

# William Sharp and "Fiona Macleod"

A Life



WILLIAM F. HALLORAN



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2022 William F. Halloran



This work is licensed under a Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

William F. Halloran, *William Sharp and "Fiona Macleod": A Life*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0276>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations.

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0276#copyright>. Further details about Creative Commons licenses are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>. Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0276#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

ISBN Paperback: 9781800643260

ISBN Hardback: 9781800643277

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800643284

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800643291

ISBN Digital ebook (azw3): 9781800643307

ISBN XML: 9781800643314

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0276

Cover image: William Strang, William Sharp (c. 1897), etching, printed by David Strang. Photograph by William F. Halloran of author's copy (2019).

Cover design: Anna Gatti.

# Chapter Eighteen

*January–June 1899*

---

In a lengthy article entitled “A Group of Celtic Writers” in the January issue of the *Fortnightly Review* William Sharp, disguised as Fiona, offered his views of the Celtic Revival. He thought there was too much looseness of phrase among journalists who wrote about “the Celtic spirit, the Celtic movement, and that mysterious entity Celticism.” To clarify the issue, he offered a definition:

What is called “the Celtic Renaissance” is simply a fresh development of creative energy colored by nationality and molded by inherited forces, a development diverted from the common way by accident of race and temperament. The Celtic writer is the writer the temper of whose mind is more ancient, more primitive, and in a sense more natural than that of his compatriot in whom the Teutonic strain prevails.

After detailing more differences between Celtic and Teutonic writers, he settled on a simple definition:

All that the new generation of Celtic or Anglo-Celtic (for the most part Anglo-Celtic) writers hold in conscious aim, is to interpret anew “the beauty at the heart of things,” not along the lines of English tradition but along that of racial instinct, colored and informed by individual temperament.

The writers he singled out as fitting the definition were Anglo-Irish: W. B. Yeats, George Russell (Æ), Nora Hopper, and Katharine Tynan Hinkson. Designed to solidify Fiona Macleod’s position in the Celtic Renaissance and curry favor among the Irish, the article was favorably noted in the Irish press.

It also elicited an unexpected response. The sections reproduced above are enough to show its prose was unlike Fiona Macleod’s and

resembled that of the articles William Sharp was writing for London periodicals. It precipitated an unsigned article entitled "Who is Fiona Macleod: A Study in Two Styles" in the January 28 issue of the *London Daily Chronicle* which set passages of prose side by side, and challenged Sharp to deny his authorship: "Will Mr. Sharp deny that he is identical with Miss Macleod? That Miss Macleod is Mr. Sharp. I for one have not a lingering doubt, and I congratulate the latter on the success, the real magic and strength of the work issued under the assumed name." This article was notable for its detailed comparisons and its praise of the pseudonymous writings. Sharp was worried about its effect, but since it was hard to refute he decided to ignore it. Several months later, at the insistence of his publishers, he placed a brief denial by Fiona in the *Literary World* (*Memoir*, 305).

Concern about a possible unmasking contributed to the various maladies Sharp suffered during the winter months of 1899, but he managed to finish two books: Macleod's *The Dominion of Dreams* was published by Archibald Constable and Co. on May 27, and Sharp's *Silence Farm* was published by Grant Richards on June 13. The former was a collection of stories and ruminations Sharp considered the deepest and most significant of the Fiona writings. The latter, as described in the previous chapter, was a realistic novel about a young farmer falling in love with his father's ward and incurring his father's wrath. On January 18, he told Richards he thought it was "the strongest and best piece of work I have done in fiction." Richards agreed to publish it, and, when it appeared, Sharp promoted it among his friends and fellow writers hoping to elicit favorable reviews that would boost sales. Unfortunately, trying to read *Silence Farm* one becomes emersed in a verbal swamp, and it disappeared quickly into the silence of its title. Sharp was a skillful and energetic editor and critic, but he fell short when venturing into short fiction, and the novel eluded him. On the other hand, adopting the persona of an elusive lady who roamed the western isles of Scotland released his creative and formative powers. The fiction is uneven and too often over-written, but as Fiona he could mold stories from start to finish, stories that enabled readers to suspend disbelief and identify with characters. Sharp thought his ability to adopt the Fiona Macleod persona and tell the stories depended on maintaining the fiction of her existence as a real person.

