

William Sharp and "Fiona Macleod"

A Life



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

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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 Nineteen

July–December 1899

Sharp asked Yeats several times in May and June to review Fiona's *Dominion of Dreams*. Yeats praise would boost the book's sales. On July 3, while he was in the west of Scotland, Sharp began a letter to Yeats about the Celtic Order and the plays he was writing as Fiona. Before he finished, the post brought a letter from a London friend telling him Yeats had reviewed the book negatively in the July *Bookman*. Distraught, he began another letter to Yeats in which he quoted extensively the letter from his friend who had a conversation with several "literary men" who spoke favorably about Sharp's *Silence Farm*. But then,

the talk drifted to your friend (she is your friend, is she not?) Miss Macleod's new book, and what a notable thing it is for a book of that kind to go into a second edition within three weeks of publication. So, there is a split in the Celtic Camp! I admit it amuses me. I never have believed, never can believe, in the ability of these folk to sink minor matters for a common end. I'm speaking of course of W. B. Yeats's article on Miss M. in *The Bookman*. Mr. _____ laughed & said that it was the worst snub Miss M. had received. Have you seen it? Yeats says she has enough faults to ruin any ordinary writer, and that there's not a story in her book which should not have many words struck out. As he doesn't say a word of praise or welcome about it, but only something about her surely unquestioned mythopoeic faculty — it's obvious he either doesn't find much in the book, or wants to take her down a peg or two.

Sharp had not seen the July issue of the *Bookman*, but he expected it to arrive the next day. "Meanwhile," he continued the second Yeats letter, "I can hardly credit what my friend writes."

I hope it is not true. It will greatly distress & dishearten Miss Macleod, who had hoped so much for a cordial & generous word from you about

her maturest & most carefully wrought book: but I hope it is not true for the sake of the plays also, for if once deeply discouraged Miss M. may not touch them again for months. And still more, & far more importantly than for any individual concern, I hope it is not so — for the always bitterly opposed idea of unselfish & united action among "our scattered few" will be grievously handicapped by any suggestion that you have "gone for" or even "snubbed" Miss Macleod.

When a copy of the *Bookman* arrived the next day, Sharp found in Yeats's review two paragraphs of praise and only one expressing reservations about Fiona's overly florid style. He decided not to send Yeats the second letter, and it has surfaced in a batch of Sharp letters to John Macleay recently acquired by the National Library of Scotland. How it came into Macleay's hands is unknown, but Elizabeth may have mistakenly included among letters she returned to Macleay after using them in the *Memoir*. Instead of sending that letter, Sharp wrote to Yeats as Fiona and asked him "to indicate the passages he took most exception to." According to Elizabeth, Yeats sent "a carefully annotated copy of the book," and "a number of the revisions that differentiate the version in the *Collected Edition* from the original issue are the outcome of this criticism" (*Memoir*, 309).

The person most likely to have stirred up trouble between two leading figures of the Celtic Renaissance was Sharp's publisher, Grant Richards. He knew where Sharp was staying in Scotland, and he knew Sharp would be sensitive to any criticism of Fiona's *Dominion of Dreams*, particularly anything negative by Yeats. The letter writer's conversation with the "literary men" took place at the Savile Club in London. According to the Club's records, Richards became a member on March 24, 1899. That the men spoke positively about Sharp's *Silence Farm* is not surprising since Grant Richards published it. Nor is it surprising the men were amused by Yeats's criticism of *The Dominion of Dreams* and viewed it as a "split in the Celtic camp." Some in London's literary establishment, Richards among them, viewed Fiona Macleod and other Celtic Revivalists with a mixture of humor and contempt.

On July 20, the Sharps, back in London, stored their furniture and vacated their South Hampstead flat. They stayed briefly with Elizabeth's mother in Bayswater and then returned to their "dear West Highlands, to Loch Goil, to Corrie in Arran, and to Iona" (*Memoir*, 311). In August they crossed to Belfast and, after a few days in the city, went north to

Ballycastle on the Antrim coast. On August 26, they moved south to Newcastle in County Down, stayed there three weeks, and spent ten days in Dublin before returning on September 26 to London.

