

# William Sharp and "Fiona Macleod"

A Life



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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 Four

1887–1888

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In the spring of 1887, Sharp succeeded his friend Eric Robertson as editor of the “Literary Chair” in the *Young Folk’s Paper*, a widely circulated weekly paper for boys. This appointment brought “steady work” and “a reliable income, a condition of security hitherto unknown to us, which proved an excellent tonic to the delicate editor” (*Memoir*, 127–128). Assisted by Elizabeth, Sharp read evaluated, and responded to “efforts in prose and verse of the ‘young folk’ who wished to exercise their budding literary talents.” The best pieces appeared in the paper “prefaced by an article of criticism and instruction written by their editor and critic.”

Though he remained weak, Sharp continued to work and travel. After resting again for a time at the Caird’s country house in Hampshire, he and Elizabeth went to Paris in early May to review the Salons for the *Glasgow Herald*. On April 28, before leaving for Paris, he asked Ford Madox Brown, who was in Manchester painting frescoes in the new Town Hall, if it would be convenient for him to stay with him on May 16 or 17 when he planned to be in Manchester for the Royal Jubilee Exhibition celebrating the fiftieth year of Queen Victoria’s reign. He wanted to examine a painting in the Exhibition for a review in the *Glasgow Herald*. In a January 1890 letter to Brown, he recalled and praised a framed etching of Brown’s “Entombment” he had seen in the Exhibition. In his April 1887 letter to Brown, he said he had finished a “memoir of poor Philip Marston to precede his forthcoming volume of stories.” That volume, which Sharp called *For a Song’s Sake and other Stories*, was published by the Walter Scott firm in May 1887. Brown had known Philip and was close to the Marston family. In a July letter to

Louise Chandler Moulton, another friend of the Marston's, Sharp said the volume was selling well "almost solely on a/c" of his introductory memoir. The stories have not taken well, he continued, but the reviews were flattering; in fact, one said Philip "was at least fortunate in death to have such a biographer."

Along with his articles and editorial work on the *Young Folk's Paper* and for the Walter Scott firm, Sharp's main endeavor in 1887 was his monograph on Shelley for Scott's Great Writers Series. He continued to correspond with Shelley experts, chief among them Edward Dowden, and devoted considerable effort to the book, which was published on the first of October. It contained instead of a dedication a "special acknowledgment of indebtedness" to Dowden "whose two comprehensive volumes on Shelley form the completest and most reliable record extant, and at the same time constitute the worthiest monument wherewith the poet's memory has yet been honored." Elizabeth's description of his choice of Shelley for his first Great Writers book is telling. Shelley was the inspiring genius of his youth, she wrote, and "He was in sympathy with much of Shelley's thought: with his hatred of rigid conventionality, of the tyranny of social laws, with his antagonism to existing marriage and divorce laws, with his belief in the sanctity of passion when called forth by high and true emotion" (*Memoir*, 131). A letter Sharp wrote to a Mr. Clarke in December 1887 demonstrates the strength of his convictions regarding women's rights. He called the views of women in a poem Clarke sent him for comment "absolute lies and absurdities." In a second letter to Clarke, he affirmed the influence of Shelley: "instead of my reverence for true womanhood falling off, it is yearly growing more strengthened, till now with Shelley it is one of my cardinal faiths — the equality of the sexes." Those were the sentiments of Mona Caird and Elizabeth herself. By mentioning them here in the context of the Shelley biography, she set the stage for the events that changed the course of their lives in the following decade.