Richards' decision to publish *Silence Farm* may have been based in friendship rather than the work's quality. In May 1897, he married Elisina Palamidessi de Castelvechio (1878–1959), the great-great-granddaughter of Napoleon's brother Louis. In the spring of 1898, they were planning a delayed honeymoon on the French Riviera. Sharp suggested Richards contact Thomas Janvier who had a home in Provence and was currently living in London. Should Janvier fail to respond, Sharp offered his assistance. He knew the area well, Mistral and Felix Gras were friends, and he was engaged in "a critical study of modern Provençal literature." Years later, in *Author Hunting by an Old Literary Sportsman*, Richards credited William Sharp and Thomas Janvier with drawing up the itinerary for his honeymoon.

In a late January letter to Richards, Sharp mentioned the success of Mrs. Wingate Rinder's translation of C. Le Goffic's *Le Crucifié de Keraliès*, recently published as *The Dark Way of Love* by Archibald Constable and suggested he commission Mrs. Rinder to translate Jules Boissiere's *Fumeurs d'Opium*. Richards must have expressed interest, since Edith sent him Sharp's copy of *Fumeurs d'Opium* and a sample of her translation. Either it failed to reach Richards, or he mislaid it which caused Sharp to tell him in a late April letter he hoped it might still be traced, as copies were not easy to come by. Mrs. Rinder was naturally put out about it as her translating had to be stopped, and it was not resumed.

In late March, the Sharps spent a long Easter weekend (March 30–April 4) in Hazelmere, Surrey with the Grant Allens, Grant Richards' uncle and aunt. Accepting the invitation in a March 25 letter, Sharp said his insomnia required a separate bed; he would stay at a nearby inn if a room having two beds was not available at the Allen's. To mitigate his request for separate beds, he informed the Allens Elizabeth was about to return from a month-long absence in Scotland and commented: "How fortunate that I am an austere Anchorite — eh?" In a follow-up letter to Nellie Allen, who must have assured him of the separate sleeping arrangement, Sharp hoped the "fine air" would provide "a surcease from too much nervous headache and from indifferent sleep."

On March 25, Fiona thanked Frederick Ernest Green, a prolific writer on agricultural policy, for his letter praising her *Washer of the Ford*, and Green published the letter in his "Book of the Week" column in the January 21, 1909 issue of the *New Age*. The book that occasioned

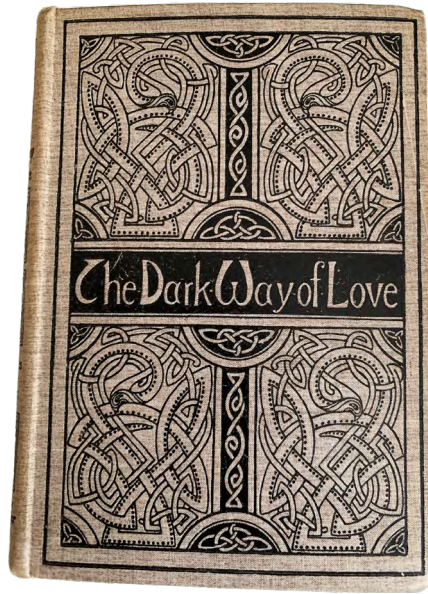


Fig. 51 The elaborate cover design of *The Dark Way of Love*, Edith Wingate Rinder's translation of C. Le Goffic's *Le Crucifié de Keraliès*, published by Archibald Constable in 1898. Photograph by William F. Halloran of his copy.

Green's column was Fiona's *Songs and Poems, Old and New*, published posthumously in 1909 by Eliot Stock. In his column, Green recalled sitting next to Richard Whiteing at a dinner in 1899 following the publication of his *No. 5 St. John Street*, a popular novel that went through sixteen editions, made Whiteing famous, and became Grant Richards' first commercial success. Green asked Whiteing if he knew William Sharp and said it had been rumored that Sharp "was either Fiona Macleod or else a near relation to that personality." Whiteing replied, "Yes, I do. Now, he is my ideal of a Man — magnificent physically as well as intellectually." Green commented, "How I should have liked to see these two Titans among men of letters standing together or walking arm-in-arm down Fleet Street." Sharp would have been surprised and pleased to be called a "Titan among men of letters."