Benjamin Burgess Moore, the Yale undergraduate who fell in love with Fiona, announced he was coming to England and hoped to meet her. In a July 12 letter, Fiona assured him he was one of the few for whom she would break her invariable rule, but she needed complete and prolonged rest and was about to leave Edinburgh for a two- or three-month yachting trip in the far north. She suggested Moore meet instead with her “most intimate friend, Mr. William Sharp,” who “asked me to say he hoped you would call next Monday afternoon (17th) about 3 or 3.30.” Moore accepted that suggestion, and Fiona, in an August 11 letter, said she was glad Moore liked Sharp. Surprisingly, she continued, “If you had not, you would not like me! Truly: for we are not only close kindred but at one in all things.” Mr. Sharp had taken a liking to his “American friend” and hoped he would call again in October on his way back to America from the continent. He was leaving his South Hampstead address at the end of July and would be living from October first in Chorleywood, just northwest of London and reachable by train. Moore could call on him either there or at his club, the Grosvenor in New Bond Street. He was currently in Ireland, “on the north Antrim coast called Ballycastle (the neighborhood whence Deirdre and the Sons of Usna sailed for Scotland when fleeing from Concobar).” Fiona had just received a letter from Sharp in which he described his “titanic swim among rough breakers on a wild coast near the Giant’s Causeway, so, after all, his hated London life does not seem to have sapped his vigor!” Later she will go to Ireland to meet him. She already knew “the wild Antrim coast — and the lonely, remote, Gaelic-speaking isle of Ragherry (Rathlin) where the grandson of the great Nial the Victorious went down with all his fleet.” Why Sharp wanted to portray himself to Moore as strong and vigorous is not clear, but the mentions of Gaelic mythology were designed to sustain his interest in Fiona.

Having now met Moore and decided he was a sensible young man who might become a useful promoter of Fiona in America, Sharp had Fiona share some details about her work. She planned several revisions of *The Dominion of Dreams*. They were too late for the third edition, but she hoped there would be a fourth so she could insert the changes

despite the publisher's opposition. She mentioned an "exceedingly good" review the book received the previous week in the *Publisher's Circular*, and a complimentary notice of the book in, of all papers, *Punch*. Then surprisingly, given the favorable reviews and Sharp's claims that it was the best Fiona had done, he wrote as Fiona: "I am very dissatisfied with it — and would gladly rearrange and rewrite it all from beginning to end." During the fall, Fiona hoped to finish a volume of spiritual tales that would be named either "the Reddening of the West" or, after its chief essay, "The Divine Adventure." Unless she could finish one of its crucial pieces, an essay on Iona, she would delay its publication until the spring of 1900. She also hoped to finish before Christmas a volume of three plays: "The King of Ireland's Sons," "The Immortal Hour," and "Queen Ganore." That volume did not materialize, but the first play, retitled "The House of Usna," was performed in April 1900 and published in July 1900 in the *National and English Review*. The second play, "The Immortal Hour," was published in the *Fortnightly Review* in November 1900. More will be said about them in the next chapter. After sounding more like Sharp than the modest lady of the Isles, Sharp revived her coyness in concluding: "Now after all this personal detail see that you write to me from France, or I will not forgive you, nor ever write to you again. | So, conditionally, your friend, Fiona Macleod."

