

# William Sharp and "Fiona Macleod"

A Life



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# Chapter Seventeen

1898

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Early in the new year Sharp suffered a “an acute depression” which Elizabeth attributed to the strain of maintaining a double identity. “Each of the two natures,” she continued, “had its own needs and desires, interests, and friends. The needs of each were not always harmonious one with the other but created a complex condition that led to a severe nervous collapse (*Memoir*, 292). This collapse, as we have seen, was not Sharp’s first. Others predated his invention of Fiona Macleod, and they became more serious when his feminine “nature” was given a separate identity. Ernest Rhys was not alone among Sharp’s friends to comment on his ability to recover quickly from periods of illness. His ability to emerge from a deep depression into state of euphoria that foreshadowed another lapse into depression signals from this distance a bipolar disorder or, more simply, manic depression. In January 1898, according to Elizabeth, his depression required a “change of environment.” He left London “for the southern coast and moved from place to place — Bournemouth, Brighton, and St. Margaret’s Bay near Dover.” He was “much alone, except for the occasional visit of an intimate friend.”

In a January or February letter to Catherine Janvier, from which Elizabeth quoted a passage, Sharp described his condition:

I am skirting the wood of shadows. I am filled with vague fears — and yet a clear triumphant laughter goes through it, whether of life or death no one knows. I am also in a duel with forces other than those of human wills — and I need all my courage and strength. At the moment I have recovered my phisic control over certain media. It cannot last more than a few days at most a few weeks at a time: but in that I am myself.

In addition to alleviating depression, but unnamed by Elizabeth, there was another purpose in Sharp's moving from place to place along England's southern coast. He was trying to create conditions that induced dreams and visions he could share with Yeats. That effort, often aided by drugs, rather than alleviating depression contributed to the mood swings he described to Catherine Janvier. When his spiritualist activities at Phenice Croft in 1894 produced similar results, Elizabeth insisted they give up the house and return to the city. In December 1896 she attributed his illness to "experimentation with certain psychic phenomena [...] efforts in which at times he and Mr. W. B. Yeats collaborated" (*Memoir*, 282). Sharp and Yeats may have engaged together in psychic experiments earlier, but their collaboration began in earnest in January 1897 and reached a crescendo in early 1898. As described in the previous chapter, Yeats convinced Sharp, referencing his own relationship with Maud Gonne, that visions came more easily when jointly evoked by a man and a woman who were in love. He urged Sharp to partner with Fiona who he thought the better "seer" just as he thought Maud Gonne's psychic capacities exceeded his own. Edith Rinder, who was playing the part of Fiona in the search for rituals, was the "intimate friend" who occasionally visited Sharp on the south coast. Whether or not Edith shared his faith in the supernatural, her presence for the spiritualist activities reflected her concern for Sharp's health and productivity. Given Elizabeth's worry about her husband's spiritualist activities, it is interesting to note that a diary, now in the British Library, which Elizabeth kept for some years after her husband died in 1905, records in considerable detail her contacts through a medium with the spirit of her dead husband.

In mid-February, shortly after arriving at the St. Margaret's Bay Hotel near Dover, Sharp wrote Elizabeth a letter which expressed the sense of peace and happiness that came to him that afternoon after leaving the station, walking through the village, and finding himself "alone, alone 'in the open.'" It was not "merely healing to me but an imperative necessity of my life." He was weary of "the endless recurrence of the ordinary in the lives of most people." To his own "wild heart [...] life must come otherwise or not at all." He wished he was "a youth once more" so he could "lie down at night smelling the earth and rise at dawn, smelling the new air out of the East, and know enough of men and cities to avoid

both, and to consider little any gods ancient or modern, knowing well that there is only 'The Red God' to think of, he who lives and laughs in the red blood." He described the tension between the need to produce articles and reviews that generated income and his desire to live freely in nature, "a wild instinct to go to my own."

In a letter about this time to "a friend," who may well have been Edith, he was even more specific about his desire to shed his human qualities and become a creature of nature:

I wish I could live all my hours out of doors: I envy no one in the world so much as the red deer, the eagle, the sea-mew. I am sure no kings have so royal a life as the plovers and curlews have. All these have freedom, rejoice continually on the wind's wing, exalt alike in sun and shade: to them day is day, and night is night, and there is nothing else (*Memoir*, p. 298).

Elizabeth read this letter as providing "an insight into the primitive elemental soul that so often swayed him and his work." Taken together, the two letters — to Elizabeth and to a friend — express Sharp's passing desire to escape the bonds of rational life, to live an "elemental life" in the natural world, to recover the freedom he experienced as a youth in the Hebrides.

Before leaving St. Margaret's Bay, he explained his illness to Murray Gilchrist and said his two weeks there had been restorative:

I know you will have been sorry to hear that I have been ill — and had to leave work, and home. The immediate cause was a severe and sudden attack of influenza which went to membranes of the head and brain, and all but resulted in brain fever. This evil was averted — but it and the possible collapse of your friend Will were at one time, and for some days, an imminent probability. I have now been a fortnight in this quiet sea-haven and am practically myself again.