Green also recalled having talked with W. B. Yeats, the honored guest and speaker at another dinner which took place on March 1, 1899:

From telling me how he could cast a spell upon an Irish peasant and make him see a ghost, we got on to talk of crystal-gazing and from thence to Fiona

Macleod, whose writings were to me the most beautiful efflorescence of the Celtic Renaissance. I remember asking him point-blank if he knew who Fiona Macleod was. He answered in the affirmative. He spoke about a pilgrimage, too, that she had made to George Meredith, and how in her was wedded beauty and intellect. This inspired me to speak of my wife, who had died a few years anterior to this, and I promised to send him a little book of her poems.

Green then printed what he termed a “strange reply” from Mr. Yeats:

My dear Mr. Green, — I thank you very much for your wife’s little book. What a beautiful face she must have had. Her photograph is a little like Miss Fiona Macleod’s, curiously enough. I have been so busy about “The Irish Literary Theatre” that [I] have put off writing to you from day to day. Again thanking you, I remain, yours sincerely, W. B. Yeats.

After receiving this letter, Green wrote Fiona the letter which produced her reply of March 25. Yeats’s letter to Green is of interest for its direct evidence Sharp had shown Yeats a picture of Edith Rinder and identified it as a portrait of the woman who inspired Fiona. Green commented: “Whether or not Mr. Yeats ever knew the truth and felt obliged to sustain the fiction invented by the author himself I cannot say.” Yeats did know a version of the truth. He knew Sharp was the vehicle of the Fiona stories and poems, and he accepted Sharp’s contention Fiona was a secondary personality inhabiting his body inspired by a beautiful woman with whom he was in love. He had seen a picture of Edith Rinder, the woman who enabled the emergence of Fiona, the woman Sharp sometimes identified as Fiona.

In a mid-April letter Sharp thanked Yeats for a copy of *The Wind among the Reeds*, his “long-awaited” book of new poems: “It is beautifully got up — and you know what intimate appeal and constant charm its contents have for me. Some of your loveliest work is here. And the notes (which I must read again and again) have, in their kind, a like charm.” He ended: “Either I or Miss M. — or both, separately — will review your beautiful book in one or two places. Miss M. has written to the Express — ‘Literature’ is already secured.” Fiona’s review appeared in the *Dublin Daily Express* on April 22, 1899 under the title “Mr. Yeats’ New Book”:

It is not often, I imagine, that titles are as apt as that which Mr. Yeats has chosen for this little book. These fewer than two-score poems, most

of them within the boundary of a page, are small and slight as reeds; and the wind which moves them, which whispers or sings from them a delicate music, is as invisible, as mysterious, as elemental as that "strong creature, without flesh, without bone, that neither sees nor is seen," of which long ago Taliesin sang.

Having defined the spirit of the poems, Fiona turned to praise:

Mr. Yeats is assuredly of that small band of poets and dreamers who write from no other impulse than because they see and dream in a reality so vivid that it is called imagination. With him the imagination is in truth the second-sight of the inward life. Thus it is that he lives with symbols, as an unimaginative nature might live with barren facts.

A note of caution creeps in: "When the reader, unfamiliar with 'the signature of symbol,' shall read these and kindred lines, will he not feel that this new priest of the Sun should translate to a more human key his too transcendental vision?"

That question leads to a discussion of the notes which comprise half of the book: "If all notes afforded reading such as one may read here! Mr. Yeats turns round mentally and shows us the other side, where the roots grow and the fibers fill with sap, and how they grow to that blossom we have already seen, and what the sap is." They are full of learning and "have something of the charm of the poems to which they stand interpreter," but

one cannot ignore the incongruity which lies in the wedded union of brief lyrical poems with many explicatory pages. It is not their presence, then, that one objects to, but their need. Poetry is an art which is, or should be, as rigorously aloof from the extraneously explicative, as the art of painting is, or as sculpture is, or music. When Mr. Yeats gives us work on a larger scale, with a greater sweep, he will, I trust, remember that every purely esoteric symbol is an idle haze — and haze, as we know, is apt to develop into a blank mist.

From questioning the need for the notes, learned though they might be, and asserting that poetry should stand by itself without explication, Fiona reverted to high praise:

what a lovely gift of music and spiritual intensity and beauty Mr. Yeats delivers in this book, ...No lovelier, more convincingly poetic verse has been given to us of late than these light, yet strenuous, airs of a wind that is forever mysterious, though we hold it more familiar when it blows



across the mind of some poet such as Mr. Yeats whom we know, and to whom we look.