In August 1887 Sharp received a letter from Hall Caine expressing his concern about the state of Sharp's health. Sharp's response, from North Queensferry in Fife on September first, is a frank and detailed account of the heart problem that plagued him:

I think you are the only one of my friends who has recognised what a secret enemy my ill-health is. I look so robust, and (often at a great effort)

try to be cheerful and sanguine that many think I have little to complain of. You, however, realise something of what I have really to endure. There are perhaps few people who know what “angina pectoris” really is, though “snake in the breast” gives them some idea it is not pleasant. If from hereditary taint it sometimes attacks the most robust natures, & is then deadliest. The agony of it is sometimes too great for conscious endurance, and over one’s head always hangs the shadow of sudden death. The doctor has warned me it may come at any moment; I may stoop too suddenly, may fall, may receive startling news — anything of the kind may bring about instant death. This, added to the precariousness of the literary life and its incessant hard work, gives me many a dark hour. Sometimes I awake at night with the dull gripping pain which is ominous of attack, and as I lie by my sleeping wife I do not know if I shall ever see the morning’s light. Then I think of the hard struggle of life, and what my death would mean to my wife, and — well, I needn’t dilate on the subject.

He continued, revealing more about his approach to life and death:

But partly because it is my natural bias and in great part because I have trained myself to this kind of self-control, I betray nothing of all this to anyone. The other day a friend remarked to my wife that I was looking so well and was so cheerful & confident that I must surely be exceptionally well — and yet this was shortly after an attack so violent and dreadful that it was some time before I came round. If, however, I did not keep this “brave front” before the world, I would give way to the shadow that dogs me always. I never allow it to overcome me: if it be too appellant, I face it and as it were frown it down. I have no fear of death, which the soul in me knows to be but the gate of life. The world is so very beautiful, and full of such transcendent hints of the divine, that death should be as welcome to all as the first breath of summer to the hillslopes and meadows. Yet oh I do cling to life too! There is so much I want to do, so many dreams which I would fain should not all pass oblivion-ward unaccomplished.

Finally, he confirmed the singularity of his relationship with Caine: “You are the only one of my friends to whom I have written this — but you drew it from me by your brotherly sympathy. And now having read my words destroy and forget them.” Since Caine ignored that direction, we have in this newly discovered letter Sharp’s deepest thoughts powerfully expressed about life and death. Reading the letter, we can feel the pain that often gripped him and recognize the burden of knowing each day might be his last.

Improved finances enabled the Sharps to move, at the close of 1887, from a flat on Talgarth Road in West Kensington to a larger house in South Hampstead where "the air was purer and access to green fields easier." In early November, in good health and spirits, Sharp told Caine he had taken "a most delightful house" in Goldhurst Terrace, South Hampstead, and planned to move in at the end of December. He suggested Caine do the same as the neighborhood was "well sheltered from fog & east wind," healthy and not inconvenient. It would be grand to have Caine as a near neighbor. Later in the month, before the move, ill-health struck again, and Elizabeth took her husband to the Isle of Wight to recover from "inflammation of the lungs." After returning in early January, they settled into the South Hampstead house which had, according to Elizabeth, a sunny study on the ground floor so the "invalid" would not have to deal with stairs. Since its address, 17a Goldhurst Terrace, was frequently confused with 17 Goldhurst Terrace, the house in front facing the street, it needed a name, and the Sharps settled on "Wescam," a name made up of the initials the two Sharps and Mona Caird who lived near by. They began holding Sunday evening "at homes" which were attended by "all those with whom we were in sympathy," and the list of guests Elizabeth provided in the *Memoir* (140–141) includes many well-known writers and editors. As winter turned to spring Sharp's health held in the new location. His editorial work and Elizabeth's well-placed friends and her charm as a hostess solidified their position near the center of London's literary life.

Mona Allison Caird and her husband James Alexander Henryson Caird had a much larger house a few blocks north on Arkwrite Road where the Sharps were frequently entertained and met many of Mona's well-placed friends, including Thomas Hardy. She was a formidable figure who was gaining a reputation, praised by many and denigrated by more, as an advocate for women's rights, especially greater equality in marriage. The American women's rights activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton visited Mona Caird in February 1888 and recalled in 1898: "Mrs. Caird was a very graceful, pleasing woman, and so gentle in manner and appearance that no one would deem her capable of hurling such thunderbolts at the long-suffering Saxon people" (*Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences 1815–1897*). The Sharps shared Mona's views on marriage and women's rights, and she invariably came to their rescue when they needed help.



