

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 Six

1890

After spending Christmas with the painter Keeley Halswelle and his wife Helena near Petersfield in Hampshire, the Sharps entertained friends for dinner at their South Hampstead home on New Year's Day. A good deal of alcohol was consumed, or so he told Ford Madox Brown in a letter thanking him for his New Year's card, a proof of his Samson and Delilah etching. In the first two months of 1890, Sharp recorded his activities in a diary, parts of which his wife preserved in the *Memoir*. In early January, he was working on the Browning monograph and beginning a novel, "The Ordeal of Basil Hope," which he never finished. He was also writing articles for the *Scottish Leader* and "London Letters" for the *Glasgow Herald*. In mid-January, to escape the distractions of London, he went to Hastings where he worked steadily on the Browning biography and enjoyed long walks with the poet Coventry Patmore. After returning to London in February, he continued work on the Browning manuscript and "Basil Hope." In mid-March, he congratulated Bliss Carman, the Canadian poet he met the previous summer in Canada, on his appointment as an editorial writer for the *New York Independent*. The letter was written in Edinburgh where he was visiting his mother and resting his eyes and head after intense work on the Browning book. In an April 7 letter to Frank Marzials, general editor of Walter Scott's Great Writers Series, he said he had nearly finished reviewing and revising proofs of the Browning book and would return them in the morning. The half-dozen advanced copies which were printed several days later must not have contained Sharp's corrections as he sent an "Errata and Addenda" slip to potential reviewers. On April 16, he told J. Stanley Little his life of Browning was "going splendidly — already about 10,000 copies disposed of."

While working on the Browning biography, Sharp also wrote the Browningsque prose piece "Fragments from the Lost Journal of Piero di Cosimo" which appeared in two parts in the January and April issues of the *Art Review*, the short-lived successor to the *Scottish Art Review*. Both journals were edited by Sharp's friend James Mavor and published by Walter Scott. He also selected the poems and wrote the introduction for *Great Odes: English and American*, a Canterbury volume that appeared in April. He wrote a play, "The Northern Night," that was included in an 1894 collection of short dramas called *Vistas*. He produced an article on D'Annunzio for the *Fortnightly Review* and an article on American literature for the *National Review*. In early May, he went to Paris to review the Salons for the *Glasgow Herald*. He wrote a "Critical Memoir" for an English translation of Sainte-Beuve's *Essays on Men and Women* which Walter Scott published in September in David Stott's "Masterpieces of Foreign Authors" series. He was also reading extensively in contemporary French, Belgian, and Italian literature. His interests ranged widely, and his relatively good health in 1889 and the first half of 1890 enabled him to focus on writing projects that produced income.

In May, he sent Bliss Carman a poem, "The Coves of Crail," which stands out for its stark imagery and what it portends. It was included in the second (1889) edition of Sharp's third book of poems, *Romantic Ballads and Poems of Phantasy*, but that book was not published in the United States which freed Carman to publish it in the July issue of the *New York Independent*.

The Coves of Crail
 The moon-white waters wash and leap,
 The dark tide floods the Coves of Crail;
 Sound, sound he lies in dreamless sleep
 Nor hears the sea-wind wail.

The pale gold of his oozy locks,
 Doth hither drift and wave;
 His thin hands splash against the rocks,
 His white lips nothing crave.

Afar away she laughs and sings —
 A song he loved, a wild sea-strain —
 Of how the mermen weave their rings
 Upon the reef-set main.

Sound, sound he lies in dreamless sleep,
 Nor hears the sea-wind wail,
 Tho' with the tide his white hands creep
 Amid the Coves of Crail.

Crail is both a small village on the rocky east coast of Scotland, and the name of the harbor the village overlooks. The handsome man in the poem who now moves only with the waves was lured to the sea by the song of a mermaid and drowned in his attempt to reach her. The poem's subject, tone, and form anticipate the poetry Sharp would attribute to Fiona Macleod. He heard many versions of its story from men and women he encountered in the Hebrides. It reflects the dangers of life on the sea for fishermen and other sailors as well as the danger of trying to cross the boundary between the world we know and the spirit world we would like to know. A common theme in fairy tales of all languages, it became a frequent motif in the writings Sharp published as Fiona Macleod.

Sharp's burst of writing and editing in the winter and spring of 1890 finally produced enough money for a break from editing, reviewing, and the pressures of life in London. In a January 23, 1889 letter, he told Hall Caine he hoped to be settled in Rome the next winter: "I am tired of living in this abominable climate, and of so much pot-boiling. I want to retire for a year and devote myself to original work." On February 22 he wrote to Richard Watson Gilder:

Next October I am going to leave England for six months at any rate, and perhaps for 18, and return to my well-loved Italy. I am sick of pot-boiling and wish to get on with purely original work. The Drawback is — heavy pecuniary loss. However, I feel I must do it, now or never.