A revised and expanded version of this review appeared as “The Later Work of Mr. W. B. Yeats,” in the October 1902 issue of the *North American Review* (473–485). There, Fiona called the volume the “beginning of a new music” and included, “This little book has the remoteness, the melancholy of all poetry inspired by spiritual passion.” Concerns about the obscure symbolism and the copious notes were retained, but the praise was more excessive: Yeats was “one of a small company” of “pioneers in that intimate return to nature from which we may and do expect so profound and beautiful a revelation.”

Couched as they are amid words of praise that would warm the heart of any young poet, the review’s critical comments contributed to the breach that occurred between Yeats and Sharp/Macleod over the next few years. Coolness had begun to surface during Sharp’s visit to the West of Ireland in the fall of 1897. Yeats’s Irish friends were not hesitant in sharing their reservations about Sharp’s strange behavior and lack of enthusiasm for Irish nationalism. Fiona was not alone among reviewers in questioning the arcane symbolism and lengthy notes in *The Wind among the Reeds*. Yeats anticipated the criticism when he described the volume to Henry Davray (*Collected Letters II*, 306): the notes, he said, had given him “a good deal of trouble & will probably make most of the critics spend half of every review complaining that I have written very long notes about very short poems” (see also R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats, A Life*, I, 214–218).

Davray reviewed the book favorably in the July 1899 issue of *Mercure de France* (267–268). Interestingly, he addressed both Yeats’s book and Fiona Macleod’s *The Dominion of Dreams* as the work of the two major exemplars of the Celtic movement in Britain. Though Yeats knew his symbols and notes would invite criticism and though he eliminated the notes in later printings of the poems, he did not expect any critical remarks from Sharp/Macleod, his secret confederates in the Celtic Mystical Order and a major voice in the Celtic Revival. Sharp, of all people, should have appreciated the symbols, some derived from the Golden Dawn and the Celtic Order, as well as the attempt to enlighten the world about Celtic myth and lore. It was not long until Yeats’s reciprocated with a critique of Fiona’s *The Dominion of Dreams*.

In mid-April, having finished *Silence Farm* and with *The Dominion of Dreams* in galleys, Sharp was set to go to Paris to review the Salons and then on to the country for a period of rest and relaxation. Difficult negotiations with Grant Richards about *Silence Farm* delayed his departure. On April 16, he was leaving the following week. On April 26, he would leave on the 28<sup>th</sup>; on the 28<sup>th</sup> he could not leave until April 30 or May 1. The problem was Sharp's need for an advance from Richards to fund his trip. On April 25 he told Richards he was willing to accept fifty pounds instead of a hundred pounds upon delivery of the manuscript. Two days later he returned the manuscript to Richards (who had shipped it back to him) and agreed to accept twenty-five pounds if he could have the money now. He needed it "owing to an unforeseen emergency." Richards had the upper hand, since the sale of Sharp's previous novel, *Wives in Exile*, was disappointing, but it is sad to witness Sharp, who wanted so much to be in his own right a successful writer of fiction, pleading with the young publisher for money.

Once in France, Sharp spent about two weeks reviewing the salons in Paris. While there, he met Moina and Macgregor Mathers and read aloud several stories from his proof copy of *The Dominion of Dreams*. The Mathers were impressed. In a letter to Yeats dated May 29, Moina Mathers wrote: "We have been much delighted to meet William Sharp, who was over here. It is impossible to say how much we liked him — We felt greatly in sympathy — He is a very remarkable being I think — in every respect, & so strangely psychic." After signing the letter "Yours fraternally ever | Vestigia," her name in the *Golden Dawn*, she added a footnote: "Have just received 'The Dominion of Dreams' — & am much looking forward to it" (*Collected Letters II*, 51). An enthusiastic reader of Fiona, Moina became an enthusiastic admirer of Sharp, though she did not know he was Fiona.

On May 14, Sharp left Paris to spend a week in the countryside. During that week, we learn from later letters, he became ill enough to need two physicians, but he was able to return to London on May 22, where he found an author's copy of *Silence Farm*. The next day, he told Grant Richards he was pleased by the appearance of the book: "the binding, the print, the paper, are just what I would choose." He was sorry Richards had postponed publication until June 13, and gave him a list of people who should, along with the weeklies and monthlies,

receive complimentary copies so they could write reviews or otherwise spread word about the book.

