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 Eight

January–June 1892

Sharp left for America on January 6th aboard the *Teutonic* and arrived in New York a week later where he stayed initially with the Stedmans at 173 West 78th Street. Through his friendship with the Stedmans and others he met during his first visit to New York in 1889, he had immediate access to the literary and publishing elite of the city. Chief among them was Richard Henry Stoddard, a poet and man of letters who with Stedman presided over the literary life of the city. Stedman also arranged for Sharp to meet J. M. Stoddart who edited the prestigious *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in Philadelphia. When Sharp wondered if it might be possible to meet Walt Whitman, who lived in Camden, New Jersey across the Delaware River from Philadelphia, Stedman's son Arthur, who knew Whitman, offered to write a letter of introduction. Whitman was a revered figure in the literary circles Sharp frequented in London, and the possibility of meeting him was enormously attractive. After arriving on Wednesday, January 13th Sharp went by train to Philadelphia on the fifteenth and the next morning he called on Stoddart to discuss articles he might write for publication in Lippincott's. When Sharp said he hoped to meet Whitman, Stoddart immediately contacted Horace Traubel who clerked in a nearby bank.

A handsome man of thirty-four who was himself a poet, Traubel was Whitman's principal caretaker and would be his literary executor and biographer. He is best known for transcribing and compiling nine volumes of daily conversations entitled *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. His main concern in 1892 was keeping Whitman in good health and good spirits. Unable to get his letter of introduction to Sharp before he left New York, Stedman sent it to a Philadelphia bookseller for Sharp to retrieve. Traubel said a letter of introduction was unnecessary and

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offered to take Sharp to Camden that afternoon to meet Whitman who was bedridden, but able to receive guests. Sharp described the visit in a letter to his wife. Whitman was lying in "his narrow bed, with his white beard, white locks, and ashy-gray face in vague relief, in the afternoon light, against the white pillows and coverlet." They discussed the London literary scene, and Sharp assured the ailing poet he was revered by many British writers. In his parting words, Whitman gave Sharp a mission:

> William Sharp when you go back to England, tell those friends of whom you have been speaking, and all others whom you may know and I do not, that words fail me to express my deep gratitude to them for sympathy and aid truly enough beyond acknowledgment. Good-bye to you and to them — the last greetings of a tired old poet.

Two months after Sharp's visit, Whitman died.

Fig. 17 Photograph of Walt Whitman and his nurse Fritzenger (1890). Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Whitman,_Walt_(1819-1892)_and_his_male_nurse_Fritzenger.JPG, Public Domain.

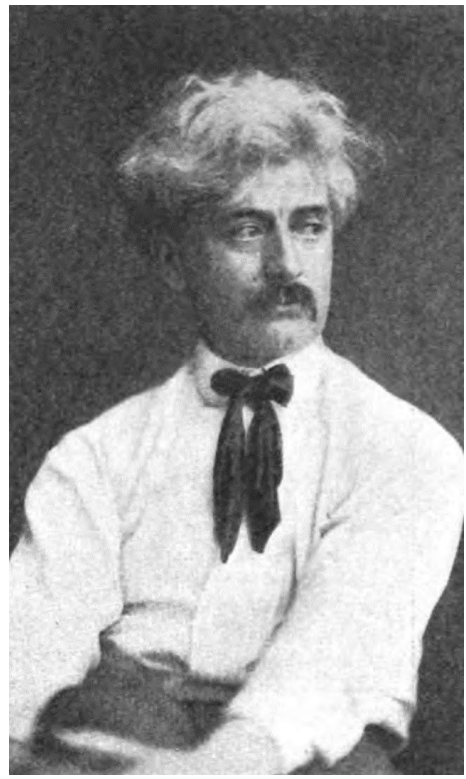

Fig. 18 Photograph of Horace Traubel (c. 1912). Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_Horace_Traubel.jpg, Public Domain.

After returning to New York, Sharp continued meeting with publishers and friends. On Friday, he crossed the Hudson River with Henry Mills Alden, editor of *Harper's Magazine*, and spent the weekend with Alden's family in Metuchen, New Jersey. On Monday, he returned to the city with Alden and boarded a train to Boston to meet Horace Scudder, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, and visit Louise Chandler Moulton who was frequently in London and shared Sharp's affection for the Marston family. He had considered extending his stay in America to talk with more editors and publishers, but shortly after arriving in Boston he received word of his younger brother Edward's unexpected death and decided to sail for home as planned the following Wednesday, February 3. He returned to New York on Thursday and spent the night with Arthur Stedman. On Friday he moved to E. C. Stedman's house, and on

Saturday evening had dinner with Mrs. Thomas Harland, the mother of Henry Harland, an American writer and a good friend who was living in London. During the weekend he met again with Alden and, in a letter thanking Scudder for his hospitality, reported Mrs. Alden's health was deteriorating. Scudder and Alden met as undergraduates at Williams College and remained life-long friends. On Tuesday he moved to a mid-town hotel and boarded the Majestic early the next morning.