Fig. 6. Alice Mona (Alison) Caird (1854–1922) Engraving based on a photograph by H. S. Mendelssohn Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mona\\_Caird](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mona_Caird)

Sharp's improved health enabled greater productivity. He selected poems and wrote prefaces for an anthology of odes and a book of American sonnets, both published in Scott's Canterbury Series, of which he was General Editor. He contributed reviews and critical articles to the *Academy*, the *Athenaeum*, and the *Literary World*. In April, he reviewed a Paris Salon for the *Glasgow Herald* and described it to Frederick Shields as "the resort of the evil rather than of the good spirits of art." George Meredith invited the Sharp's to spend Whitsuntide with him in Surrey, and Sharp described their visit in a May 22 letter to Richard Le Gallienne: "I have just returned from my delightful visit to the loveliest part of the loveliest county in Southern England — and with glorious weather & such a host as George Meredith I need not say that I have enjoyed the last few days immensely." From Box Hill, the Sharps walked over to Dorking to see their friend Grant Allen who was entertaining Joseph Cotton who edited the *Academy*. Sharp told Cotton he was pleased by Le Gallienne's *Academy* review of his edition of Philip Marston's poetry. Meredith and Sharp had long conversations during the day and,

Elizabeth recalled, Meredith read from his novels at night: "The reader's enjoyment seemed as great as that of his audience, and it interested me to hear how closely his methods of conversation resembled, in wittiness and brilliance, those of the characters in his novels" (*Memoir*, 145). On May 23, Sharp wrote to Theodore Watts: "What a charming fellow G. M. is — is he not? The more I see of him, the more I admire and like him."

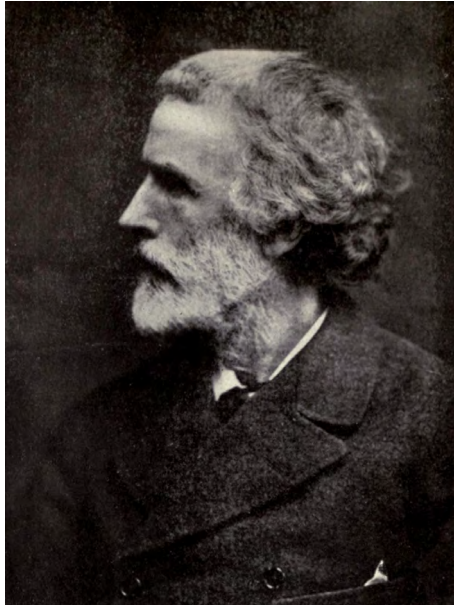


Fig. 7 George Meredith in *Robert Louis Stevenson: A Bookman Extra Number 1913* (London: Hodder & Stoughton), p. 138, Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George\\_Meredith%27s\\_Portrait.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:George_Meredith%27s_Portrait.jpg), Public Domain.

Sharp also told Watts on the 23<sup>rd</sup> that he would send him a copy of his third book of poetry — *Romantic Ballads and Poems of Phantasy* — which had just been published by Walter Scott. It was a "maturer work," and he hoped Watts would find it an improvement over his first two volumes of poetry.

In substance, it is imaginative in the truest sense — as I do not hesitate to say. It honestly seems to me that with all its demerits there is stuff in it of the purely imaginative kind such as you will not easily find in the work of other contemporary minor poets. Of course, I shall be disappointed if no one likes it, or thinks highly of it — but for the first time in my life I am indifferent to adverse criticism: for I feel well assured that the little



booklet is sterling — and with this assured confidence a bad reception can at the worst be but unfortunate and disagreeable.

Having described the main qualities of the book, Sharp said he was not urging Watts to review it (in the *Athenaeum* where he was a poetry critic), but the letter spells out what he hoped Watts would say should he decide to do so.