The year's work began to bear fruit when *The Dominion of Dreams* was officially published on May 27. Sharp sent one of his author's copies to Frank Rinder. He wanted him to have one of the first copies because the book "is at once the deepest and most intimate that F. M. has written." The letter should be read with the knowledge that Sharp's relationship with Rinder's wife was the disguised subject of many of the book's stories. Sharp told Rinder, "Too much of the book is born out of the incurable heartache, 'the nostalgia for impossible things.'" He hoped "the issues of life have been woven to beauty, for its own sake, and in divers ways to reach and help or enrich other lives." That, he said, is "a clue to the whole book," and it was at once his solace, his hope, and his ideal. "If ever a book," he continued, "came out of the depths of a life it is this." He then turned to the future of the Fiona writing: "F. M.'s influence is now steadily deepening and, thank God, along the lines I have hoped and dreamed. ... In the writings to come I hope a deeper and richer and truer note of inward joy and spiritual hope will be the living influence." More explicitly, he intended future Fiona writings to turn from love affairs and their inevitable tragic endings to stories of joy and hope. Concluding the letter, he quoted the final sentence of "The Distant Country," one of the book's stories: "Love is more great than we conceive, and Death is the keeper of unknown redemptions."

Sharp began writing "The Distant Country" in the summer of 1898, not long after he invented, in his June 28 letter to Yeats, the metaphor of the match, the flame, and the torch to describe his relationship with Edith. He concluded that letter, we recall, by saying: "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." "The Distant Country" is the tale that did not seem impossible.

Writing as Fiona in the first person, Sharp announced the story would be about love: "There is a poet's tale that I love well and have often recalled: and of how in the hour of death love may be so great that it transcends the height of hills and the waste of deserts and the salt reaches of the sea." One night Fiona dreamed of Red Ithel and Pale Bronwen in the far east and the next night of Aillinn and Sweet-spoken Baile in the Gaelic west. Both couples loved intensely, but sadly their love

was consummated only in death. From those four star-crossed lovers, Fiona moved on to a pair of lovers she "loved well" who "had their day in this West of rains and rainbows, of tears and hopes" and have now passed on to the "Distant Country." The body of the tale is an effort by Sharp, speaking as Fiona, to describe and understand his relationship with Edith Rinder. Before launching the story, Sharp announced its theme by introducing the metaphor of the flame.

Love is at once so great and so frail that there is perhaps no thought which can at the same time so appall and uplift us. And there is in love at times for some an unfathomed mystery. That which can lead to the stars can lead to the abyss. There is a limit set to mortal joy as well as to mortal suffering, and the flame may overlap itself in one as in the other. The most dread mystery of a love that is overwhelming is its death through its own flame.

Fiona then proceeded to the story of the couple she knew. The woman, who was a "flame" to the man's "mind as well as to his life," fears their all-consuming love, as it becomes more powerful, will burn itself out. At first the man rejects that fear and describes his love as "more enduring than the hills." The woman senses the end approaching when the man becomes "strangely disquieted": "Too many dreams," he said once, with double meaning, smiling as he looked at her, but with an unexpressed trouble in his eyes." Soon her love for him becomes "too great a flame" and implodes. She has not ceased to love him. She will continue to give him her entire being, but it has become "an image that has no life." Love came close, the man decides, and looked at them in its "immortal guise," a tameless and fierce thing "more intense than fire," which consumes what death only silences.

Here Sharp ventured into the spiritualist experiments he was conducting with Edith. The "immortal had become mortal." The man had not foreseen the result when "by a spiritual force, he accomplished that too intimate, that too close union in which none may endure." Fiona believed in the "mystery," but could not explain it. She knew of it "only through those two who broke (or of whom one broke) some occult but imperious spiritual law." The two lovers "lived long after this great change. Their love never faltered. Each, as before, came close to the other, as day and night ceaselessly meet in dawns and twilights. But that came to her no more which had gone. " And for him, "he grew

slowly to understand a love more great than his. His had not known the innermost flame, that is pure fire." Fiona turned next to the depressions that often clouded the man's life: as they sometimes clouded the life of William Sharp: "Strange and terrible thoughts came to him at times. The waste places of the imagination were peopled. Often, as he has told me, through sleepless nights a solemn marching as of a vast throng rose and fell, a dreadful pulse."