At the letter's close, he added: "I have suffered much, but am now again fronting life gravely and with laughing eyes." In a March 1 letter, after returning to London, he told Stedman "he had been seriously ill, had just returned from two-months convalescence, and was well again partly due to what he called "alleviations" or "to be more exact, it should be in the singular! You can guess the name, & perhaps remember something of a rare beauty, of life-lifting eyes." He must have shown Stedman a photograph of Edith Rinder during his trip to New York in November

1896. Later in the letter he was more specific about his illness and Edith's role in his recovery:

Although I have had so bad a time with a dangerous collapse (culminating in severe meningitis) I am now feeling better than I have done for at least two years past — and am quite determined not only to work hard but to get as much of the sunshine & joy & romance and dear delight of life as may be! And what's more, I've had it! And what's more, I have laid in a treasure of it quite recently! And what's more — by my Queen's full consent and approval — I've been a very bad boy with a very dear & delightful "friend," now alas returned to her home in Brussels — & generally I've been "spoilt" & made much of, & have enjoyed it, and am thinking of reforming 20 years hence, but meanwhile cling to my Sunshine Creed — to live sunnily, to think blithely, to act on the square even in my "sinning," & to try to give sunshine to others. After all, it's not such a bad creed — indeed, it's a very good one, and it has my dear poet E. C. S. as Prophet!

In the *Memoir*, Elizabeth said she welcomed Edith's cooperation in the efforts to maintain her husband's health, but this paragraph is the only known instance of Sharp's stating explicitly that Elizabeth (his Queen) consented in and approved of his relationship with Edith. Stedman would have known Edith Wingate Rinder's translations of the stories of Belgian writers, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, which Stone and Kimball published in 1895. Sharp may have given him a copy and suggested she was the woman he loved. Edith visited Belgium in the summer of 1895 and interacted with the writers she translated. In 1899, she published in the *Dome* her translation of Maeterlinck's "Massacre of the Innocents" (January, 49–60), a review of Maeterlinck's *Wisdom and Destiny* (January, 93), and "A Child of the Marshland" (December, 49–60). She may have visited Brussels again in 1898, or Sharp, for reasons unknown, simply invented the idea to remove her from London.

Toward the end of the letter, in a burst of enthusiasm reflecting his restored health and enhanced devotion to the creed of which Stedman was the prophet, Sharp revealed his plan to meet Edith again in France in mid-April:

If all goes well, you can think of me (and my friend) in a lovely green retreat, on the Marne, near Paris, during the last fortnight of April. If you were there too, I would drink to you in white wine, and she would give you a kiss — which, with the glory in her beautiful eyes, would make

you "wild with the waste of all unnumbered Springs." You will be with us in Spirit, dear poet of youth & romance — and I will kiss her for you, & likewise drink the sweet wine of France!!

Following this passage several lines are blacked out and undecipherable. They precede the following lines which are also crossed through but can be read: "[...] hope, and I trust that her sunny smile and youthful heart often rejoice you. You will be a dear youth till the end, E. C. S., — & may the Gods reward you!" Stedman's life must also have been enriched by a young woman as he tried to live the creed of which, at least in Sharp's mind, he was the Prophet. Sharp concluded by saying his letter had better be entrusted to "the oblivious flame." The letter was not so entrusted, but Stedman or someone expunged the name of the young woman who brought joy to his life.

In his St. Margaret's Bay letter to Gilchrist, Sharp said Fiona, "before she got ill," had nearly finished a group of stories that might appear in the spring under the title *There is But One Love*, a volume Elizabeth identified as Fiona's *The Dominion of Dreams*, which was not published until the spring of 1899. Four of those stories appeared first in periodicals in 1898: "Children of the Dark Star" (*Dome*, May); "Enya of the Dark Eyes" (*Literature*, September); "The Wells of Peace" (*Good Words*, September); and "The White Heron" (*Harper's*, December). Two more failed to make their way into *The Dominion of Dreams*: "The Four Winds of Desire" (*Good Words*, 245) and "The Wayfarer" (*Cosmopolis*, June). Despite his illnesses during the first several months of 1898, Sharp produced by mid-year a considerable volume of writing.

Yet another spiritualist entered Sharp's life in late March when he wrote the first of several Fiona letters to Dr. John A. Goodchild, whom he met through their mutual friend Grant Allen. As Fiona, he thanked Goodchild for a copy of a book of his poems and for a proof copy of his *Light of the West*, which would be published in April by Allen's nephew, Grant Richards. Goodchild was a highly regarded medical doctor who cared for his British patients in England and in Italy where many spent the darker months. He was also a serious student of the early civilizations of Ireland, England, and Scotland and had a special affection for the Celts, especially the early converts to Christianity. More significantly, important messages were delivered to him during sleep and reveries. He bought from a tailor in Italy a beautiful glass bowl he thought might

be the Holy Grail, the cup Jesus used at the last supper. After keeping it on display in his library for several years, a master spirit directed him to bury it in a stream near Glastonbury in the West of England, the reputed domain of King Arthur and his grail-seeking knights. The purpose of the burial is not clear, but it had some interesting results. Given Sharp's involvement with Yeats's Celtic Mystical Order, it is not surprising he was drawn to Goodchild who, in turn, was drawn to the Celtic stories of Fiona Macleod.

Since Elizabeth included in the *Memoir* (294–296) part of a letter from her husband dated March 29, he must have been away again. Her inclusion of this letter in the *Memoir* addresses concerns about her acceptance of her husband's relationship with Edith. It is a carefully crafted argument not for free love, but for loving more than one person at a time. Elizabeth introduced the letter by saying it expressed views she and her husband held in common, thus echoing Sharp's opening assertion in the letter:

Yes, in essentials, we are all at one. We have both learned and unlearned so much, and we have come to see that we are wrought mysteriously by forces beyond ourselves, but in so seeing we know that there is a great and deep love that conquers even disillusion and disappointment.

