enabled Elizabeth and William to spend many happy days "rambling over the hills, boating and sailing on the lochs," talking over their very vague prospects, and reading and discussing his poems. The families' holiday was brought to an abrupt and unhappy end on August 20 by the untimely death of William's father, an event that was a great shock to William who soon suffered a physical breakdown that raised the danger of consumption. Hoping a complete change of environment might improve his health and spirits, his family arranged passage for him on a ship bound for Australia. He relished the experiences of the voyage and the new country, where he stayed with family friends and spent many days exploring Gippsland and the desert region of New South Wales. He decided to settle in Australia and began looking for suitable work. When that search failed, he changed course and booked passage on the *Loch Tay* which reached London in June 1877.

Sharp stayed for a time with Elizabeth and her parents at their London house on Inverness Terrace just north of Bayswater Road. This was his first experience of the city that would become his home. Elizabeth introduced him to her friends, among them Adelaide Elder and Mona Alison, who later married the Scottish Laird, Henryson Caird of Casseneary. Elizabeth's mother enlisted the help and influence of her friends to find work for Sharp, but there was no immediate success. At summer's end, he returned to Scotland, joining his mother at Moffat where she had taken a house, and he devoted himself through a lonely fall and winter to writing. Several poems composed during these months appeared in his first volume of poetry, *The Human Inheritance*, in 1882.

Less than a year after returning from Australia, in the spring of 1878 when he was twenty-two, Sharp returned to London and began work at the London branch of the Melbourne Bank, a position secured for him by Alexander Elder, the father of Adelaide. He rented a room at 19 Albert's Street near Regent's Park and spent weekends with Elizabeth and her family at 72 Inverness Terrace, but their engagement remained secret. Despite an earlier decision to refrain from publishing "until he could do it properly," Sharp became increasingly anxious to appear in print. He submitted a poem, "A Nocturne to Chopin," to *Good Words*. It was accepted and published in July 1878. Late that summer, Elizabeth

convinced him to end the secrecy, which he thoroughly enjoyed, and tell her mother they were engaged. When she realized her daughter was determined, she reluctantly approved, but warned others would disapprove because they were first cousins. “From that moment,” Elizabeth said, her mother “treated her nephew as her son.”

On the first of September 1879, William, with an introduction from Sir Noel Paton, the Scottish Pre-Raphaelite painter and a friend of the family, appeared at the door of the famous poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Rossetti welcomed the handsome and enthusiastic young writer who became a frequent guest at his home, 16 Cheyne Walk. Sharp soon gained acceptance into the circle of admiring friends who lightened the darkness of Rossetti’s final years. He came to know Algernon Swinburne, Theodore Watts (later Watts-Dunton), Hall



Fig. 1 Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1850 at age twenty-two. A portrait by William Holman Hunt (c. 1883), Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:William\\_Holman\\_Hunt\\_-\\_Portrait\\_of\\_Dante\\_Gabriel\\_Rossetti\\_at\\_22\\_years\\_of\\_Age\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:William_Holman_Hunt_-_Portrait_of_Dante_Gabriel_Rossetti_at_22_years_of_Age_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg), Public Domain.



Caine (another Rossetti acolyte), Robert Francillon, Julian Hawthorne, Rossetti's brother and sister, William Michael and Christina, and Philip Marston, a promising young poet who was blind and soon became Sharp's close friend.



Fig. 2 An albumen print of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Taken by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) (1863), Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dante\\_Gabriel\\_Rossetti\\_001.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dante_Gabriel_Rossetti_001.jpg), Public Domain.

In the summer of 1880, Mrs. George Lillie Craik, author of *John Halifax, Gentleman* and Philip Marston's godmother, entertained Sharp and Marston several times at her home, The Corner House, south of London in Shortlands, Kent. During one of those visits Sharp caught a severe cold after being drenched in a thunderstorm. Still ill, he went to Port Maddock in North Wales to visit Elizabeth and her mother who had rented a holiday cottage. There his cold descended into rheumatic fever which forced him to stay an entire month while Elizabeth and her mother nursed him back to health. The illness lasted through the fall and permanently damaged his heart. Despite her worry that Sharp — "weak and delicate" — would not take care of himself, Elizabeth accompanied her mother to Italy for the winter months. By mid-December Sharp was



well enough to describe in a letter to Elizabeth a night he spent at the Oasis Club in Covent Garden with Francillon, Julian Hawthorne, and many other artists.

In 1881 Sharp published several articles in *Modern Thought* and increased his contacts with the Rossetti circle. One consequence of his deeper literary involvement was an abrupt end to his banking career. In late August, the Principal of the City of Melbourne Bank offered him the alternative of employment in a remote branch in Australia or resignation. Sharp chose the latter and went to Scotland for two months to visit relatives and friends, among them William Bell Scott and Sir Noel Paton. When he returned to London he spent several weeks looking for another position and finally obtained a post with the Fine Arts Society's Gallery in Bond Street. The Society had decided to establish a section on German and English engravings and hired Sharp, through the good offices of Mrs. Craik, to study the subject for six months and then become the section's director. Shortly after he began work at the Gallery, the society reversed course and withdrew from the project. At year's end, Sharp was again out of work.

His trip to Australia, his persistent ill-health, his relationship with the woman who would become his wife, his determination to become a serious writer, and his lack of interest in banking or any other business or profession defined Sharp's life into his mid-twenties. His prospects were dim at the close of 1881. But another factor turned the tide: the friends he made as a bright and handsome young Scotsman new on the London scene. Some came through Elizabeth, a young girl of means with a fine mind and a sound education. She had a group of similarly talented and knowledgeable friends who readily accepted Sharp into their circle, supported his ambitions, and encouraged his development. Others came through Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who in his final years fostered Sharp's development as a poet, confided in him through long opium-fueled nights, and welcomed him into his circle of accomplished and respected painters, poets, and editors. They smoothed Sharp's entry into the literary life of London where he would flourish and attain a position of prominence during the 1880s.