Fiona did not know "what, in the end, clouded or unclouded" the man's spirit. But she, "who knew them, who loved them," has her "assured faith: the more, not the less, now that they have gone to that distant country of Splendour and Terror." Then the climactic sentence: "Love is more great than we conceive, and Death is the keeper of unknown redemptions." That sentence became fixed in Sharp's mind and in the minds of many readers of Fiona Macleod; it is inscribed on his gravestone under a Celtic cross in a remote protestant cemetery in Sicily.

For all its contradictions and excesses of language, this story was Sharp's effort to explain how his love for Edith Rinder and hers for him quickened his imagination and enabled him to write as Fiona Macleod. Augmented by their efforts to contact and join the realm of spirits, their love became too passionate, too intense. Whereupon they broke, or, more precisely, he broke "some occult but imperious spiritual law" that produced his intense mental conflicts. Either the flame of his love was so intense it burned itself out or, he speculates, he had not reached the "innermost flame," the flame of pure fire which can burn forever. Either way, the love became unsustainable. It could be fulfilled only in some "distant country of Splendour or Terror," wherever their spirits may live when they die.

The story's ending — the fire that fueled their love burned itself out — explains Sharp's sending the book to Frank Rinder and highlighting this story. The sentence he quotes from the story, moreover, is a plea for forgiveness. Deep love is beyond our ability to understand and control. Redemption from the pain it causes may come only after death. That conclusion must also explain Elizabeth's decision to include in the *Memoir* portions of her husband's letter to Rinder. If the operation of love is a mystery beyond human comprehension, the actions it precipitates are beyond human control and unreconcilable on this side of the shade that separates life and death. Sharp intended the story and

this letter as signals to Rinder that the intensity of his relationship with his wife had begun to fade. Elizabeth surely grasped her husband's intent and included the letter in the *Memoir* for her readers to unravel.

The importance of the story is reaffirmed in two letters to Yeats. In the first in late May Sharp said of *The Dominion of Dreams*, "Few can guess how personal much of it is. You almost alone will read 'The Distant Country,' for example, with 'other eyes.'" Yeats would recognize the two principal characters are based on Sharp and the woman he loved, and he would understand the occult underpinnings and their effect. In the second, dated September 16, Sharp, writing this time as Fiona, had more to say about the story and its central metaphor which will be discussed in the next chapter.

On May 29 Sharp also wrote letters about *The Dominion of Dreams* to Æ (George Russell) and Coulson Kernahan, and he drafted Fiona letters to Benjamin Burgess Moore in the United States and to Edith Lyttelton in London. The latter presents a telling instance of Sharp's efforts to ingratiate himself with the London establishment. Edith Sophy Balfour Lyttelton, later Dame Edith Lyttelton, was a writer and an enthusiastic reader of Fiona Macleod. She was also a prominent hostess and the wife of Alfred Lyttelton (1857–1913), a Member of Parliament and, for a time, Secretary of State. In responding as Fiona in early May to a fan letter from Mrs. Lyttelton, Sharp wrote:

I would like to know a little more of you, though more than likely we may never meet. Will you tell me? (Are you Miss or Mrs.?) But just as you like, of course. I ask, partly because of yourself as revealed in your letter: partly because of a keen personal association unwittingly awakened. But it does not matter. I am content that you are a friend, that you bear a name dear to me, and that you have been generous enough to write whole heartedly to a stranger.

Edith Lyttelton's name was dear to Sharp/Macleod, of course, because she shared her given name with Edith Rinder. Fiona continued,

You live in London and know Mr. Yeats. Do you know his, and my friend and kinsman, Mr. William Sharp? As doubtless you have seen in the papers — for the controversy about myself seems as recurrent as the sea-serpent — he is often supposed to be me, or I to be him, or both of us to be each other, with many other speculative variations! I would like you to meet.



Fig. 52 Dame Edith Sophy Lyttelton (née Balfour) after a picture by Romney; by Lafayette, photogravure by Walker & Boutall, 1897; published 1899. © National Portrait Gallery, London. Some rights reserved.

