

William Sharp and "Fiona Macleod"

A Life



WILLIAM F. HALLORAN



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Cover image: William Strang, William Sharp (c. 1897), etching, printed by David Strang. Photograph by William F. Halloran of author's copy (2019).

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Chapter Two

1882–1884

In February 1882 Rossetti became ill and depressed, convinced he was near death. Hall Caine, his main caretaker, rented a house on the seacoast near Birchington in Kent in the hope that living near the sea away from the fogs and smoke of London would improve his health and spirits. He invited William Sharp and Theodore Watts for a weekend to help him break through Rossetti's gloom. In a February 13 letter to Elizabeth from Birchington, Sharp described an outing with Rossetti the previous day: "Oh, the larks yesterday! It was as warm as June, and Rossetti and Caine and I went out, and I lay in the grass basking in the sun, looking down on the shining sea, and hearing these heavenly incarnate little joys sending thrills of sweetness, and vague pain through all my being." Years later he expanded on the experience as one of his most cherished memories:

It had been a lovely day. Rossetti asked me to go out with him for a stroll on the cliff; and though he leaned heavily and dragged his limbs wearily as if in pain, he grew more cheerful as the sunlight warmed him. The sky was a cloudless blue and the singing of at least a score of larks was wonderful to listen to. Everywhere Spring odours prevailed.... At first, I thought Rossetti was indifferent, but this mood gave way. He let go my arm and stood staring seaward silently, then, still in a low, tired voice, but with a new tone, he murmured, "It is beautiful — the world and life itself. I am glad I have lived." Insensibly thereafter the dejection lifted from off his spirit. And for the rest of that day and that evening he was noticeably less despondent (*Memoir*, 59–60).

Less than two months later, on April 9, Rossetti died. Sharp described his feelings to Elizabeth on the night before he went to Birchington for the funeral:

He had weaknesses and frailties within the last six or eight months owing to his illness, but to myself he was ever patient and true and affectionate. A grand heart and soul, a true friend, a great artist, a great poet. I shall not meet with such another. He loved me, I know — and believed and hoped great things of me, and within the last few days I have learned how generously and how urgently, he impressed this upon others. [...] I can hardly imagine London without him.

Rossetti was more than a friend and mentor. Sharp's father rejected his son's artistic bent and died without reconciliation. Rossetti was the first of many who filled that void.

In the years before his death, Rossetti drew first Caine and then Sharp into his circle and depended on them for support and companionship. Soon after he died, both men decided to write a book about the great man. When Caine learned in July that Sharp was preparing a book, he complained bitterly. Since Sharp's book would cut into the sale of his book, he had decided to abandon it. Sharp's letters to Caine were not available to Elizabeth for her *Memoir*, and she mentioned him only twice. Their competing books on Rossetti might well have permanently damaged their relationship. A trove of Sharp letters to Caine preserved in the Manx Museum on the Isle of Man shows, on the contrary, they remained close friends for many years. After a brief period of strain in the summer of 1882, Sharp cleared the air in a letter that assured Caine his book would not be a biography, but "a Study of the Poet-Artist — for in deference to your own work I determined to make the biographical portion consist of only about ten pages or so. [...] I fail to see where the two will clash." Mollified by this explanation, Caine went ahead with his book — *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* — which was published by Elliot Stock in September. Sharp's response to Caine preserved their friendship.

During July, William Michael Rossetti worked with Sharp on the dating and location of his brother's paintings. With that information in hand by early August, Sharp joined his mother and sisters in a rented cottage in western Scotland where he wrote the main body of the book. He finished it after returning to London, and Macmillan published *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and A Study* in December. The book's favorable reception provided a significant boost to Sharp's literary career. While his descriptions and analyses of Rossetti's paintings, poetry, and prose continue to be of some interest, the book's main lasting value is its



Fig. 3 Hall Caine, *The Manxman*, as caricatured in *Vanity Fair*. John Bernard Partridge (1896), Wikimedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hall_Caine_Vanity_Fair_2_July_1896.jpg, Public Domain.

Appendix, a detailed listing of the dates, subjects, and then current owners of Rossetti's paintings.

Sharp's first book of poems — *The Human Inheritance; The New Hope; Motherhood* — was published by Elliot Stock in 1882. He considered this book, according to Elizabeth, the beginning of the "true work of his life." As the title indicates, it consists of three long poems. "The Human Inheritance" has four sections which depict, in turn, childhood, youth, manhood/womanhood, and old age. "The New Hope" forecasts a spiritual regeneration of the world; and "Motherhood" attempts to show "by depicting the experience of giving birth" the commonality of experience among all living creatures. Sharp considered that poem, which Rossetti had praised, a major accomplishment. When Elizabeth was in Italy in 1880, she read parts of "Motherhood" to Eugene Lee-Hamilton, an aspiring poet who lived near Florence with his mother and sister, Violet Paget, who was gaining a reputation in England for her publications under the pseudonym Vernon Lee. They thought the

poem's depiction of "giving birth" was not a fit subject for poetry. In response Sharp wrote a long letter to Lee-Hamilton and another to Paget in March 1881 justifying his effort to show in the poem that women shared with animals many experiences and feelings. The poem seems not to have produced much consternation when it appeared in the 1882 volume, perhaps because the entire volume evoked minimal notice and sank quietly out of sight. The care with which Sharp wrote and defended "Motherhood," however, signaled his life-long fascination with the inner lives of women. This poem was his first effort to penetrate and portray publicly the consciousness of a woman, a manner of thinking and feeling he felt deep within himself that culminated in 1892 in his creation of and identification with Fiona Macleod.

