

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 Five

1889

The high point of 1889 for Sharp was his first visit, in late summer, to Canada and the United States. His interest in North America increased as he edited in early 1889 a collection of American sonnets for Scott's *Canterbury Poets*, and he came to view the States as a market for his work. In January, he offered the Century Publishing Company in New York the American rights to *Children of Tomorrow*, which was scheduled for British publication by Chatto & Windus in April. Also in January, he proposed two articles for publication in Philadelphia's *Lippincott's Magazine*. In the spring, he thanked Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the American man of letters and friend of Emily Dickinson, for a book of his poetry and said he would try to mention it favorably in print. He told Higginson, who planned to be in London shortly, that he would hold a copy of *American Sonnets* to present in person. In July, he sent copies to Frank Dempster Sherman and Clinton Scollard, both represented in the anthology. The enclosed letters praised their poems and expressed his hope to meet them in the fall when he planned "to pay a short visit to E. C. Stedman and one or two other friends in New York."

A New York banker and a poet, anthologist, and critic, Stedman was the most powerful literary figure in the United States. He exerted substantial influence over publishers and editors in New York, which had supplanted Boston as the literary center of the country. Sharp could not have chosen a better advocate in the American publishing world. His contacts with Stedman began in 1887 when, in an article on the younger British poets in the October issue of the *Century Magazine*, Stedman, relying on the Australian poems in Sharp's *The Human Inheritance*, placed him among the "Colonial" poets. Sharp knew the *Century* article was to become a supplementary chapter on young

British poets in the thirteenth (Jubilee) edition of Stedman's *Victorian Poets*, a groundbreaking study first published in 1875. When Sharp saw the *Century* article, he asked Stedman to correct the error: "Since you are so kindly going to do me the honour of mention in your forthcoming supplementary work, I should not like to be misrepresented." He was a Scotsman, not a "Colonial." Stedman replied warmly: "Something in your work made me suspect that, despite your Australian tone, etc., you did not hail (as we Yankees say) from the Colonies. So, you will find in my new vol. of *Victorian Poets* that I do not place you with the Colonial poets, but just preceding them, and I have a reference to your Rossetti volume" (*Memoir*, 129).

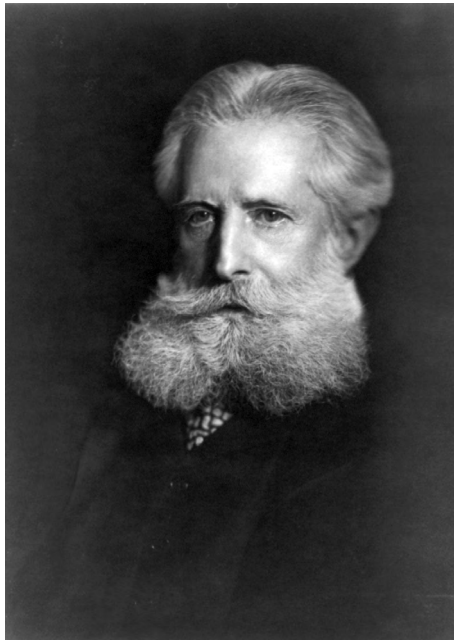


Fig. 9 An 1897 photograph of Edmund Clarence Stedman (1833–1908), an American poet, critic, essayist, banker, and scientist. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edmund_Clarence_Stedman_cph.3a44372.jpg, Public Domain.

This exchange "led to a life-long friendship" with Stedman who had "so genial a nature that, on becoming personally acquainted in New York two years later, the older poet declared he had adopted the younger man from across the seas as his 'English son'" (*Memoir*, 129). Elizabeth's