Sharp did meet Edith Lyttelton at a social gathering shortly after he returned from France in mid-May. She told him, in what must have been a brief conversation, she had been ill. Sharp passed this news to Fiona and used it as an excuse to have Fiona tell Edith how sorry she was to hear of her illness, adding “You will, of course, know at once how I have heard of your illness.” She continued,

After your second letter I wanted you to meet Mr. William Sharp, and he would have called a month or more ago but that he had to go to France. I am glad you have met for as I think I told you, he is my most intimate friend, as well as my kinsman. If you like him, you would like me: if you do not like him, you would not like me. There! It is a woman’s argument — but perhaps none the less convincing.

Farcical as those sentences sound, Sharp was not simply having fun with Mrs. Lyttelton. He was angling for another meeting, this time just the two of them. “So, you live in an old house in Westminster and have ‘a swift and individual mind,’ and are ‘keenly sensitive to impressions,’ and ‘seem tuned to that finer inward suffering which goes with every

nature open to mystery and to beauty.' That is what Sharp told Fiona, and she knew that. She mentally reproached Sharp for not being more explicit where upon he said frankly "It is not only that I have no time, but that I am unable to say more. If ever I meet her alone, I will see and know what, in a first visit, in the circumstances and with others present, was of necessity fugitive or uncertain." Sharp was using Fiona to prepare the way for his calling on Edith in the hope of finding her alone and prepared for an in-depth discussion of their dreams and desires. He was especially attracted to women he thought might become confidants, and this one had the added advantage of being highly placed in society.

It did not take long for Edith to invite Sharp and for him to accept. The next Fiona letter, dated June 18, is a reply to a recent letter from Edith Lyttleton:

I am very glad that you can feel to me as to a friend. I hope you will write when so ever you will. I shall always be glad to hear from you. Indeed, I feel that we *are* friends. There are things — but above all there is *something* — in your letter which comes home to me intimately.

As some slight sign of this I sent you the "Kingdom of Silence," and also asked Mr. Sharp to send you from me (I thought he had an extra copy of mine, but he hadn't!) a copy of my most personal or intimate book, "From the Hills of Dream."

Do you not "write" yourself? Your letters (with their eager note, and distinctive touch) make me think you do. If so, I wish you would let me see something.

I am glad you have seen my friend again. I think you and he will become friends. It is my hope. He says you are "the Hon. Mrs. Lyttelton," and wife of one of whose family I know something.

And I am sure I would like you now as much as he does.

Sharp's use of Fiona to begin a friendship with a woman of importance mirrored the relationship he developed — via Yeats — with Lady Gregory, and both friendships were limited in duration. .

In late May, Sharp assured Yeats he had read and carefully considered the draft of a Celtic Mystical Order Rite. He thought it needed "something more definite in visionary insight and significance." It needed "spiritual recasting." He was waiting for inspiration, a "resurrection," that would enable him to recast the Rite. He would let Yeats know when the rebirth occurred if it was of "any worth." His "stream of inward thought" was "moving that way." He had been ill and was now better, but his doctor



had ordered “hill and sea air” native to him. He and Elizabeth would forego their plans to visit Scandinavia and go instead to Ireland at the end of July, to the East coast, as it would be too expensive to go to the West. He hoped Yeats will like *The Dominion of Dreams*, which will appeal to few but hopefully “sink deep.” The play Fiona Macleod would soon finish for Yeats’s Celtic Theatre would no longer be called “The Tarist,” but “The King of Ireland’s Son.” Sharp asked if Yeats will be at Gort (with Lady Gregory) or Tillyra (with Edward Martyn) in August? If so, Sharp said, he envied him as his heart was always in the West. Having to stay in hotels would make the West too expensive for their Ireland visit. Yeats surely got the unspoken point that an invitation from Lady Gregory to stay at Coole Park or from Martyn to stay at Tillyra would make the West affordable. In a postscript, Sharp sent his “most cordial remembrances & regards to Lady Gregory”

Through most of June, Sharp remained in London, trying to promote sales of his two books through friends and reviewers. On or around June 5, he wrote again to Yeats. He was still too weak to undertake the psychic effort to comment in detail on the draft copy of the Rite. It needed more work, and he would get to it as soon as he could muster the energy. Again, he asked Yeats what he thought of *The Dominion of Dreams* and wondered if he would be reviewing it. He remained curious on this point through June. Having heard nothing in response, he was surprised when Yeats’s review appeared in the July *Bookman*.