Having assured Elizabeth of his continuing love, he portrays his love for Edith as a powerful force impossible to control:

Not all the wishing, not all the dreaming, not all the will and hope and prayer we summon can alter that within us which is stronger than ourselves. This is a hard lesson to learn for all of us, and most for a woman. We are brought up within such an atmosphere of conventional untruth to life that most people never even perceive the hopeless futility in the arbitrary ideals which are imposed upon us — and the result for the deeper natures, endless tragic miscarriage of love, peace, and hope. But, fortunately, those of us who to our own suffering *do* see only too clearly, can still strike out a nobler ideal — one that does not shrink from the deepest responsibilities and yet can so widen and deepen the heart and spirit with love that what else would be irremediable pain can be transmuted into hope, into peace, and even into joy.

More simply, loving more than one person can cause deep pain, but it can become a source of hope, peace, and even joy for those who know it can "widen and deepen the heart and spirit."



It strains credulity to believe Sharp's relationship with Edith Rinder brought "hope, peace, and even joy" to Elizabeth, but her inclusion of the letter is a clear sign she shared its basic tenets. For most people, Sharp continued in the letter, "the supreme disintegrate" of happiness is "the Tyranny of Love — the love which is forever demanding *as its due* that which is wholly independent of bonds, which is as the wind which bloweth where it listeth or where it is impelled, by the Spirit." Men and women are taught "hopeless lies." They start life

with ideals which seem fair but are radically consumptive: ideals that are not only bound to perish, but that could not survive. [...] That ought not be — but it must be as long as young men and women are fed mentally and spiritually upon the foolish and cowardly lies of a false and corrupt conventionalism.

Mona Caird, Elizabeth's best friend and Edith's cousin by marriage, was arguing forcefully against the conventional constraints of marriage. Elizabeth asserted several times in the *Memoir* that she and her husband shared Mona's views. Her main goal was to free women from the legal and conventional constraints of marriage and recognize them as equal partners with their husbands. In this letter Sharp goes much further to argue that men and women ought to be freed from the convention that marriage required them to love and have intimate relations with only their marital partner.

The letter casts an important light on Sharp's psychological make-up. "False and corrupt conventionalism," he wrote, subjects "many fine natures, men and women," to "lifelong suffering." Some never learn their unhappiness is the result of impossible ideals, while others "learn first strength to endure the transmutations and then power to weld these to far nobler and finer uses and ends." Both suffer, and Sharp places himself among the second class of sufferers. Everyone, he says, tends to nurse grief. "The brooding spirit craves for the sunlight, but it will not leave the shadows. Often, *Sorrow* is our best ally." Sharp's frequent bouts of depression which he described to intimate friends were rooted in the impossible ideals installed in his youth. The letter to Elizabeth ends as follows:

I dreamed that a beautiful spirit was standing beside me. He said, "My Brother, I have come to give you the supreme gift that will heal you and save you." I answered eagerly: "Give it me — what is it?" And the fair

radiant spirit smiled with beautiful solemn eyes and blew a breath into the tangled garden of my heart — and when I looked there, I saw the tall white Flower of Sorrow growing in the Sunlight.

Whether or not the dream occurred, Sharp's rendition is revealing. When he was twenty-one, his father, with whom he had a strained relationship, died. From that point onward, he had an overpowering need for an intimate relationship with a man or a woman with whom he could share his deepest thoughts and feelings. Elizabeth, Edith, and Catherine Janvier fulfilled the female need, and a succession of men — Hall Caine, J. Stanley Little, R. Murray Gilchrist, E. C. Stedman, and starting in 1900 Alexander Nelson Hood, the Duke of Bronte — fulfilled his need for a male confidant, a brother who would blow a breath into the tangled garden of his heart and allow his sorrow to grow into a beautiful white flower in the bright sunlight. These individuals and others fulfilled a deep psychological imperative that reasserted itself throughout his troubled life. Among his surviving letters, those to Murray Gilchrist express that need most vividly. The white Flower of Sorrow neatly symbolized the beauty as well as the temporality of periods of relief from dark depression.

Sharp's trip to France was delayed. On April 22, he told Gilchrist he was leaving for Paris "next Friday," April 29. The purpose of the trip was to introduce Fiona to Yeats and those who were helping him with the Celtic Mystical Order: Maud Gonne, Macgregor Mathers, and his wife Moira. The six would engage in psychic experiments, and Yeats would discuss with Fiona the plays he wanted her to write for the Celtic Theatre he was planning for Dublin. Yeats described the gathering in an April 25 letter to Lady Gregory:

I have been here in Paris for a couple of days. [...] I am buried in Celtic mythology and shall be for a couple of weeks or so. Miss Gonne has been ill with bronchitis. [...] She comes here to-morrow to see visions. Fiona Macleod (this is private as she is curiously secret about her movements) talks of coming here too, so we will have a great Celtic gathering (*Collected Letters II*, 214–215).

In a postscript, he told Lady Gregory he was staying with Macgregor Mathers, "a Celtic enthusiast who spends most of his day in highland costume to the wonder of the neighbors."