The eighteen-day visit in the United States was pleasant and productive. Sharp solidified his friendships with the editors of *Harper's Magazine*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *New York Independent* and met the editor of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. He gained a better idea of the kind of articles and poems they would publish and discussed various writing projects. Like so many British writers Sharp wanted to take advantage of the growing American market. He received an offer from a leading American theatrical manager to buy the rights to the play he was writing based on *A Fellowe and His Wife*. Through Arthur Stedman, he negotiated successfully with Charles Webster and Company for the American publication of *Romantic Ballads* and *Sospiri di Roma* in a single volume that appeared in the latter part of 1892 as *Flower o' the Vine*. Sharp wanted his friend Bliss Carman, a fellow poet, to write the introduction to the volume, but Stedman preferred another friend of Sharp's, Thomas Janvier, a short story writer, not a poet, but better known than Carman. Sharp relented and informed Stedman that Janvier would write the introduction if properly compensated. A deal was struck, and Janvier produced a glowing introduction for which Sharp was grateful.

After a rough mid-winter crossing, the Majestic arrived in Liverpool on February 10. Sharp spent a few days recuperating in London before going north on February 14 to comfort his mother. In Edinburgh, he explained in a letter to Arthur Stedman why he was not enthusiastic about giving his next book, which he now called "Dramatic Vistas," to Charles Webster as a follow-up publication to *Flower o' the Vine*. Acting as an agent for Webster and Company, Arthur had written to say Sharp's reluctance in this regard was "shabby." Sharp said he did not wish to issue these "new things in a new dramatic form" in an ordinary way, but pseudonymously in a small privately printed edition. He believed his reputation as an editor and enemies he made as a reviewer were responsible for the lukewarm reception of his *Romantic Ballads* and *Sospiri di Roma*.

> I have my own reasons for wishing to issue them in this way in the first instance. They are new in method and manner, and are, I believe, the best work of the kind I can do. Work of this kind is so dear to me that I am relatively indifferent to its financial success: and, in addition, I am particularly curious to see how these "Dramatic Vistas" will be received, without any of the bias for or against involved in the attachment of my name to them.

The Webster firm might publish a trade edition of the book as by Sharp, but only after he issued a small private edition for friends and reviewers under the pseudonym H. P. Siwäarmill, his anagram for William Sharp. When he was in Germany working with Blanch Willis Howard on *A Fellowe and His Wife* in October 1891, he purchased Maurice Maeterlinck's *La Princess Maleine* and *Les Aveugles*, read straight through them, and, in his diary, called their author a "writer of singular genius." According to the diary, he produced over the next two days, under the influence of Maeterlinck, five "Dramatic Interludes" which he intended to publish pseudonymously. In late February 1892, the five interludes had grown to eight entitled *Dramatic Vistas*. When the book finally appeared in 1894, Sharp claimed authorship and dropped *Dramatic*, leaving just *Vistas*.

Back in London from Edinburgh by February 19, Sharp thanked Thomas Janvier for a copy of his recently published *The Uncle of an Angel and Other Stories* and said he was planning to settle down in London for a period of intense writing. He had finished "Dramatic Vistas," two or three of which he read to Catherine Janvier in New York. In a letter of February 23, he told Laura Stedman he had rented rooms at 11 Bedford Gardens, near Campden Hill in Kensington which had a studio where Elizabeth, who had many friends in the area, was doing some painting. They took the rooms for only a brief period because they planned to rent "a cottage or small house somewhere in the country — probably at a place a few miles north of Cookham Dene and the Woods of Waldegrave." They would remove all their books and furniture from storage, and "either live in it for weeks at a time, or for a day or two as the humour takes us." The house would provide a retreat where Sharp could focus on "more serious and lasting work," but it would have to be near London so both Sharps could continue writing and reviewing for the periodicals and papers.