offhand comment contains an important insight. Sharp's father, who disapproved of his son's interest in literature and his desire to become a writer, died when Sharp was twenty-one. From that point forward, he sought out older literary men, worked to gain their friendship and approval, and depended on them for advancement, not an unusual pattern for young people making their way in the world. The list of such men in Sharp's life — Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Addington Symonds, Walter Pater, George Meredith, to name only a few of the most prominent — is unusually long, and the son/father trope pervades his correspondence with them. Of all these, his relationship with Stedman was the most consequential and long-lasting. After their initial meeting in 1889, when Sharp stayed with Stedman and his wife Laura in New York, Sharp's letters became increasingly familiar until Stedman began to function as both a father confessor and a trusted comrade. The first of the surviving Sharp letters, which is in the Pattee Library at Pennsylvania State University, is dated July 27, 1889, shortly before Sharp left for North America. Excepting the short quotation from an 1887 letter Elizabeth Sharp included in her *Memoir*, earlier correspondence between the two men has not surfaced. Sharp surely corresponded with Stedman in 1888 as he prepared his anthology of *American Sonnets*. His dedication of that volume to Stedman — "the Foremost American Critic" — was an expression of gratitude for Stedman's help in choosing the poets and poems for the volume.

In a letter dated February 16, 1889, Sharp told Theodore Watts he was staying for a fortnight or more with his friend Sir George Brisbane Scott Douglas (1856–1935), a Scottish Baronet and a poet and editor who lived in Springwood House, the family seat near Kelso in the Scottish Border Region. He was working hard and enjoying the "beautiful old place — near the junction of the Teviot and the Tweed, both of which flow through D.'s property. The Teviot is but 200 yards from my window, and some 300 yards away is the picturesque mound-set ruin of the ancient Roxburghe Castle. Last night I fell asleep to the hooting of the owls blended with the brawling undertone of the Teviot." The main purpose of the letter was to inform Watts, poetry editor of *The Athenaeum*, that the second edition of his *Romantic Ballads and Poems of Phantasy* containing "many important alterations" and a new poem would be published the following week. As described in the previous

chapter, when the first edition appeared the previous May, he sent Watts a copy and spelled out what he would like to see in a review of the book while telling Watts he did not expect him — given their friendship — to write the review. Now he told Watts he was "a little hurt" that Norman MacColl, the editor of the *Athenaeum*, had not printed a review. He had also been disturbed by some negative remarks Watts reportedly made, but he had chalked that up to "misapprehension" and refused to let it interfere with their friendship. Now he asked Watts, if not inconvenient or disagreeable, to send MacColl a paragraph simply announcing the second edition with alterations and additions. The appearance of such a paragraph in the prestigious *Athenaeum* would help the book's sales.

Sharp began his February 16 letter to Watts by asking what he thought of Hall Caine's new play. "From what I hear privately (from my wife, Cotton, and others) I gather that it is a very third-rate affair though with some strong melodramatic situations." Caine's "Good Old Times" which had recently opened in London's Princess Theatre was drawing enthusiastic crowds and generating a good deal of money. Sharp and his host George Douglas had little regard for Wilson Barrett, who produced the play and acted in it. They thought Caine should be turning his attention to more serious and consequential fiction and drama. On March 4, back in London, Sharp expressed their concern in a letter to Caine. He was delighted to hear of the play's financial success, but he thought Caine should spend his time with more serious writing:

though I honestly admit that you, with your high abilities, should be working at more enduring stuff than ordinary melodrama. We need a true dramatic writer, and you have it in you to be the man — but! I have your reputation so truly to heart that what you yourself say is good news to me. Still, it is always something to have achieved so great a financial success in these difficult days — though the financial aspect, with a man like you, ought to be — and in your case is — of secondary import... Douglas [Sir George] believes in you — but dislikes what he calls Wilson Barrettish melodrama: and he expressed an earnest hope the other day that your next play would be, in truth, a big thing. I'm delighted to hear what you say about your prospective novel and play...

In mid-month, he would try to get down to Bexley, then a village where Caine was living and now a Borough of Greater London, to talk about that and other matters. He hoped Caine, should he be in town the following Saturday, would find his way out to Wescam, the Sharp's

home in South Hampstead, for a party: "Some seventy to eighty literary and artistic friends have been asked — and probably somewhere about 40 or 50 will come." Those numbers demonstrate the extent to which he and Elizabeth had immersed themselves in London's literary society.