During 1882 Sharp earned small amounts for poems that appeared in the *Athenaeum*, the *Portfolio*, the *Academy*, the *Art Journal*, and, in America, *Harper's Magazine*. Toward the end of the year, he was down to his last penny. A forty-pound check from *Harper's* provided relief; then out of the blue a two-hundred-pound check arrived from an unknown friend of his grandfather who had heard from Sir Noel Paton that he was "inclined to the study of literature and art." Sharp was to use the money "to pursue his artistic studies" in Italy. With this windfall he left for Italy at the end of February 1883 and spent five months studying paintings by the major figures of the Italian Renaissance. He went first to Florence where he stayed with Elizabeth's aunt in her villa on the outskirts of the city, then to Venice where he met Ouida and William Dean Howells and formed a close friendship with John Addington Symonds, then to Sienna, and then to Rome before returning to Florence. He described much of what he saw in a series of lengthy letters to Elizabeth who had seen many of the paintings and frescoes during her trip to Italy in 1881. He studied the works carefully and shared his opinions of their relative merits. His association with Rossetti and others of the Pre-Raphaelite movement introduced him to many artists who preceded Raphael. In Italy he made direct contact with their paintings, and that experience provided a solid basis for the art criticism that occupied his time and attention in the years that followed.

When he returned to London, he wrote a series of articles for the *Glasgow Herald* on Etrurian cities. In August, he was in Scotland with his mother and sisters in a rented house on the Clyde. While there, he



Fig. 4 Photograph of William Sharp taken by an unknown photographer in Rome in 1883. Reproduced from *William Sharp: A Memoir*, compiled by Elizabeth Sharp (London: William Heinemann, 1910).

went over to Arran to visit Sir Noel Paton; from there he went on to Oban, sailed to Mull, and crossed the island to the small island of Iona which became a place of pilgrimage for him and figured prominently in his writings as Fiona Macleod. In September, the *Glasgow Herald*, on the strength of his Italian articles, invited him to become its London-based art critic, a post he held for many years before turning it over to Elizabeth.

On his way to Scotland in early August, he lost a large portmanteau which “in addition to new clothes got in London and valuable souvenirs and presents from Italy, contained all my MSS., both prose & verse, all my Memoranda (many of them essential to work in hand), all my Notes taken in Italy, my private papers and letters, some proofs, three partly written articles (two of them much overdue), my most valued books — and indeed my whole literary stock-in-trade pro-tem.” After retracing his steps in cold, wet weather, trying to find the missing case, he had no choice but to accept its loss. He wrote to Hall Caine in August 1883:

As a literary worker yourself you will understand what a "fister" this is to a young writer. I must take this buffet of Fate, however, without undue wincing — and tackle to again all the more earnestly for the severe loss and disappointment experienced. There's no use crying over spilt milk.

The portmanteau was found about a month after its loss and returned in a wet and damaged condition, but many of the poems and essays were recoverable, and some were published in *Good Words*, the *Fortnightly Review*, *Cassell's Magazine*, and the *Literary World*.

After returning to London from Scotland in September, Sharp contacted a cold that progressed into a second bout of rheumatic fever, further damaging his heart. His sister Mary came from Edinburgh to join Elizabeth in nursing him back to health. By November he was able to tell Caine:

I am greatly better, so much so that I find it difficult to credit the doctor's doleful prognostications: I *feel* I must take care, but beyond that I have no immediate cause for alarm. The worst of it is that I am one day in exuberant health and the next very much the reverse. The doctors agree that it is valvular disease of the heart, a treacherous form thereof still further complicated by a hereditary bias.

He felt well enough to make light of the illness: "a fellow must 'kick' someday — and I would as soon do so 'per the heart' as, like no small number of my *forbears* in Scotland, from delirium tremens, sheep-stealing (in hanging days), and general disreputableness." Still, there was a problem: "Even if pecuniarily able, I am forbidden to marry for a year to come — and though waiting is hard now for us both, it is better even for my fiancée that nothing should be done which might result in what would be such a grief to her." Even if he had the requisite money, marriage would put too great a strain on his heart.

During the early part of 1884, Sharp prepared his second book of poems, *Earth's Voices*, which was published by Elliott Stock in June. Perhaps because he had become friends with more important literary figures, it was more widely noted than the earlier volume. He received a letter of praise from Walter Pater, whose judgment might have been tinged by the volume's dedication to him, and another from Christina Rossetti who liked several poems, especially those praising her brother. In a 1906 *Century* article, Sharp's friend Ernest Rhys praised some of the poems in *Earth's Voices*: "His writings betrayed a constant quest

after those hardly realizable regions of thought and those keener lyric emotions, which, since Shelley wrote and Rossetti wrote and painted, have so often occupied the interpreters of the vision and spectacle of nature." Rhys found in one of the volume's poems, "A Record," "unmistakable germs" of "some of the supernatural ideas that afterward received a much more vital expression in the works of Fiona Macleod."