Sharp wrote several other remarkable letters in Ireland. In late August, he told his new friend, Edith Lyttelton, that Fiona sailed to Iceland but did not stay long before being blown south to the Inner Hebrides by "a continuous polar wind which almost made sails as swift as steam." He spent some time with her before coming to Ireland, and she might join him there "for a week or so in Connemara, and again in Antrim." After reading Sharp's *Silence Farm*, Edith Lyttelton had written to ask about his other writings. Among other books Sharp mentioned *Sospiri di Roma*, the lyrics he wrote and published in Italy in 1891. He promised to give or lend Mrs. Lyttelton a copy of the rare, limited edition and described some of the circumstances of its composition. He might tell her more in person than he cared to write. Was that only another effort to land a meeting with Mrs. Lyttelton, or did he intend to tell her about a beautiful young woman who inspired the poems. Had he done so he would not have identified the woman as Edith Rinder, but simply as Fiona Macleod. He sometimes claimed the mysterious and elusive

Fiona was his cousin, and sometimes he went further, implying they were lovers. Edith was often conflated in his mind with Fiona, and the fictional Fiona story was intricately interwoven with the facts of his life.

On September 12, his forty-fourth birthday, Sharp, in a reflective mood, wrote a letter to Adelaide Elder, Elizabeth's girlhood friend, in which he recalled that on his twenty-second birthday in 1877 she had given him "a beautifully bound book by a poet with a strange name and by me quite unknown — Dante Gabriel Rossetti." Had he not received that gift, the whole course of his life would have been different. He mentioned the book to Sir Noel Paton, a Scottish painter, a family friend, and a friend of Rossetti who dissuaded him from "going abroad on a career of adventure." Later, in 1881, Paton provided the introduction he presented to Rossetti when he knocked on his door in Cheyne Walk and was invited in for the first of many visits. That event, Sharp wrote, "completely redirected the whole course of my life." He knew Adelaide understood how "in the complex spiritual interrelation of life," the "single impulse of a friend" can have "so profound a significance." As Sharp approached his fiftieth birthday, they became occasions for reflecting on his past and mustering resolve to get on with unfinished projects.

A Fiona letter to Yeats dated September 16 thanked him for returning a copy of *The Dominion of Dreams* with suggested revisions. According to Fiona the book had "already been in great part revised by my friend" [Sharp himself] who had "in one notable instance followed [Yeats's] suggestion." She did not bother to say why Sharp was revising her book. In an October 20 letter to John Macleay, Sharp, as Fiona, said *The Dominion of Dreams* was now in its fifth edition, but she had still been unable to make any revisions. She hoped to be able to make revisions in the seventh edition, and it seemed probable that would occur by or shortly after the first of the year. As it turned out, the revisions had to wait until 1910 when Elizabeth, in accord with her husband's instructions, reprinted *The Dominion of Dreams* in Volume III of the Uniform Edition of *The Works of "Fiona Macleod"* (London: William Heinemann).

From revisions, Sharp as Fiona turned in the September 16 letter to "The Distant Country," one of the stories in *The Dominion of Dreams*:

Of one thing only I am convinced, as is my friend (an opinion shared with the rare few whose judgment really means much), that there is

nothing in *Dominion of Dreams* or elsewhere in these writings under my name to stand beside "The Distant Country." Nothing else has made so deep and vital an impression both on men and women — and possibly it may be true what a very subtle and powerful mind has written about it, that it is the deepest and most searching utterance on the mystery of passion which has appeared in our time. It is indeed the core of *all* these writings — and will outlast them all.

Nowhere else was Sharp so direct in asserting the autobiographical underpinnings of the Fiona writings and the importance therein of love and sexual passion. He continued writing as Fiona:

Of course, I am speaking for myself only. As for my friend, his heart is in the ancient world and his mind for ever questing in the domain of the spirit. I think he cares little for anything but through the remembering imagination to recall and interpret, and through the formative and penetrative imagination to discover certain mysteries of psychological and spiritual life. (Apropos, I wish you very much to read, when it appears in the *Fortnightly Review* — probably either in October or in November — the spiritual "essay" called "The Divine Adventure" — an imaginative effort to reach the same vital problems of spiritual life along the separate, yet inevitably interrelated, lines of the Body, the Will (Mind or Intellect), and the Soul.) ["The Divine Adventure" appeared in the November 1 and December 11 issues of the *Fortnightly Review*.]