Sharp left for Paris on April 29, but he made it only as far as Dover where he again checked into the St. Margaret's Bay Hotel. He wrote to Yeats the next day: "A sudden and serious collapse in health will prevent Miss M. from coming to Paris" and will "probably end in her having to go to some remote Baths for 2 months." He added, "As for myself, partly for this and partly because being myself (as you will understand) seriously indisposed in the same way, I am unable to go to Paris either." This sentence indicates Sharp, by this time, had told Yeats confidentially that Fiona was a second personality and there was another woman he loved who facilitated the emergence and shared many of her qualities. She was working with him psychically on the Celtic Mystical Order. This was the Fiona Yeats expected in Paris. However improbable that construction may be, Yeats accepted it. He was in love with Maud Gonne who loosened his creative powers just as the real Fiona released Sharp's. He was also deeply committed to the possibility of communicating with spirits. Since neither Maud Gonne nor the Mathers knew anything about the woman within, the woman he was taking to Paris would be Fiona Macleod.



Fig. 49 Maud Gonne McBride (1866–1953). Wikimedia [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maude\\_Gonne\\_McBride\\_nd.jpg#/media/File:Maude\\_Gonne\\_McBride\\_nd.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maude_Gonne_McBride_nd.jpg#/media/File:Maude_Gonne_McBride_nd.jpg), Public Domain.

In agreeing to take Fiona to Paris, Sharp must have thought he and Edith, as Fiona, would engage briefly with Yeats and company and then go to "the lovely green retreat on the Marne, near Paris," he described to Stedman on March first. He expected Edith to play the role of Fiona in Paris as she had done for an hour or two with George Meredith the previous June. Though sympathetic to the Celtic Revival, she was neither a Scot nor immersed in the myths and legends of the Hebrides. She must have considered the Paris plan as one of Sharp's romantic fantasies that would evaporate. When she realized he was about to implement the plan, she demurred, and Sharp was forced to invent Fiona's illness. Ensuing events bordered on the fantastic.

After learning Sharp and Fiona were not coming to Paris, Yeats sent Sharp a letter dated May 3:

My dear Sharpe [sic]: please send the enclosed to Miss Macleod. I have been compelled to seal it up, because it concerns the affairs of an astral form which appeared to me & to my fiends last night. I will probably be able to tell you about it later. Please send it at once. Also please tell me what is the tartan of your family & what kind of person was Miss Macleod's father. What did he look like? What was his tartan? Were you conscious of being in any unusual state on either May 1 or May 2<sup>nd</sup>? You will understand these questions later but I may not speak more clearly now except to say that I have had an astral experience of the most intense kind & that your answers are necessary before certain things which I was asked to do can be done.

Such was the atmosphere Yeats and his friends had created in Paris. Yeats, of course, had minimal interest in tartans, so it was Mathers who asked him to do "certain things." Years later, Yeats recalled (*Memoir*, 105) that Mathers "had seen a vision of 'a man standing in an archway' wearing a kilt with the Macleod and another tartan." Yeats himself had begun "to shiver," and the shivering was associated in his mind with William Sharp and Fiona Macleod. In a second "self-induced clairvoyant experience Mathers had seen Sharp in need" and proclaimed, "It is madness, but it is like the madness of a god" (*Collected Letters II*, 219–220). A professional Scot, the tartan wearing Mathers, with help from his wife Moina, he was setting up a Paris Lodge of the Order of the Golden Dawn. He must have had some doubts about the Sharp/Fiona duo. Their tartans, if any, might prove them legitimate Scots. He was

more interested in asserting his Scottish credentials and getting on with the Golden Dawn than in Yeats' Celtic Order.

In his May 5 reply to Yeats' May 3 letter, Sharp said Fiona was with him at St. Margaret's Bay.

She was on her way to Paris, but as I told you she was suddenly taken too unwell. She was sleeping when your letter came, but I left the enclosure for her at her bedside — & if she wakes before the post goes, she will doubtless give you a message through me, unless she feels up to writing herself. If well enough, she leaves here on Saturday morning — but to go north again.

In response to Yeats' questions, Sharp said he experienced on May 1 "a singular depression, and a curious sense of unreality for a time," as though he was really elsewhere, but on May 2 he suffered in a way he could not explain, "owing to what seemed ... an unaccountable preoccupation of Miss M." Responding again to Yeats: Fiona's "father was tall, fine looking, with a rather singular concentrated expression. The Macleod tartan is dark (dark green and dark blue almost black)." Fiona, he continued, "sees a startling likeness between me & her father, though I am taller & bigger & fairer than he was. There are, however, many similarities in nature, etc., and also in the accident of baptismal name." One need not look far for the origin of that detail; Edith Wingate Rinder's father, then deceased, was William Wingate (1828–1884) of Ludford, Leicestershire. Sharp didn't understand why Yeats was asking about the tartan though he must have suspected the questions about Fiona's father came from Mathers. He was nervous about Mathers's interest in Fiona's family, and he saw no need to share the spotlight by introducing a second male into the mix.

In his sealed note to Fiona dated May 3, Yeats said he was suddenly visited the previous night "by the intellectual body of some one who was passing through an intense emotional crisis." He was inclined to believe Fiona was his visitor, and he asked if she, either last night or the previous night (the "intellectual body sometimes appears a little after the emotional crisis that causes its appearance") was passing through some state of tragic feeling. He does not ask in an "idle spirit," but because his help and the help "of the far more powerful occultist [Maud Gonne], with whom he was working, was undoubtedly asked last night by some one."