Sharp intended to print only a hundred copies. Given the “unexpected and gratifying anticipatory demand,” he agreed to a “larger edition” most of which was “already engaged.” The high demand might encourage Watts to write or solicit a review. In the “Dedicatory Introduction” to the volume Sharp expressed his “earnest conviction” that “a Romantic revival [is] imminent in our poetic literature, a true awakening of genuine romantic sentiment.” He dedicated the volume to his wife who has “a sterling appreciation of imaginative literature.” She shared with him “the true Celtic passion for the weird and supernatural, and for vividly romantic sentiment and action.” In predicting a turn away from realism and formalism, Sharp hoped the volume would inspire a third romantic movement in the century’s poetry, the first begun by Wordsworth and Keats and the second by Rossetti and William Morris. Several poems in the volume are a decided improvement over those published earlier, but its main interest is the “Introduction” which forecasts the poetry Sharp would write as Fiona Macleod. The volume did not have the broad impact Sharp anticipated or bring him the recognition he sought.

As 1888 proceeded, Sharp developed a close friendship with Richard Le Gallienne, an aspiring poet who lived in Liverpool and would move to London in 1891 to write for *The Star*. On May 19, he thanked Le Gallienne for his friendly and sympathetic *Academy* review of his Marston book. Three days later he asked Le Gallienne to let him know when he would be in London as he looked forward to the pleasure of meeting him. When Le Gallienne came to London in early June, Sharp sent him a special invitation: “If you have not made any other arrangement could you come here on Sunday evening next? We don’t ‘dress’ on Sunday evenings, as friends sometimes drop in then promiscuously: and indeed on Sunday next we are, I believe, to have ‘high tea’ in place of dinner, for the sake of domestic convenience of some kind.” He asked Le Gallienne to come at six so they could have a private “hour’s chat” before the other guests arrived. He had sent Le Gallienne a copy of *Romantic Ballads* and

wanted to talk with him about the new Romantic movement its preface forecast. He sensed from reading Le Gallienne's poems that he might be a willing recruit for the new Romanticism and recognized his potential as a major actor in London's literary life. Sharp's interest in Le Gallienne and the attention he received when he moved to London were due in no small measure to the young man's carriage and physiognomy — indeed, his physical beauty.



Fig. 8 Richard Le Gallienne (1866–1947). Photograph by Arthur Ellis (1894).  
Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Richard\\_Le\\_Gallienne\\_by\\_Alfred\\_Ellis.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Richard_Le_Gallienne_by_Alfred_Ellis.jpg), Public Domain.

Twenty years after Sharp's death, in his *Romantic Nineties* (1926), Le Gallienne painted a vivid picture of one of his dearest friends:

When I reached London [from his native Liverpool], Sharp was already known as the biographer of Rossetti, the editor of an excellent anthology of sonnets, a popularizer of poetry. As editor of the famous "Canterbury" series, model of many such to follow, [and] something of a poet himself. [...] It was his personality that mattered most. He was probably the handsomest man in London, a large flamboyant "sun-god" sort of creature, with splendid, vital, curling gold hair and a pointed golden beard, the bluest of Northern eyes, and the complexion of a

girl. Laughing energy radiated from his robust frame, and he was all exuberance, enthusiasm, and infectious happiness, a veritable young Dionysus. [...] No one could know him without falling under the spell of his generous magnetic nature, and I was proud to count him among my dearest friends (111).

This description confirms that of Ernest Rhys in *Everyman Remembers* and differs radically from that in Sharp's 1887 letter to Hall Caine. In 1900 Le Gallienne dedicated his *Travels in England* to Sharp with affection and a brief but compelling piece of doggerel:

Will, you have travelled far and wide  
 On many a foreign country-side,  
 Tell me if you have fairer found  
 Than honeysuckled English ground;  
 Or did you, all the journey through,  
 Find such a friend, dear Will — as you?