Concern about Caine's work took a back seat in mid-month when Sharp decided to stand for election to the Chair of Literature at University College, London. The Chair was vacant following the retirement of Henry Morley (1822–1894), one of the first Professors of English Literature and a dynamic lecturer who had occupied the chair since 1865. Sharp requested and received supporting letters from Caine, Edward Dowden, and Richard Garnett, and, according to Elizabeth, his candidacy was also supported by Robert Browning, George Meredith, Walter Pater, Theodore Watts, Alfred Austin, Professor Minto, Sir George Douglas, Aubrey de Vere, and Mrs. Augusta Webster. That he sought this post despite having spent only two years studying literature at Glasgow University reflects the self-confidence he gained through his reading, editing, and reviewing. The list of his supporters reflects the extent to which his work and his forceful personality had penetrated and gained the respect of fellow authors. Despite the support of these literary luminaries and the prestige and security the post would bring, Sharp withdrew from consideration when, again according to Elizabeth, his doctor advised his heart might not withstand the strain. Whatever the reason, he was relieved when left "in possession of his freedom." For all his gregariousness, Sharp became agitated whenever he was asked to give a formal lecture or even speak informally before an audience. Realizing this deficiency and concerned about the condition of his heart, his doctors continued to advise against lecturing. From this distance the inappropriateness of Sharp's application is abundantly clear. Even his supporters must have recognized his inability to replicate the energetic lecturing and vast knowledge of the retiring Professor of English at University College.

On May 5, the Sharps left London to review the Salon in Paris. On the 9th, Sharp wrote to thank Richard Le Gallienne for his second book of poetry, *Volumes in Folio*, which he declared he would read with interest when he returned to London in a week or so. In the letter accompanying the volume, which was forwarded to Paris, Le Gallienne said he was planning to accompany the actor Wilson Barrett, for whom he served as

secretary, on his tour of America in October. Setting aside his opinion of Barrett, Sharp told Le Gallienne he would also be there in October and suggested they meet. As it turned out, an attack of asthma prevented Le Gallienne from traveling. On the 10th, Elizabeth sent a short review of the sculpture exhibited in the Salon to James Mavor who printed it without attribution following her husband's unsigned review of the Salon's paintings in the June number of the *Scottish Art Review*. The Sharps left Paris on May 11 to spend a week or so in the countryside. When they returned to London, Sharp asked Mavor when he needed the manuscript for Pt. I of H. P. Siwäärmill's "Emilia Viviana" which Mavor had agreed to publish in the July number of the review. In a postscript, he asked Mavor to be sure and preserve the secret of his identity. He had used H. P. Siwäärmill for an epigraph and for a character in *Children of Tomorrow* which was published on May 10 while the Sharps were in Paris. The pseudonym demonstrates his predilection — well before he created Fiona Macleod — for disguising his identity. There is no sign of "Emilia Viviana" in the *Review* which means Sharp failed to produce it or Mavor decided not to print it.

In a mid-July letter to Louise Chandler Moulton, Sharp said he was pleased she had found something attractive in *Children of Tomorrow*, which had been "badly received by the press." He was

vain enough to believe that with all its faults & demerits it is not altogether a book of "today." I have written it as an artist — and someday, if not now, it will gain its measure of recognition. At the same time, it is only a tentative effort, or a herald rather, of a new movement. I see the *Athenaeum* of today passes it by with "damning indifference" — and, on the other hand, *Public Opinion* has a long & sympathetic (tho' fault-finding) review beginning "a remarkable book by a remarkable man."

Mavor printed a carefully worded notice in the June issue of the *Scottish Art Review*. He recognized the novel's effort to portray in prose fiction the manifesto of the new Romantic School, whose advent Sharp had forecast in his dedicatory introduction to *Romantic Ballads*. For that reason, the novel was interesting in itself and "of no ordinary interest in the history of current literature." In portraying the complications of two married couples falling in love with each other's spouses, Sharp had constructed a "powerful drama of passion and destiny." For the details and "for information regarding the sect called Children of Tomorrow,"

Mavor referred “readers to the book itself.” Despite his reservations, Mavor found a way to accommodate Sharp’s request for a notice while preserving their friendship.