Just before Sharp posted his letter to Yeats, Fiona awoke, read Yeats' letter, and asked Sharp to reply for her:

*I have* been going through an intense emotional crisis. One less poignant period was on the evening or night of the 1<sup>st</sup>, but far more so, and more poignantly on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. But this, being private, I cannot speak further. I was on both occasions (though differently & for different reasons) undergoing tragic feeling, I am at present at a perilous physical & spiritual crisis. I can say no more. The one who shares my life & self is here. It is as crucial for him. I will talk over your letter to us — for to us it I, though you send it to me. Are you sure it was not Will whom you felt or saw?

Having again neatly shifted the focus to himself, Sharp revealed nothing substantive, but echoed Yeats' vague "tragic feelings" and "emotional crisis." Perhaps because he thought he had been less responsive than expected, he added the following:

Note *this* time today: About 3 p.m. today Thursday she went through (& I too) a wave of intense tragic emotion — and last night, between 10 and 12 or later, we nearly lost each other in a very strange way. Something I did by the will was too potent, & for a time severed some unconscious links (we were apart at the time: I thought she was sleeping) —& we both suffered in consequence. But I think the extreme crisis pf tragic psychic emotion is over. God grant it.

Since Yeats knew Sharp was producing the Fiona writings, his sealed letter to Fiona must have been intended for the woman who inspired the Fiona writings and was helping Sharp with the rites for his Order. That woman, we know, was Edith Rinder who must have been the Fiona who was with Sharp in St. Margaret's Bay. Convinced of that woman's psychic powers, Yeats added to his Fiona note the following postscript: "I had hoped to see you in Paris, having heard from Mr. Sharpe that you might be here. The opening ceremonial of the celtic mysteries, of which he will have told you, is now ready."

In a May 7 response to Sharp's May 5 letter, Yeats detailed Sharp/Fiona's appearances in Paris (*Collected Letters II*, 222–223). Fiona's father had appeared in a Macleod tartan to Mathers in a dream on Sunday [May 1]. On Monday [May 2], Yeats "fell into a strange kind of shivering & convulsive trembling" whereupon he felt the astral presence of first Fiona and then Sharp. Moina Mathers then saw a face



Fig. 50 Moina Mathers (1865–1928), the wife of Macgregor Mathers and sister of Henri Bergson, was an artist, occultist, and founder of the Alpha et Omega Lodge of the Golden Dawn. Left: Moina Mathers from her performance in the Rites of Isis in the Paris Lodge of the Golden Dawn (1899), Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Picture\\_of\\_Moina\\_Mathers\\_from\\_her\\_performance\\_in\\_the\\_Rites\\_of\\_Isis\\_in\\_Paris.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Picture_of_Moina_Mathers_from_her_performance_in_the_Rites_of_Isis_in_Paris.jpg), Public Domain. Right: Moina Mathers (c. 1887). Public Domain. Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moina\\_Mathers.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moina_Mathers.jpg)

which she drew, and it seemed to Yeats to be the face of William Sharp's daemon which George Russell (*Æ*) had seen in the spring of 1897. Next, Moina saw someone who must have been Fiona and then a man with a tartan who, Yeats wrote, "was probably the astral of some dead person." After all these sightings, Yeats, Moina, and Macgregor retired "into a room used for magical purposes" and there made themselves "magical principals rather than persons." Fiona appeared, Yeats continued, and told them "certain things about her spiritual & mental state & asked for Occult help, of which I prefer to talk rather than to write." Fiona, he affirmed, "is suffering physically," as Sharp had told him, "but the cause of this suffering is not physical & can be remedied." It would be best if Sharp and Fiona "could come to Paris for a couple days on (say) Monday [May 9]." Otherwise, Yeats might see Sharp in London at the end of the next week.

Yeats was left shaken for a time by this intense experience. He had spoken in a dream to Sharp's daemon during the night. If Sharp can come to Paris, his friends in "the order of the Rosy Cross," really the Order of the Golden Dawn, and specifically the Mathers, will give any help they can. These friends "have a boundless admiration for the books

of Fiona Macleod." As if all this were not enough to set Sharp's teeth on edge and feed his manic fantasies, Yeats added a postscript, which reads as follows:

I think you should do no magical work with Miss Macleod until we meet. I mean that you should not attempt to use the will magically. The danger of doing so just now is considerable. You are both the channels of very powerful beings & some mistake has been made. I tried to send a magical message, as I have said, last night. It was something which you were to say to Miss Macleod. I can but remember that it was a message of peace. I did not try to appear or make you aware of my presence. I was in a dream for a [...] time too, far off from my surroundings, & believe that our daemons met in someplace of which my bodily self has no memory & that the message which I spoke with my bodily lips was carried thither.

Yeats was an active member of the London Lodge of the Order of the Golden Dawn where his motto was *Daemon est Deus*. His encounter with Sharp's daemon was rooted in the secret rituals of the order, and Sharp, though a less active member of the London Lodge, knew many of its rituals.