Sharp's *Life and Letters of Joseph Severn* finally appeared in late February or early March, and in March, *A Fellowe and His Wife* was

published by Osgood, McIlvaine & Company in London and Houghton and Mifflin & Company in Boston. It was issued simultaneously in Germany in the Tauchnitz Collection of British Authors. In early March Sharp visited Thomas Hardy in Dorset and produced an article on Hardy that appeared in the July *Forum*. On March 9, he wrote a letter to a new friend, J. Stanley Little, an art critic who lived with his brother George Leon Little, a painter, in Bucks Green, a small village in Sussex. He asked Little if he knew of any cottages or small houses (two sitting rooms, four bedrooms, and near a station) available for a modest rental. He would come down and see anything that might be suitable.

By mid-April, the Sharps had given up their rented rooms in Kensington. The return address on his April 13 letter to E. C. Stedman — 16 Winchester Road | Swiss Cottage — was the home of Edith and Frank Rinder. He told Stedman he was about to go to France for some weeks and continued: "The 'Old Adam' calls me, and alas I am weak." Elizabeth, he said, had gone with friends to the Isle of Wight for a week or so and would join him in Paris "three weeks hence." He added this passage: "My love to Mrs. Stedman — but do not let her know that I am a backslider, as she already has but an indifferent opinion of my much-tried virtue. I really am going to reform — but 'owing to unavoidable circumstances' must not begin all at once or too hurriedly!" It is hard to read such a passage without speculating that Elizabeth and William, in all their moving about and absences from each other, were attempting to adjust to the presence of Edith Rinder in their lives, trying to find spaces and places for Edith and William to be together. Some of his letters from France imply Edith was with him for at least part of his first two weeks there. His desire to be alone for periods of time with Edith, which Elizabeth seems to have accepted, may have been a factor in the plans for a house in Sussex.

Before he left for Paris Sharp returned the proofs of the "Sospiri di Roma" section of *Flower o' the Vine* to Charles Webster along with the manuscript of a new poem entitled "Epilogue | Il Bosco Sacro | To _____." In the letter accompanying the proofs, he said he would not "let Sospiri appear again without the 'Epilogue' — which, to my mind, is one of the most essential things in the book." It is a love poem in which the speaker, Sharp, is alone in a sacred grove [*Il Bosco Sacro*] on the Campagna where

The Dusk, as a dream;
Steals slowly, slowly,
With shadowy feet
Under the branches
Here, in the woodland,
Hushfully seeking
the Night, her lover.

As dusk slowly turns into darkness there is silence, "Rest, utter rest | Utter peace." Then, suddenly, the speaker hears "thrilling | Long-drawn vibrations! | Passionate preludes | Of passionate song!" But the "wild music" and the "sweet song" are only a memory that soon fades. The speaker recalls a day of rapture in the sacred grove:

Here, where we gather'd
The snow-pure blossoms,
The Flowers of Dream:
Here, when the sunlight
On that glad day
Flooded the mosses
With golden wine
And deep in the forest,
Joy passed us, laughing,
Laughing low,
While ever behind her
Rose lovely, delicate.
Beautiful, beautiful,
The fadeless blossoms,
The Flowers of Dream.

He asks his beating, yearning heart to be sill as now there is only silence.

Here, where the moonlight,
Lies like white foam on
The dark tides of night.
Here is one only,
Longing forever,
Longing, longing
With passion and pain.

He cries out to his "beloved," but there is no answer, only silence. Still, he retains the memory of the rapture, the glad voice of his passion sings there "Out of the heart of | The fragrant darkness." His "soul's desire" is "never| Lost though afar, | My Joy, my Dreams." The poem ends:

Too deep the rapture
Of this sweet sorrow,
Of this glad pain:
O heart, still thy beating
O bird, thy song!

The Dusk, as a dream; The dedicatee following the title was left blank, but the poem was intended for Edith Rinder who, after she returned to London, was "afar," but "never lost." All the poems in the volume were written after Edith left Rome, but they were inspired by his recollections of their time together on the Campagna and reflect Sharp's joy in the love they shared and his sorrow after her departure. He insisted the poem be included as an epilogue to the Sospiri poems because it neatly summarizes the central theme of the entire volume.