As described in the previous chapter, the “book itself” was quite remarkable for its time. It went further than Mona Caird in critiquing the restraints of marriage. The ‘Children of Tomorrow’ would be free to realize their potential and preserve their sanity by developing “romantic” relationships outside the bonds of marriage. Sharp would soon find cause to join those children, but the novel predicted a future of free love that neither reviewers nor readers could sanction. Despite their response, Sharp believed the novel would be recognized in time as a herald of things to come. The strict bonds of marriage surely relaxed as the twentieth century unfolded, but the density and excesses of Sharp’s *Children of Tomorrow* and the dark improbabilities of its action render it even less readable today than when it appeared.

Sharp’s plans for North America crystallized during the summer. Mona Caird asked Elizabeth to accompany her to Austria for “the Sun-cure at Valdes in the Carpathian mountains.” After they left in mid-July (*Memoir*, 149–150). William went down to Box Hill to spend a few days with George Meredith. In a July 27 letter, he told Stedman he had been staying with Meredith in Surrey. He had been ill but had “regained [his] power to sleep.” It would be good “to get away, and to see no proofs, letters, or MSS for ten days at least.” Of the American trip, Elizabeth wrote, “going by himself seemed to promise chances of complete recovery of health; the unexplored and the unknown beckoned to him with promise of excitement and adventure” (*Memoir*, 150). Sharp chronicled his North American trip, as he had his 1884 Italian trip, in a series of letters to Elizabeth, and there is no mention of ill-health. The trip had its intended effect.

Word of Sharp’s reputation had made its way across the Atlantic. He was warmly welcomed, first in Canada and then in the United States. Stedman’s sponsorship paved the way, but Canadian and American editors and writers were familiar with Sharp’s Rossetti book, his two books of poetry, his editing and writing for the Walter Scott firm, and his articles in British journals. Their desire to strengthen contacts with London’s literary establishment — augmented by Sharp’s handsome appearance and Scottish charm — resulted in his treatment as a celebrity by prominent literary figures in Canada, Boston, and New York.

The course of his visit can be traced in the portions of letters Elizabeth printed in the *Memoir*. Charles G. D. Roberts — a well-known poet and a Professor of English Literature at King's College in Windsor, Nova Scotia — met him when he arrived in Halifax. In a letter to Stedman on August 17, he said he was leaving at once on a trip to Prince Edward Island and elsewhere with Roberts, Bliss Carman — Roberts' brother-in-law and an aspiring poet and editor — and James Longley, the Attorney General of Canada. He expected to be back in Windsor on August 25 or 26, and he would reach New York in early October where he planned to stay with the Stedmans. After returning from what turned out to be an extensive excursion with Roberts, he described it enthusiastically for Elizabeth:

Prof. Roberts and I, accompanied for the first 100 miles by Mr. Longley, started for Pictou, which we reached after 5 hours most interesting journey. The Attorney General has kindly asked me to go on a three days' trip with him (some 10 days hence) through the famous Cape Breton district, with the lovely Bras D'Or lakes: and later on, he has arranged for a three days' moose-hunt among the forests of Southern Acadia, where we shall camp out in tents, and be rowed by Indian guides.... I went with Charles Roberts and Bliss Carman through Evangeline's country. En route I traveled on the engine of the train and enjoyed the experience. Grand Pré delighted me immensely — vast meadows, with lumbering wains and the simple old Acadian life. The orchards were in their glory — and the apples delicious! At one farmhouse we put up, how you would have enjoyed our lunch of sweet milk, hot cakes, great bowls of huckleberries and cream, tea, apples, etc.! We then went through the forest belt and came upon the great ocean inlet known as the 'Basin of Minas,' and leagues away the vast bulk of Blomidon shelving bough-like into the Sea....

This trip with Roberts was the first of many adventures during his remaining four weeks in Canada. After returning to Halifax, he stayed with the family of Attorney General Longley who took him on the two excursions described above and introduced him to many of the "leading people."