Many years later, Yeats wrote of the St. Margaret's Bay exchange of letters:

I was fool enough to write to Sharp and [received] an unbelievable letter from a seaside hotel about the beautiful Fiona and himself. He had been very ill, terrible mental suffering and suddenly my soul had come to heal him, and he had found Fiona to tell her he was healed — I think that I had come as a great white bird. I learnt, however, from Mrs. Sharp years afterward that at the time he was certainly alone but mad. He had gone away to struggle on with madness (*Memoirs*, 105).

Sharp may have written another letter to Yeats or mentioned the "great white bird" in conversation, but if not and he was referring to Sharp's May 5 letter, his recollection was inaccurate. Not only is there no bird, but the assertion — attributed correctly or falsely to Elizabeth — that Sharp was surely alone and struggling with madness was not true. If Sharp's descriptions of Fiona's actions were, as I believe, beyond Sharp's ability to create out of thin air, Edith must have been with him in St. Margaret's Bay. Moreover, many of the letters he wrote to others during the two weeks were perfectly sane and rational. He was experiencing depression, a condition worsened by the psychic experiments, but he was



not insane. The description in his May 5 letter to Yeats of his depression and “tragic emotion” and Fiona’s “perilous physical & spiritual crisis” had some basis in fact, but the letter’s purpose was to sustain Yeats’s confidence in his psychic abilities. It is always difficult to distinguish between genuine Sharp’s experiences and his fabrications. They are often combined, and the mix varies. That said, this letter displays both Sharp’s canniness and the intensity of his desire to participate in Yeats’s spiritual quest

Yeats’s three May letters from Paris — one to Fiona and two to Sharp — also exhibit his attraction to Fiona and the ease of his relationship with Sharp in 1898. He was joined with both in a secret project known to only a few of his close friends. His later disparaging remarks arose, I believe, from an effort to obscure the extent of his psychic activities in the 1890s. Sharp was trying his best to follow Yeats’s directions and contribute to his project. In the first draft of his “Autobiography,” Yeats wrote of Sharp,

I feel I never properly used or valued this man, through whom the fluidic world seemed to flow, disturbing all; I allowed the sense of comedy, taken by contagion from others, to hide from me my own knowledge. To look at his big body, his high colour, his handsome head with the great crop of bristly hair, no one could have divined the ceaseless presence of that fluidic life (*Memoirs*, 128–129).

On the other hand, we recall Yeats’s remark many years later that Sharp “never told one anything that was true.” Taken together, the two comments show Yeats continued for years to unravel the mysteries and grasp the truth about Sharp/Fiona. His failure reflects the complexity of Sharp’s personality and exemplifies the difficulty his friends faced understanding him while he lived and many have faced since he died.

The letters Sharp wrote to Yeats contrast starkly with perfectly sane business letters he wrote from St Margaret’s Bay to his publisher Grant Richards, John Macleay, and Benjamin Burgess Moore. It is no wonder Sharp’s state of mind was fragile, that he was often depressed and on the edge of mental collapse. His life was defined by dichotomies and contradictions as he tried to comply with Yeats’s spiritualist expectations, write poems and stories as though by two different writers, get them published to produce income, and deal with the tensions that inevitably arose from his love for two remarkable women, both of whom loved him

and worried about his mental and physical health. Yeats's warning that Sharp not engage with Miss Macleod in any "magical work" until they could meet provided Sharp some respite for serious writing during his second week at the St. Margaret's Bay Hotel.

After returning to London on May 13, Sharp described his condition to Gilchrist: "After months of sickness, at one time at the gates of death, I am whirled back from the Iron Gates and am in the maelstrom again — fighting with mind and soul and body for that inevitable losing game which we call victory." After mentioning what he was writing, he asked Gilchrist to write to him soon, "by return best of all. You can help me — as I, I hope, can help *you*." Despite his return with renewed health to the "maelstrom," his condition remained fragile; he needed Gilchrist's help, if only through a letter. "It is only the fullest and richest lives," he wrote, "that know what the *heart* of loneliness is." He placed Gilchrist and himself among those who live full and rich lives. Sharing confidences about their deepest feelings and desires would, he thought, alleviate their loneliness. He concluded by calling Gilchrist his "comrade" and assuring him he had his love. More openly here, but throughout his correspondence with Gilchrist, there is the suggestion that Sharp had shared with Gilchrist, whose desires were directed entirely toward men and who lived with a male lover, his need for an intimate relationship with another man and the duality of his sexual orientation.

After St. Margaret's Bay, Sharp stayed in London only long enough to celebrate Elizabeth's birthday on May 17. On the 18<sup>th</sup> he left for what Elizabeth called "a delightful little wander in Holland" with Thomas Janvier, "a jovial, breezy companion." She thought a walking trip with a sound and sensible friend would be restorative, and she was right. Sharp described in a May 20 letter to Elizabeth from the south Zuyder Zee the "marvelous sky effects" and the island of Marken where "the women are grotesque, the men grotesquer, and the children grotesquest" and where the babies are "gorgeous-garbed, blue-eyed, yellow haired, imperturbable." They alone, Sharp wrote, were worth coming to see.

Only a few Sharp/Macleod letters survive from the second half of 1898. Elizabeth glossed over this six-month period by describing her husband's need to express his deepest thoughts and feelings in the writings of Fiona while also continuing to write and publish as William

Sharp to maintain their income and preserve the fiction of Fiona's separate existence.