Sharp's insistence on adding the "Epilogue" while omitting the "Preface" to the 1888 *Romantic Ballads and Poems of Phantasy* is significant. The "Preface" announced the dawn of a new Romanticism in which imagination would take precedence over formal perfection in poetry. The poems in that volume initiated the dawning age, but his next volume would reflect its full glory. "I am tortured by the passionate desire to create beauty, to sing something of the 'impossible songs' I have heard, to utter something of the rhythm of life that has most touched me." The next poems "will be daringly of the moment, vital with the life and passion of today, yet not a whit less romantic." Three years passed before he was able to realize that objective in a burst of creativity. The "Epilogue" added to the sospiri section of *Flower o' the Vine* typifies the sensuousness that infused those poems but was absent in the "romantic ballads" of the 1888 volume. Influenced by the nude statuary in and around Rome and by the frank sexuality he experienced or imagined during his walks on the Roman Campagna, the "beauty" he sought in the sospiri poems included that of the human body framed by the beauty of the natural world. The two sections of *Flower o' the Vine* reflect what Sharp viewed as a progression from the elusive romanticism announced as a "new movement" in the 1888 "Preface" to the sensuality of the "Epilogue": "daringly of the moment and vital with life and passion." The very title of the volume, *Flower o' the Vine*, evokes Bacchus, who frequents the sospiri poems in various guises. By mid-1892, Sharp had found a name for the transformation he experienced in Rome in 1891.

The sospiri poems were an initial expression of the Paganism he would soon proclaim more directly in his *Pagan Review*.

On April 23, Sharp thanked Thomas Janvier for his over-generous introduction to *Flower o' the Vine*, which he read in proofs from the Webster firm:

> I thank you most heartily for what you say there, which seems to me, moreover, if I may say so, at once generous, fittingly reserved, and likely to win attention. You yourself occupy such a high place in Letters oversea that such a recommendation of my verse cannot but result to my weal.

He told Janvier he was trying to keep down his "too cosmopolitan acquaintanceship" in Paris and assured him that "after the second of May" he was "going to reform and remain reformed." In the meantime, "after a week or so of the somewhat feverish Bohemianism of literary and artistic Paris, we shall be happy at our 'gypsy' encampment in the Forest of Fontainebleau." The "we" implies Edith Rinder was with him both in Paris and at the "encampment." If so, she must have returned home by May 2 when Elizabeth, having succeeded her husband as the paper's London art critic, arrived to review the Salons for the *Glasgow Herald*. Sharp described for Janvier the beauty of Paris in the spring, mentioned a chance meeting with Paul Verlaine, and listed some of the writers and artists he was meeting:

> I went round to Leon Vanier's, where there were many of les Jeunes — Jean Moréas, Maurice Barrés, Cazalis, Renard, Eugène Holland, and others (including your namesake, Janvier). To-night I ought to go to the weekly gathering of a large number of les Jeunes at the Café du Soleil d'Or, that favourite meeting place now of les decadents, les ymbolists, and les everything else.

He concluded by listing his plans for the rest of the year:

> (1) Lill joins me in Paris about 10 days hence and remains to see the two Salons, etc.
> (2) From the middle of May till the middle (14th) of July we shall be in London.
> (3) Then Lill goes with friends to Germany, to Bayreuth (for Wagnerian joys) and I go afoot and aboat among the lochs and isles and hills of the western Scottish Highlands.
> (4) We meet again in Stirling or Edinburgh, early in August — and then, having purchased or hired a serviceable if not a prancing steed, we go off

> for three weeks vagabondage. The steed is for Lill and our small baggage and a little tent. We'll sometimes sleep out: sometimes at inns, or in the fern in Highlander's cottages. Thereafter I shall again go off by myself to the extreme west "where joy and melancholy are one, and where youth and age are twins" as the Gaelic poet says.
> (5) The rest of September visiting in Scotland.
> (6) Part of October in London then (O Glad Tidings).
> (7) Off for 6 months to the South: first to the Greek side of Sicily: then to Rome (about Xmas) for the Spring. Finally: a Poor-House in London.

Few of these plans materialized because J. Stanley Little found a house available for leasing in Bucks Green, a small hamlet in Sussex. The Sharps planned to visit it in the first weekend of June, but Elizabeth, on June 3, developed an extremely high fever, a relapse of the malaria she contracted in France in the spring. Sharp went alone to Bucks Green on June 7, liked the house, and signed a three-year lease. When Elizabeth recovered, she visited the house and described it in the *Memoir* (200) as

> a little eight-roomed cottage, near Rudgwick, with a little porch, an orchard and garden, and small lawn with a chestnut tree in its midst... . [It] stood at the edge of a little hamlet called Bucks Green, and across the road from our garden gate stood the one shop flanked by a magnificent poplar tree, that made a landmark however far we might wander. It was a perpetual delight to us.