The Dominion of Dreams, Fiona implied, embodied the feminine approach to life and love, while *The Divine Adventure* embodied that of her friend, the masculine William Sharp. *The Divine Adventure*, the articles in the fall of 1899 and the book in the summer of 1900, was, nevertheless, published as the work of Fiona Macleod. Such were the contradictions that surfaced in Sharp's management of the dual authorship and double identity.

From the two modes of writing, Sharp as Fiona turned to yet another effort to define the role of Edith Rinder in the Fiona Macleod writings. Yeats had asked Fiona which of her tales she liked best, and she responded, "Temperamentally, those which appeal to me most are those with the play of mysterious psychic force in them." She singled out, "The Distant Country" as displaying the "mysterious psychic force" and "the core of all" the Fiona writings. As indicated in the previous chapter, the story was Sharp's attempt to fictionalize and thus come to terms with his relationship with Edith Rinder. He hoped Yeats would read the

story as a coded effort to describe how his love for Edith quickened his imagination and enabled him to write as Fiona.

Yeats knew Sharp was the author of the Fiona stories and poems, but he continued to ask if Fiona was a real person who inspired Sharp to write as Fiona, a secondary personality of Sharp's, or a spiritual being inhabiting Sharp's body and using him as an amanuensis. After drawing Yeats's attention to "The Distant Country" Sharp, as Fiona, turned to the story's fire metaphor which he had introduced to Yeats in a June 1898 letter. Here, more than a year later, he expanded and transformed it into an elaborate allegory involving the match, the torch, and the spiritual wind, a new element which fans the flame.

Again, I must tell you that all the formative and expressional as well as nearly all the visionary power is my friend's. In a sense only his is the passive part; but it is the allegory of the match, the wind, and the torch. Everything is in the torch in readiness, and, as you know, there is nothing in itself in the match. But there is the mysterious latency of fire between them: in that latent fire of love — the little touch of silent igneous potency at the end of the match. Well, the match comes to the torch, or the torch to the match — and, in what these symbolize, one adds spiritual affinity as a factor — and all at once flame is born. The torch says all is due to the match. The match knows that the flame is not hers, but lies in that mystery of thitherto awakened love, suddenly brought into being by contact. But beyond both is the wind, the spiritual air. Out of the unseen world it fans the flame. In that mysterious air, both the match and the torch hear strange voices. But the match is now part of the torch, lost in him, lost in that flame. Her small still voice speaks in the mind and spirit of the torch, sometimes guiding, sometimes inspiring, out of the deep mysterious intimacies of love and passion. That which is born of both, the flame, is subject to neither — but is the property of the torch. The air which came at the union of both is sometimes called Memory, sometimes Art, sometimes Genius, sometimes Imagination, sometimes Life, sometimes the Spirit. It is all.

The match is Fiona, the presumed author of the letter, and the torch is Sharp. Most people admire the flame and wonder only at the torch. A few "look for the match beyond the torch, and, finding her [Edith Rinder], are apt to attribute to her that which is not hers, save as a spiritual dynamic agent." Occasionally the "match may also have *in petto* the qualities of the torch — particularly memory and vision: and so can stimulate and amplify the imaginative life of the torch. But the torch

[Sharp] is at once the passive, the formative, the mnemonic and the artistically and imaginatively creative force." More explicitly: "he and he alone is the flame, his alone both the visionary, the formative, and the expressional." Sharp, as both the torch and the flame it produces, was the sole author of the Fiona writings and Fiona, or more precisely the real woman behind her, was his muse. The wind — or spiritual force — was introduced to appeal to Yeats who believed spirits intervened and energized the creative process. Once its complexities are unraveled, the letter assigns William Sharp full credit for the writings of Fiona Macleod. It is no wonder he asked Yeats to destroy it. ["Read — copy what you will, as apart from me — and destroy this."]