There was a great difference in the method of production of the two kinds of work. The F. M. writing was the result of an inner impulsion, he wrote because he had to give expression to himself whether the impulse grew out of pain or out of pleasure. But W. S., divorced as much as could be from his twin self, wrote not because he cared to, because the necessities of life demanded it (*Memoir*, 301).

In this context, Elizabeth mentioned two William Sharp novels: *Wives in Exile, A Comedy in Romance* which he wrote in 1895 for Stone and Kimble and *Silence Farm* which he was writing in 1898.

When Grant Richards started his publishing firm in 1897, Sharp saw an opening and convinced Richards to publish a British edition of *Wives in Exile*, which was written in 1896 for Stone and Kimble and finally published in 1897 by Lamson, Wolfe and Co. in Boston. He made some revisions in the spring of 1898, and the book appeared in the summer. It is a light romance in which the men go off sailing, leaving their wives behind to make do. In 1899 Richards published *Silence Farm*, a "tragic tale of the Lowlands, founded on a true incident." According to Elizabeth, her husband had to keep "a considerable amount of himself in check" in order to avoid "obvious kinship to the work of F. M." since he knew "many of the critics were on the watch." Therefore, she continued, "he strained the realistic treatment beyond what he otherwise would have done." Still, "the book was the one he liked best of all the W. S. efforts, and he considered that it contained some of his most satisfactory work." Neither *Wives in Exile* nor *Silence Farm* attracted a sizable readership or critical acclaim. Their failure caused Sharp to turn to travel writing, art history, and criticism for publications signed William Sharp. Despite his efforts to maintain a distinction between publications signed F. M. and those signed W. S. the difference began to fade.

On or about June 20, Yeats sent Fiona a letter which has not surfaced. In it he praised two Fiona stories and asked for a further explanation of the relationships between William Sharp, the female responsible for the Fiona writings, and the real woman who inspired them. Portions of Fiona's reply dated June 28 have been crossed out or erased, but it is possible to read some lines through the markings and infer some of the erased words. In a postscript Fiona asked Yeats to destroy the letter.

When Sharp had not received word that Yeats had done so, he wrote again as Fiona on July 6 to tell Yeats he was anxious about the letter. In a July 4 letter to Sharp, Yeats said he had heard from Fiona and "done as she wished about the letter" (*Collected Letters II*, 250). Fortunately, he had not done as she wished, and the letter survives. In it Sharp evoked a metaphor to describe his relationship with Edith Rinder and her role in his creative process. Since he was writing as Fiona to explain how he created and sustained her, the letter portrays Fiona describing her own origin.

The relevant section reads as follows:

I have been told that long ago one of the subtlest and strangest minds of his time — a man of Celtic ancestry on one side and of Norse on the other — was so profoundly influenced by the kindred nature and spirit of a woman whom he loved, a Celt of the Celts, that, having in a sense accidentally discovered the mystery of absolute mental and spiritual union of two impassioned and kindred natures the flame of [?vision] that had been his in a far back day was in him, so that besides a strange and far [?reaching] ancestral memory, he remembered anew and acutely every last clue and significance of his boyhood and early life, spent mostly among the shepherds and fishers of the Hebrides and Gaelic Highlands. His was the genius, the ancestral memory, the creative power — she was the flame — she, too, being also a visionary, and with unusual and all but lost old wisdom of the Gael. Without her, he would have been lost to the Beauty which was his impassioned quest: with her, as a flame to his slumbering flame, he became what he was. The outer life of each was singular, beyond that of any man or woman I have heard of: how much stranger that of their spiritual union. A profound and resolute silence lay upon the man, save when he knew the flame of the woman "through whom he saw Beauty," and his soul quickened. She gave him all she could, and without her he could not be what he was, and he needed her vision to help his own, and her dream, and her thought, and her life, till hers and his ceased to be hers and his and merged into one, and became ..... a spirit of shaping power born of them both.

Sharp enabled Fiona to recall a tale from the ancient past about a man who was half Celt and half Norse and had one of the subtlest and strangest minds of his time. Sharp was half Celt and through his mother half Norse, and he certainly had one of the strangest, if not the subtlest, minds of his time. To understand how his relationship with Edith Rinder enabled him to write as Fiona, Yeats had to untangle the metaphor of a

torch, a match, and a flame. My best effort of entanglement makes Edith the match that brought flame to the otherwise dark and silent torch. They became one in the resultant fire, which was the fire of passion, the fire of creativity. The torch (Sharp) was the vehicle that carried that fire while the match survived within the fire and sustained it. How Yeats interpreted this metaphor of creativity we cannot know, but it came to dominate Sharp's imagination. After describing it, Fiona asked Yeats: "How does that strike you as a subject for a tale, a book? It would be a strange one. Does it seem to you impossible? It does not seem so to me." Indeed, it did not, for Sharp as Fiona incorporated the match, the torch, and the flame into "The Distant Country," a story he began writing in the summer of 1898 and included in Fiona's *The Dominion of Dreams* which Archibald Constable and Co. published in May 1899. The story will be discussed in some detail in the next chapter.