In a history of Bucks Green, Roger Nash of the Rudgwick Preservation Society identified the house leased by the Sharps as the Toll House which

> was built in the curtilage of the smithy, first called Arun Villas, then The Laurels, then Phenice Croft, before its present post-war name [Toll House]. The name Phenice Croft (a place in Crete, referred to in the Bible) was given by William Sharp about 1892, who lived there somewhat secretly, for 2 years. He was a much-travelled Scottish writer of a troubled disposition who invented his pseudonym 'Fiona McCloud' whilst writing a book titled *Pharais* in Bucks Green. He was a friend of another literati, Stanley Little, who lived in Rudgwick rather longer, and at the time was lodging at Bucks Green Place. Both, I think, were drawn to the area by its Shelley connections.

Fig. 19 Early twentieth-century photograph of the house across the road from the Sharp's Phenice Croft in Bucks Green, Rudgwick Sussex. © Rudgwick Preservation Society. Courtesy of Roger Nash, Chair, Rudgwick Preservation Society, https://www.rudgwick-rps.org.uk

Fig. 20 Mid-twentieth-century photograph of Bucks Green, Rudgwick, Sussex. Phenice Croft, now the Toll House, is across the road from the building, now white, which housed the shop. © The Francis Frith Collection, https://www.francisfrith.com/bucks-green/bucks-green-the-village-c1965_b587001

According to Nash,

> In 1890 James Stanley Little and his brother George Leon Little lived in Bucks Green at The Kraal, a house in Lynwick St, now called The Old School House. In 1891, J Stanley Little lived at Bucks Green Place with William Kensett, a dairy farmer who was a near neighbor of the Sharps.

The Sharps would not have become residents of Bucks Green if Stanley Little had not found them a house they liked.

For the remainder of June Sharp corresponded regularly with Little about the house. On the twenty-second, he asked Little to tell a man named Napper that "Mr. Sharp says he has nothing to do with any extra labour unauthorised by him, and that this engaging extra assistance without consulting him first, is a thing he will not tolerate again." He also passed on specific instructions from Elizabeth:

> She would like (if nothing has yet been done) if the paint of the stairway, landing, and doors belonging thereto be done in a dark red (Pompeian red) — of one colour only, instead of the two shades already approved to match the paper. The doors in the Hotel at Littlehampton are responsible for this change of view. Again, if the drawing room has not been gone on with, we would now like if the painting of the skirting, doors, and mantel piece be uniformly of the pale tint of yellow, instead of the pale and yellow, as first arranged — but the inside of the doorless cupboard to be entirely of the deeper shade of yellow.

Sharp expected to "enter the house with the furniture about the 13th or 14th of July — just when E. goes away for a fortnight to Germany." At the close of June 1892, the Sharps were set for a new phase of their lives in a house in rural Sussex called "The Laurels." They rechristened it first "Kingscroft" in recognition of a former resident named King and then settled on "Phenice Croft" which combined the Greek name for the Phoenix, a unique bird that burned itself on a funeral pyre and rose from the ashes with renewed youth to live through another cycle, and the Scottish name for a rural cottage (croft). The stage was set for their "renewal," a period of concentrated writing in which Sharp produced first the *Pagan Review* and the early writings of Fiona Macleod.

When my wife and I drove south from London and found Phenice Croft in 1965, it was called the Toll House and occupied by a gracious couple who welcomed us into the house and introduced us to guests they were entertaining on the rear patio. They were interested in what we were able to tell them about the Sharps and their occupancy of the house in 1890s. Only recently, thanks to Roger Nash, have we learned what a distinguished occupancy the former Phenice Croft enjoyed in the 1960s. Our hosts that day were Admiral Sir Randolph Stewart Gresham Nicholson and his wife Cecilia. Nicholson commanded ships

that survived several encounters with the enemy in the first and second World Wars. Promoted to Admiral in 1943, he became Deputy to the Commander-in Chief of the Eastern Fleet in 1944. Following the war, he was appointed Admiral Commander of Her Majesty's Dockyard in Devonport. Upon his retirement in 1950, he was granted a knighthood (KCB), and between 1953 and 1958 he served as Lieutenant Governor of Jersey. The Nicholsons acquired the Toll House in 1950 and refurbished it in a style befitting a distinguished Admiral. After a life of accomplishments, Nicholson died in 1975 at the age of eighty-two, and his wife died in 1980. Since they vacated the house, its residents have been uninterested in its history and less gracious in welcoming those who are.