On September 12, his birthday, he told Elizabeth he was now alone for the first time. There was nothing definite about him in the newspapers "save that I 'abruptly left St. John' (the capital of New Brunswick) and that I am to arrive in Quebec tomorrow." He was glad to leave New

Brunswick with its “oven-like heat,” endless forests of living and dead trees, and forest fires that nearly scorched him. After reaching the St. Lawrence River he “made a side excursion up the Saguenay River for 100 miles to Ha! Ha! Bay” and then resumed his trip up the St. Lawrence to Quebec where he was the guest of George Stewart, editor of the *Daily Chronicle*. On September 16 he traveled further up the St. Lawrence to Montreal and wrote to ask Grant Allen’s father, Joel Asaph Allen, if he could visit him on September 21 in Alwington, an area of Kingston, Ontario and the name of Allen’s house. He did not make it to Alwington as he wrote again to Stedman on the 17th to say he was leaving Montreal for Boston on the 22nd and hoped to reach New York on the 24th where he would spend 12 or 14 days before sailing home on October 6 or 8. Stedman expressed some annoyance at Sharp’s “bewildering changes of plans” as he wanted to settle his plans for the fall. Sharp apologized in a letter of September 22 and asked Stedman when he wanted him and for how long. He had other friends in New York and may have to advance his date for sailing home.

After leaving Montreal on the 22nd, a Friday, he traveled “through the States of Vermont, Connecticut, and Massachusetts” to Boston where he spent the weekend with Arthur Sherburne Hardy (1847–1930), a well-known engineer, novelist, poet, and a Professor of Mathematics at Dartmouth College. Boston was “a beautiful place — an exceedingly fine city with lovely environs” (*Memoir*, 153). Hardy introduced Sharp to members of the Harvard faculty and took him to Belmont to visit the novelist W. D. Howells whom he had met in Italy in 1883. He arrived in New York on Monday, September 25, where the Stedmans’ house became his base for ten days. In the city, he met — among others — Richard Watson Gilder, editor of the *Century Magazine*; Henry Chandler Bowen, editor of the *Independent*; and Richard Henry Stoddard, whom he christened the “father” of recent American letters. He was elected an honorary member of the “two most exclusive clubs” in New York — the *Century* and the *Players* — and he attended a special meeting of the Author’s Club where he was “guest of the evening.” He spent the weekend of the 29th with Henry Mills Alden, editor of *Harper’s Magazine*, in Metuchen, New Jersey, a visit that cemented his friendship with Alden and his family. Before sailing from New York on October 4, he left instructions with a florist to deliver on Stedman’s birthday (October 6) both a bouquet and

a letter, which was the first of many annual birthday letters to Stedman. During the seven weeks of his Canadian and American trip Sharp was entertained, feted, and, through the good offices of Stedman, introduced to editors of the principal literary magazines.

In an October 1 letter, Sharp told Elizabeth about a couple he met in New York: Thomas Allibone Janvier — a journalist and native of New Orleans — and his wife Catherine Ann Janvier, a member of the prominent Drinker family of Philadelphia and an aunt of the twentieth-century novelist Catherine Drinker Bowen. "They are true Bohemians and most delightful," Sharp wrote, "He is a writer and she an artist... . We dined together at a Cuban Cafe last night. He gave me his vol. of stories called "Colour Studies" and she a little sketch of a Mexican haunted house — both addressed to "William Sharp. Recuerdo di Amistad y carimo." Soon the Janviers began stopping in London on their way to and from southern France where they spent winters. The Sharps, in turn, visited them often in Southern France. Catherine and William developed a special bond. She would be the first person other than family to recognize the writings of Fiona Macleod as the work of William Sharp.

Sharp landed in Liverpool in mid-October and went on to Germany at the end of the month to accompany Elizabeth home. Buoyed by his reception in Canada and the United States, he set to work with renewed vigor. Following Robert Browning's death in Venice on December 12, he wrote a long elegiac poem that appeared in the February 1890 number of the *Art Review*, and he began a biographical/critical study for the Great Writers Series. He also began a series of prose "Imaginary Journals" modeled after Browning's dramatic monologues in poetry. One of the projected stories was to be called "The Crime of Andrea dal Castagno" which Sharp described as "A fragment from the Journal of this murderer painter and successful hypocrite, written not long before his death." He described his plans for the "Imaginary Journals" in a December 18 letter to Richard Watson Gilder, who decided against publishing them. When he heard Sharp had begun a book on Browning, Oscar Wilde, recalling the Rossetti book, remarked, "When a great man dies, Sharp and Caine go in with the undertaker."