Sharp was in London for most of July 1898 writing and dealing with the publication details of *Wives in Exile*. In mid-July, he received a letter from Yeats addressed to Fiona informing him that a certain legal obstacle to the establishment of a Celtic Theater in Dublin had been resolved and asking which plays Fiona would have for production by the fall. In her reply, Fiona said that three plays ("Fand and Cuchulain," "The King of Ys," and "Dahut the Red") would be ready for consideration. And there might be a fourth, "The Hour of Beauty." The first three were never finished, but "The Hour of Beauty," was retitled "The Immortal Hour" and published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1900. The play was not performed in Dublin, but it became the libretto for Rutland Boughton's opera, which was an enormous success on the London stage in the 1920s and is still performed. Though Sharp was working on plays during the summer of 1898, he managed to complete only two ("The Immortal Hour" and "The House of Usna"). His plan to write a series of short dramas under the general title *The Theatre of the Soul* came to naught, but "The House of Usna" was also published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1900. On April 29, 1900, it was performed at the Globe Theatre in London under the auspices of the Stage Society of which Sharp was President. Only a few in the audience knew he was the play's author.

On July 19 the Sharps went to Holmesfield in Derbyshire to visit Murray Gilchrist at Cartledge Hall, where he lived with his mother, his two sisters, and his companion George Garfitt. They returned to London

on July 26, and Sharp left for the West of Scotland on July 31. A letter carrying that date from Fiona to Benjamin Burgess Moore, the American fan she had enlisted in approaching publishers, informed him that "it is not quite true that Mr. Yeats and I are collaborating on a drama: but we are each writing a drama, which we hope to see brought out in the new Celtic Theatre in Dublin next year." She concluded by telling him that as soon as she finished her new book (*The Dominion of Dreams*) she would "get on with two short plays, 'The Hour of Beauty' and 'The King of Ys and Dahut the Red.'" Yeats's efforts to encourage Sharp/Fiona to write plays for his projected theatre in Dublin soon came to an abrupt end when Irish Nationalists forced him to change its name to the "Irish Theatre" and exclude all but Irish authors.

In a July 4 letter to Sharp from Coole Park, Yeats said Edward Martyn was too upset by his mother's death (on May 12) to invite anyone to Tillyra Castle, his home in County Galway. If he changed his mind, Yeats would speak to him about inviting Sharp who spent three weeks at Tillyra in October 1897. Encouraged by Yeats, Martyn sent Sharp an invitation, but the formality of Sharp's early August reply suggests it was less welcoming than that of the previous year. Having gone by himself to the West of Scotland at the end of July, Sharp stayed in and around Kilcreggan, near where Edith Rinder was vacationing, for most of August. He returned to London on the 24<sup>th</sup> and went on to Holland to gather material for an article on Rembrandt which *Cosmopolis* commissioned and published in its November issue. He was back in London by September 17, the date of a Fiona letter to Benjamin Moore which mentioned "prolonged absence" as reason for his delay in writing.

Sharp's annual birthday letter to E. C. Stedman on September 28 mentioned "illness — followed by heavy work & latterly a big exigent writing commission in Holland for *Cosmopolis*" (the Rembrandt article) as excuses for the relative brevity of the letter. Still, he managed to inform Stedman that he "had a very wonderful & happy time this summer with the dear friend of whom you know, & whose writings you admire so much — & I look to another week at least about mid-October." The dear friend was Edith Rinder, who Stedman thought was Fiona Macleod. She and Sharp were frequently together during the three weeks he spent in the West of Scotland. He concluded the Stedman letter by highlighting his recent successes: "In another letter I must tell you of my many literary

doings — more ambitious now. (In a magazine way, see *Fortnightly* for August, etc. etc. Also, *Cosmopolis* in Nov. — am now writing for *all* the big mags here and U.S.A.)” The August *Fortnightly* contained his tribute to Edward Burne Jones, the Pre-Raphaelite painter who recently died.

It is difficult to chronicle Sharp’s activities in the fall of 1898 because very few letters survive. He may have had another holiday with Edith Rinder in October, as he told Stedman he was planning, and he was continuing the mystical efforts to obtain talismans and rituals for Yeats. In that connection, it is interesting to note that Sharp proposed Grant Richards ask Edith Rinder to translate Jules Bossière’s *Fumeurs d’Opium*, a collection of stories first published in 1896 examining the effects of opium on mind and body.

Near the end of December, just before Christmas, he wrote to Catherine Ann Janvier with enthusiasm and optimism from the Pettycur Inn across the Forth from Edinburgh. His time there had been “memorable,” and he had written three stories for *The Dominion of Dreams* that he thought some of his best work.

What a glorious day it has been. The most beautiful I have ever seen at Pettycur I think. Cloudless blue sky, clear exquisite air tho’ cold, with a marvelous golden light in the afternoon. Arthur’s Seat, the Craggs, and the Castle and the 14 ranges of the Pentlands all clear-cut as steel, and the city itself visible in fluent golden light.

Then he was moved to reflect on what he had accomplished and to welcome “a new birth,” without specifying whether it would occur in this world or the next:

And now I listen to the gathering of the tidal waters under the stars. There is an infinite solemnity — a hush, something sacred and wonderful. A benediction lies upon the world. Far off I hear the roaming wind. Thoughts and memories crowd in on me. Here I have lived and suffered — here I have touched the heights — here I have done my best. And now, here, I am going through a new birth. “Sic itur ad astral!”  
[Thus, onward to the stars]

It is fitting that the first and last surviving letters of 1898 were addressed to Catherine Ann Janvier, the American artist and writer who was fourteen years older than Sharp, and with whom he shared some of his deepest thoughts and dreams.