In "The Distant Country," Sharp implied the love that defined his relationship with Edith had changed shape. In this letter he was more explicit: Edith's role as Sharp's muse, as his inspiration for the Fiona Macleod writings, was diminishing. "Of late," he wrote, "the 'match' is more than ever simply a hidden flame in the mind of the 'torch.' When I add that the match never saw or heard a line of "Honey of the Wild Bees" (which you admire so much) till after written, you will understand better." In that story, Sharp introduced what he called "ancient Celtic lore" to equate Love and Death. Rinn, known as "Honey of the Wild Bees," fell in love with Aevgrain, the beautiful daughter of Deirdre and Naois. Having seduced her and caused her to love and follow him, he announced he was the Lord of the Shadow whose name in this world is Death. As in "The Distant Country," passionate love can be perfectly and permanently consummated only in the afterlife, the realm of spirits. In drawing Yeats's attention to this story, Sharp wanted him to know the woman behind Fiona was becoming less important in producing the writings published as her work. It was Sharp who introduced the spirit from the shadow world to portray the impossibility of perfect love in this world. It was Sharp who foresaw the inevitable ending of his relationship with the woman behind Fiona and the gradual reintegration of his personality.

Fiona, Sharp posits, was speaking only for herself in expressing her preferences for stories in *The Dominion of Dreams*, not for her friend Sharp:

[His] heart is in the ancient world and his mind forever questing in the domain of the spirit. I think he cares little for anything but through

the *remembering* imagination to recall and interpret, and through the formative and penetrative imagination to discover certain mysteries of psychological and spiritual life. (Apropos, I wish you very much to read, when it appears in the *Fortnightly Review* — probably either in October or in November — the spiritual ‘essay’ called “The Divine Adventure” — an imaginative effort to reach the same vital problems of spiritual life along the separate, yet inevitably interrelated, lines of the Body, the Will (Mind or Intellect), and the Soul.)

The forthcoming “Divine Adventure” would be published as the work of Fiona Macleod, but it would be an expression of William Sharp’s attempt to discover through “the *remembering*, formative and penetrative imagination certain mysteries of psychological and spiritual life.” Sharp had tried hard to maintain in his fiction and poetry the gender difference between the voice of Fiona and his own, but the difference had become less essential. Moving forward, the Fiona writings would project a voice that combined feminine and masculine sensibilities, a voice closer to that Sharp adopted in his reviews and essays on literature and art.

For financial and health reasons, the Sharps decided “to make the experiment of wintering at Chorleywood,” a small town immediately northwest of London, now part of greater London. Ever in need of money, they hoped to economize by living outside London and avoid having to go abroad to escape the city’s smoke and smog in the winter. On the first of October 1899, they occupied the first floor of a new building named Wharnccliffe with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Chorleywood’s High Commons. A baker named Frederick Baldwin owned the building, and his bakery occupied the ground floor. A member of the Hertfordshire Genealogical Society, recognizing William Sharp’s occupancy of the building at the turn of the 20th century, has posted a contemporary photograph on the Society’s website and seeks older photographs so the building can be restored. On October 8, Sharp told Richard Garnett they had settled in Chorleywood, a “bracing & delightful place, near Milton’s Chalfont St. Giles and Arnold’s beloved Chess” where he hoped Garnett would “feel inclined to come for a breath of vivid air.” Concluding an October 19 letter to Watts-Dunton, he remarked: “How lovely autumn is at this moment. The trees here are divinely lovely.”



Fig. 53 Recent photograph of Wharncliffe, Chorleywood, London, <http://www.hertfordshire-genealogy.co.uk/images/!/c/chorleywood/chorleywood-wharncliffe-google.jpg>