Sharp spent most of March and April in a Dover house loaned to him by Mrs. Craik who understood both his precarious finances and his need to recuperate away from the fogs of London. His friend and fellow poet Philip Marston (1850–1887), Mrs. Craik's godson who was partially blinded at the age of three, spent a week with him in April. Following Marston's death in 1887, Sharp published an edition of his poem, *For a Song's Sake*, in Walter Scott's Canterbury Series. In a "Memorial Introduction," he described in glowing terms the walks they took together near Dover in 1884 and Marston's excited response to the warm sea air and sounds he never heard in London. Sharp crossed to France in early May for the first of many visits to Paris as an art critic for the *Glasgow Herald*. He wrote excitedly to Elizabeth about the writers, painters, and other luminaries he was meeting, among them Paul Bourget, Alphonse Daudet, Emile Zola, Frederic Mistral, Adolphe Bouguereau, Fernand Cormon, Puvis de Chavannes, Jules Breton, and, curiously, Madame Blavatsky.

After returning from Paris, Sharp suffered another relapse that led him to ask Hall Caine on Sunday, June 15, 1884, if he could stay with him the following night. He was vacating his cold and damp rented rooms in Thorngate Road, and he had to leave them the next day. He could not stay with Elizabeth's family in Inverness Terrace until Tuesday. The letter shows how close Sharp and Caine were in this period and supplies a revealing insight into the malady Sharp could not escape:

I have had, this afternoon, a narrow escape from rheumatic fever & must leave here at once. I think I have fought it down, but I must not risk such another chance. I have been crouching over a large fire and with my medicine have got the better of the cursed complaint. [...] If in any way inconvenient, a postcard will do if you only say all right on it. Wd. come in the evening — but must go west early in the day from here on an urgent matter. Can't say how thankful I am to have escaped this sharp and sudden attack, & there's no saying what a second bout would do.

Excuse a hideous scrawl, but my hands are so chilled and pained I can hardly hold the pen — and have to write at a distance.

Caine replied at once. Sharp should come the next day to a house Caine rented in Hampstead where he would be well cared for by two ladies. According to Caine's biographer, Sharp spent that Monday night at Caine's house on Worsley Road, Hampstead — where he was looked after by Caine's fifteen-year-old mistress, Mary Chandler, and her maid. (*Hall Caine: Portrait of a Victorian Romancer*, 171.)

Caine had rented the Hampstead house for Mary Chandler because he did not want his family or others to know about his relationship with a very young girl who was pregnant with his child. Sharp was one of only a few close friends who knew about the arrangement. In an August 26th letter from Scotland, he asked Caine

Is the hour of paternity drawing nigh? I wonder if MacColl would accept for the *Athenaeum* a sonnet on "Caine's Firstborn"? I must try. If a boy, please call it "Abel," or in case this would give rise to too many poor jokes, what do you say to "Tubal." Most people would simply think you had called him after "that fellow, you know, in one of George Eliot's poems"!

As it turned out, a baby boy was born on August 15th and named neither Abel nor Tubal, after the Tubal-Cain in *Genesis*, but Ralph after Ralph Hall, Caine's grandfather. The main purpose of the August 26th letter was to let Caine know about an upcoming change in his own circumstances:

Just a line, my dear Caine, in the midst of pressure from urgent work and accumulated correspondence, to let you know (what I am sure you will be glad to hear for my sake) that at last my long engagement is drawing to a close, and that Lillie and I are to be married on All Saints Day — just about two months from date. What we have got to marry on, Heaven knows — for I don't: yet I hope a plunge in the dark will not in this instance prove disastrous. It is not a plunge in the dark as regards love and friendship — and that is the main thing.

The year of waiting prescribed by his doctor was up, and Elizabeth's parents were finally convinced her marriage to her first cousin was inevitable even though the newly married couple's financial circumstances remained uncertain. Sharp had proved himself a reliable

and constant young man; indeed, his frequent presence at 72 Inverness Terrace, Bayswater, had made him part of Elizabeth's family.

On October 31st, after a nine-year courtship, Elizabeth and William were married at Christ Church, Lancaster Gate, London. They rented a flat at 46 Talgarth Road in West Kensington which was furnished by their families. They continued to make their way as writers and expanded their circle of literary and artistic friends. In her *Memoir*, Elizabeth included a list of luminaries whose "literary households" welcomed the newly married couple. Among the many were Walter Pater, Robert Browning, Mr. and Mrs. Ford Madox Ford, Mr. and Mrs. William Morris, Mr. and Mrs. William Rossetti, Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Wilde, and Sir Frederick Leighton, the painter whose beautiful home and studio just off the Kensington High Street is now open to the public. At the close of 1884, both Sharps embarked on a six-year period of editing and reviewing that placed them near the center of London's literary elite. Still, William continued to write poetry and harbored a desire to gain attention and praise for his imaginative writing in poetry and prose.