After asking Yeats to do something for *Silence Farm* in his early June letter, he said he and Elizabeth would be leaving their South Hampstead flat (30 Greencroft Gardens) for good around July 20. If Yeats would be in town before then, he hoped to see him. He told Yeats for the second time he and Elizabeth would spend some time on the east coast of Ireland, north of Dublin. Then he explicitly stated his hope that Edward Martyn or Lady Gregory would invite them to the West. The lines containing that hope are crossed through with a single wavy line, but the text is clearly visible. If the line was Sharp’s, he must have wanted Yeats to think he had thought better about conveying his hope for an invitation while leaving the hint highly visible. Uncharacteristically, Sharp ended by telling Yeats he was suffering one of his periodic bouts of depression: “I doubt if I’ll ever live in London again. It is not likely. I do not know that I am overwhelmingly anxious to live anywhere. I think you know

enough of me to know how profoundly I feel the strain of life — the strain of double life. Still, there is much to be done yet. But for that..." The mention of his double life reminds us again Sharp told Yeats in 1897 the Fiona writings flowed through him, she was a separate alternative personality triggered and inspired by a real woman with whom he enjoyed an intimate relationship.

Yeats also sent a draft copy of the rite to Fiona asking her to comment. Rather than asking Sharp's second self to respond, the letter must been intended for the woman who inspired Sharp to write as Fiona, the woman he knew only as Fiona who was helping Sharp with the Celtic Rites. In a June 14 letter Sharp as Fiona asked Yeats to be patient about the Rite for a bit longer. Sharp would be coming to see her in Scotland at the end of the following week (around June 24), and "it is important he and I should talk over, rather than correspond about this."

In late May, Sharp told Æ (George Russell) he would receive a copy of *The Dominion of Dreams* "from Miss Macleod & myself (per the publishers)." When they met in Dublin the previous fall, Sharp claimed authorship of the Fiona writings and said, as he told Yeats, she was a separate personality inhabiting his body. Russell knew Sharp was talking about one aspect of his self when he said the book "comes from deeper depths of life, both of suffering & spiritual exaltation, than any other of F. M.'s books." Preserving the fiction of Fiona's separate existence, Æ sent her a letter, which has not surfaced, that mixed praise with criticism. Writing as Fiona, Sharp responded on June 17 to Æ's "friendly and sincere letter," echoing Æ's heightened prose:

I am like one in an apparently clear wood which is yet a mysterious maze out of which I cannot escape, or even reach the frontiers so as to discern where I am and what vistas are beyond me: nay, even the stars themselves become confused often in the darkness of the branches, and the sun's way seems equally to lead west or east, or north or south, so that I fare often bewildered even at full noon.

Perhaps your letter — perhaps your will and thought — can help me. I hope so. I can say neither "yea" nor "nay" to the central part of your letter. But that spiritually I have been furnishing the palaces of the mind with empty shadows is, I fear, true. Well, I *hope* — and *believe*.

The letter ended with a request for a copy of the review Æ was writing for the *Dublin Daily Express*. When Æ sent the review to Fiona later in

the summer, he excused his delay by saying he had said all he wished to say directly to her in the earlier letter. He told her “The review is sincere if critical. But I can judge by no other than an absolute standard.” He concluded with a sad admission: “if you hope and believe you are on the path: Faith and hope are companions only met on the straight road and having them you have help I could not give you having lost them awhile.”

Sharp went to Edinburgh on or around June 24. On the 27<sup>th</sup> he mailed a card to Grant Richards from Sterling on his way to Glasgow and the West. He wanted to assure him he would answer his letter when he returned to Edinburgh in “about a week.” In the June 14 Fiona letter to Yeats, she said Sharp planned to meet her in Edinburgh and go with her to the western isles. It was his habit to talk about the time he spent with Edith Rinder as time spent with Fiona, who he claimed variously was both his cousin and his beloved. He was constructing and taking part in a drama with multiplying complexities that only he understood, and it was becoming difficult to manage. He began to tell people different and contradictory details about Fiona — who she was and how they were related — and it became harder to keep his stories straight. Sequencing Fiona’s movements with those of Edith enabled him to attain some consistency. It is likely Sharp and Edith were together in the country southwest of Glasgow, in or near the Kyles of Bute, in late June, a respite that may well have lasted longer than a week and one that provided an escape from his financial problems and the nagging doubts of friends and fellow writers about the authenticity of Fiona.