On October 25, Grant Allen suffered a painful death from liver cancer. His family arranged for his body to be cremated on October 27 following a brief ceremony in the Brookwood Crematorium in Woking. Sharp was deeply moved by the death of his friend who shared many of his "advanced" views about the nature of love and the restraints of marriage. His effort to attend the service in Woking was stymied by poor communications and missed connections. Having failed to reach Woking, he returned to Chorleywood and wrote a sympathy letter to Allen's son. Only in that morning's paper had he learned of Allen's death and the service set for three o'clock that afternoon: "I at once changed my clothes, caught the one available train, & drove straight across — but, in the hurried departure, I had unfortunately read 'Charing Cross' for 'Waterloo' — & so I missed the train after all, to my profound regret everyway." He also explained his absence and conveyed his sympathy to Grant Richards, his publisher and Allen's nephew. In a letter to Murray Gilchrist that day, he said he was acutely saddened by the death of his good friend, Grant Allen: "I loved the man — and admired the brilliant writer and catholic critic and eager student. He was of a most winsome nature. The world seems shrunken a bit more. As yet, I cannot realise I am not to see him again. Our hearts ache for his wife — an ideal loveable woman — a

dear friend of us both.” He also told Gilchrist he had undertaken, for financial reasons, a huge study of art in the nineteenth century that, with his other writing, occupied all his time. Still, he remained pleased with Chorleywood and the beauty of the fall season: “We like this most beautiful and bracing neighborhood greatly [...] It has been the loveliest October I remember for years. The equinoxial bloom is on every tree. But today, after long drought, the weather has broken, and a heavy rain has begun.”

In early November Sharp invited Gilchrist to come to London for a few days at the end of the month to be his guest at a dinner of the Omar Khayyam Club: “You know that the Omar Khayyam Club is the ‘Blue Ribbon’ so to speak of Literary Associations, and that its occasional meetings are more sought after than any other. As I think you know I am one of the 49 members — and I much want you to be my guest at the forthcoming meeting on Friday Dec. 1.” It would be a special occasion. The President of the club had honored Sharp by asking him to write and recite a poem at the dinner. The invitation meant a great deal as it confirmed his presence among London’s literary elite. Though Elizabeth seconded the invitation to Gilchrist, he did not appear.

An undertow soon diminished the pleasure of life in Chorleywood. As November darkened into December, Sharp had to take the unusual step of asking Watts-Dunton for a loan:

What with long and disastrous illness at the beginning of the year — having to help others dear to me — and, finally, losses involved through the misdeed of another, I find myself on my beam-ends. By next Spring I hope to have things righted so far, if health holds out — but my pinch is just now, with less than £5 in the world to call my own at this moment!

Much of their income derived from journalistic art criticism, and all such work had been cut back by two-thirds due to the Boer War. When he finished the history of fine arts in the nineteenth century, it would repay the time and effort he was devoting to it, but nothing until then. He asked Watts-Dunton if he could lend him fifty pounds. If that was too much, he might be able to manage with twenty-five pounds, which had the buying power of 2,766 contemporary pounds and 3,350 dollars. He would be able to repay that much by February or even sooner. How ironic that Sharp who was about to be honored by his peers at the Omar

Khayyam Club dinner had only five pounds to his name. A man of means and considerable compassion, Watts-Dunton came through with twenty-five pounds.

"The Divine Adventure" appeared in the November and December issues of the *Fortnightly Review*. On December 30, Sharp told Gilchrist, who knew Fiona was Sharp, "It was written *de profundis*, partly because of a compelling spirit, partly to help others passionately eager to obtain some light on this most complex and intimate spiritual destiny." On that day, he also wrote to Frank Rinder, his "dear friend and literary comrade" to wish him "health and prosperity in 1900." He wanted him to read the opening pages of the Fiona Macleod essay called "Iona" which would soon appear in a book with "The Divine Adventure": "I have never written anything [...] so spiritually autobiographical. Strange as it may seem it is almost all literal reproduction of actuality with only some dates and names altered." Having asserted his authorship of the essay, he said to Rinder, "But enough of that troublesome F. M!" This assertion — he is, and he is not Fiona Macleod — is a fitting conclusion to a year in which he made some progress in clarifying, for himself if not for others, the complex relationship of William Sharp, Edith Rinder, and Fiona Macleod.