On June 17, he announced his decision to "begin *literary life anew*" in a long letter to Stedman:

As for us, we are both at heart Bohemians — and are well-content if we can have good shelter, enough to eat, books, music, friends, sunshine, and free nature — all of which we can have with the scantiest of purses. Perhaps I shd be less light-hearted in the matter if I thought that our coming Bohemian life might involve my wife in hard poverty when my hour comes — but fortunately her 'future' is well assured.

The Sharps divested themselves of some of their writing and editing obligations, stored their furniture, and vacated their South Hampstead

house on June 24. They would travel while Sharp devoted himself to serious literary work. Their financial circumstances precluded a complete break. Sharp transferred to Elizabeth the post of London art critic for the *Glasgow Herald* and resigned his lucrative though time-consuming position with the *Young Folks' Paper*, but he retained his Canterbury Poets editorship. After leaving Wescam, the Sharps spent a week in the Caird's Northbrook House in Micheldever, Hampshire, which he described in a June 17 letter to Stedman as "a friend's place 7 miles across the downs north of Winchester." When they returned to London, they stayed with the Cairds in their large South Hampstead house and decamped to Scotland at the end of the month.

In the summer of 1887 or 1888 the Sharps spent a weekend in Surrey with Sir Walter and Lady Hughes, friends of Elizabeth's mother. While there they met Walter Severn, a well-known painter who was familiar with Sharp's book on Rossetti. He asked Sharp if he would like to undertake a biography of his father, Joseph Severn, also a painter, who accompanied John Keats to Rome and cared for him there as tuberculosis took his life. Sharp agreed to undertake the project, and Severn gave him a large quantity of unpublished manuscripts written by and related to his father. Sharp began working intermittently on this project in the Spring of 1890. On July 15, he wrote to William Wetmore Story asking if he had known Severn, who spent the winter months in Rome and eventually served as British Ambassador to Italy. Elizabeth reproduced a portion of Story's reply:

I knew Mr. Severn in Rome and frequently met and saw him, but I can recall nothing which would be of value to you. He was, as you may know, a most pleasant man — and in the minds of all is associated with the memory of Keats by whose side he lies in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome. When the bodies were removed, as they were several years ago, and laid side by side, there was a little funeral ceremony, and I made an address on the occasion in honor and commemoration of the two friends (*Memoir*, 169).

An American lawyer, sculptor, poet, and novelist, Story (1819–1895) moved to Rome in 1850. His apartment became a gathering place for British and American artists and writers, among them Elizabeth and Robert Browning, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry James (who wrote his biography). His monumental sculptures, mostly of Biblical

and Classical figures, are displayed in museums in the United States and Britain. Sharp met Story when he was in Rome in 1883. His July 15 letter had the secondary purpose of reestablishing contact so Story might welcome him into his social network when he reached Rome in December.

In early August, the Sharps learned Eric Sutherland Robertson had returned briefly to London from Lahore where he held the chair of literature and logic in the University. Robertson and Sharp were good friends before he left for Lahore in 1887. A graduate of Edinburgh University, he edited the Great Writers Series for the Walter Scott firm, and he served as Sharp's best man when he and Elizabeth married in 1884. Before leaving for Lahore, he arranged for Sharp to succeed him as editor of the "Literary Chair" in the *Young Folk's Paper*, a position that provided a regular income and increased Sharp's visibility in the London literary scene. Sharp wrote to Robertson on August 15: "I have often missed you for, as you know, I was strongly drawn to you from the first, and look upon you as one of my very few "deep" friends. My most intimate friend since you left is Theodore Roussel, the French painter, who now lives in London."



Fig. 10 A self portrait of Theodore Roussel (1847–1926) a French painter, who moved to London in 1878 and two years later married the widow Frances Amelia Smithson Bull (1844–1909). A close friend of James McNeill, he was William Sharp's "most intimate friend" in 1890. Wikipedia: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Theodore_Roussel_\(autorretrato\)_1.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Theodore_Roussel_(autorretrato)_1.jpg)

In case Robertson could meet them in Scotland, Sharp gave him their Scottish itinerary. On the next day they were leaving for the West Highlands — Tarbert on Loch Fyne in Argyll — where they would spend three weeks. From September 8 to 12, Sharp would be in Glasgow while Elizabeth was visiting a friend, Mary Georgina Wade Wilson, in South Bantaskine. From the 12th to the 17th both Sharps would be in North Queensferry, a village across the Firth just northwest of Edinburgh. They planned to go north to Aberdeen for a few days on the 17th, and on the 22nd they would be back in Edinburgh staying with Sharp's mother. They followed that itinerary and returned to London at the end of September where they stayed with Elizabeth's mother at 72 Inverness Terrace in Bayswater. Robertson did not make it to Scotland, but they met in London. In a letter of October 1, Sharp told Theodore Watts that Elizabeth intended to invite him for afternoon tea on October 4 with Eric Robertson and George Meredith.