In August 1888, the Sharps went to Scotland and stayed two and a half months visiting family and friends. In a mid-October birthday letter to Theodore Watts, Sharp said there had been only four “wholly wet days” during their visit. They had been on the west or east coast most of the time, but were also “for some weeks at a glorious spot in Strathspey, a lovely moorland farm a thousand feet above the sea, among the Grampians, in Morayshire” just northwest of Aberdeen. While in Scotland he finished his second book for Walter Scott's Great Writers Series, a study of the German poet Heinrich Heine (1897–1865). He was seldom ill during his annual visits to Scotland, and his letters were invariably cheerful. Even that to Caine from Fife in September describing bouts of illness concluded, “I have been in a strong mental and spiritual ferment lately, and I think I shall speedily write something I have long had in my mind.” The fresh air and familiar surroundings, augmented by relief from the pressures and tensions of London, were restorative.

When he returned to London in the fall, Sharp asked Andrew Chatto if his firm would like to publish a novel he was writing called *Sampriël*. He compared it to his *Romantic Ballads and Poems of Phantasy* as exemplifying the “new romantic movement.” Just as the poems represented a new flowering of Romanticism, the novel was “destined to revolutionize contemporary fiction.” Chatto accepted the offer and published it in 1889 as *Children of Tomorrow*. The love affair at the center of the romance

encompassed many of the ideas he encountered in writing the Shelley monograph for Walter Scott: Elizabeth tied the novel to the advanced views of love and marriage among their circle of friends:

A minority of dreamers and thinkers look beyond the strictly guarded, fettered conditions of married life, to a time, when man and woman, equally shall know that to stultify or slay the spiritual inner life of another human being, through the radical misunderstanding between alien temperaments inevitably tied to one another, is one of the greatest crimes against humanity. That the author [Sharp] knew how visionary for the immediate future were these ideas which we at that time so eagerly discussed with a little group of intimate sympathetic friends is shown by the prefatory lines in the book.

Forlorn the way, yet with strange gleams of gladness;  
 Sad beyond words the voices far behind,  
 Yet we, perplex with our diviner madness,  
 Must heed them not — the goal is still to find:  
 What though beset by pain and fear and sorrow,  
 We must not fail, we Children of To-morrow (*Memoir*, 146–147).

In the book one character says of another whose name, H. P. Siwäämill, is an anagram of William Sharp:

He sees, as do so many of us, that the old conventionalities, the old moralities even, are in process of rapid evolution, if not dissolution, and he perceives that now, as always heretofore, the future is foreshadowed in the present, the Tomorrow is foretold in certain vivid moments of Today (75).

This sentence appears on the book's title page attributed to none other than H. P. Siwäämill: "We, who live more intensely and suffer more acutely than others, are the Children of To-morrow, for in us the new forces of the future are already astir or even dominant." Sharp neatly inserted his advanced views of marriage into the novel; Siwäämill's opinions are his.

The renewed good health Sharp enjoyed during the summer in Scotland lasted through the fall, enabling him to continue the writing and editing that produced a reasonable income. Although these two years — 1887 and 1888 — were marked by bouts of ill health, they also included periods of work that brought improved financial circumstances and acceptance in London's literary establishment, but

neither *Romantic Ballads and Poems of Phantasy* nor *Children of Tomorrow* brought the accolades and acolytes Sharp sought. The new Romanticism proclaimed in the books was undercut by the quality of the products. Oscar Wilde made that point bitingly in reviewing *Romantic Ballads*: the “Introduction” announcing the new Romanticism was the “most interesting part of the volume,” but it heralded “a dawn that rose long ago,” and the poems were “quite inadequate.” The lack luster response to the two volumes convinced Sharp his work as an editor and critic hampered his effort to gain approval for his poetry and fiction. That belief led to his decision in 1890 to break from editing and launch a new life that culminated four years later in Fiona Macleod through whom he relaunched his “new Romanticism” pseudonymously under the umbrella of the Celtic revival.