The letter to Watts conveyed Dr. Donald Macleod's willingness to speak with him about the possible serial publication of Watts' novel — *Alwyn* — in *Good Words*. While Sharp was in Tarbert in late August and early September, he spent a good deal of time with Macleod, an eminent Presbyterian clergyman, a respected theologian, and a talented and prominent minister who served in Park Church, Glasgow from 1869 until 1901. He also edited from 1872 until 1907 the evangelical journal *Good Words*. Under his editorship, the journal began to branch out from its purely religious base to include non-religious essays and works of fiction. Macleod was also a repository of Celtic myth and the source of many of the Fiona tales. Sharp indirectly acknowledged his debt by adopting Macleod's surname to provide a measure of authenticity and prestige for Fiona. During this visit, Elizabeth recalled, Macleod sang to Sharp "with joyous abandonment a Neapolitan song" and asked him to send him from Italy an article for *Good Words*. Sharp's "Reminiscences of the Marble Quarries of Carrara," which appeared in *Good Words* late in 1890, must have derived from a visit to the quarries during Sharp's first trip to Italy in 1883 since the Sharps did not reach Tuscany on their way to Rome until December 1890, too late for that month's *Good Words*.

On October 11, Sharp told Stedman he and Elizabeth were leaving the next day for Germany where they planned to stay through November. He asked Stedman for a "line of introduction" to Blanche Willis Howard,

an American novelist who had recently married Dr. Julius von Teuffel, the court physician of Württemberg. The Sharps went first to Antwerp, stopped in Bonn, and went on to Heidelberg where, he told James Mavor, they were “very comfortably settled in a romantic old house adjoining the Castle grounds — and with interesting literary associations. Goethe himself wrote one of his poems in the balcony of the quaint, picturesque room I occupy.” According to Elizabeth, her husband was disappointed with the Rhine, and he expressed some surprising anti-German, pro-French sentiments in a letter to an unknown friend: “The real charm of the Rhine, beyond the fascination that all rivers and riverine scenery have for most people, is that of literary and historical romance. The Rhine is in this respect the Nile of Europe.” He thought it should be the boundary between Germany and France.

Germany has much to gain from a true communion with its more charming neighbor. The world would jog on just the same if Germany were annihilated by France, Russia, and Italy: but the disappearance of brilliant, vivacious, intellectual France would be almost as serious a loss to intellectual Europe, as would be to the people at large the disappearance of the Moon.

Sharp wrote again to Stedman on November 4 to thank him for the introduction to Blanch Willis Howard. He had forwarded it and asked to see her in the following week. In sending the introduction, Stedman asked Sharp if he had a hidden motive in wishing to meet her, and thus began the repartee that continued for many years regarding possible extramarital affairs. Sharp replied he was indeed going to Stuttgart alone, but only because Elizabeth was otherwise occupied in Heidelberg. He did plan “to cut about a bit” on his own, visiting “Karlsruhe, Mannheim, the Neckar, and so forth” and he was going alone to Frankfurt at the end of the week to hear Wagner’s “Rienzi.” There followed another complaint about Germany: “*Mon Ami*, it is only too easy to be virtuous here. The women — ah, ‘let us proceed!’”

The Sharps left Heidelberg on November 25 and reached Tuscany, “flooded in sunshine and glowing colour,” in the second week of December. After a few days with Elizabeth’s aunt in Florence, they went on to Rome and settled in rooms on Via delle Quattro Fontane, near the summit of the Quirinal Hill. Shortly after arriving, Sharp conveyed his opinion of Germany to Catherine Janvier:

Well, we were glad to leave Germany. Broadly, it is a joyless place for Bohemians. It is all beer, coarse jokes, coarse living, and domestic tyranny on the man's part, subjection on the woman's — on the one side: pedantic learning, scientific pedagogism, and mental *ennui*; on the other: with, of course, a fine leavening *somewhere* of the salt of life.

He described their six weeks in Heidelberg as "wet," but admitted it was "only fair to say we were not there at the best season." Stuttgart was his favorite German city. "Wonderfully animated and pleasing for a German town," it had a charming double attraction both as a medieval city and as a modern capital." He now had a friend there in Blanche Willis Howard, who was rejoicing in the title "Frau Hof-Arzt von Teuffel." Her husband, Doctor von Teuffel, was "one of the few Germans who seem to regard women as equals." Sharp's visit to the von Teuffels had a curious result: an epistolary novel called *A Fellow and his Wife* in which Howard wrote the letters of a male aristocrat who stayed home in Germany while Sharp wrote the letters of his wife who had taken off for an extended stay in Rome. This tour de force became the first instance of Sharp adopting and sustaining with remarkable consistency the persona of a woman.

He described for Catherine Janvier his writing plans, but Rome soon eclipsed them. The many "schemes he planned mentally," Elizabeth wrote, "were never realized.... A new impulse came, new work grew out of the impressions of that Roman winter which swept out of his mind all other cartooned work." Under the spell of the warmth and beauty of Rome and its surroundings, Sharp in his mid-thirties fell in love with a beautiful woman ten years his junior, a woman he knew in London who took on a compelling new radiance in Rome where she changed the course of Sharp's life and the trajectory of his work.