William Sharp and "Fiona Macleod"

A Life

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

1905

In a January 4 letter from Bordighera, Sharp told Thomas Hardy he had been to San Remo to visit William Dean Howells who ranked Hardy's work as "foremost of all contemporary work in fiction." Howells was pleased to hear Hardy valued the "faithful realism" of his work. Sharp told Hardy he and Elizabeth had just returned from New York and Boston and were glad to be back in Italy though they had "a delightful time in the States." In mid-January, they left the Italian Riviera for Rome where they hoped to stay through March in rented rooms in a hotel on the Via Sallustiana. Sharp described their location in a letter to Howells:

> We are settled here (instead of in rooms, or an apartment with a servant — which we found not to be had in accordance with our desires & needs & means) in a pleasant little suite of 3 or 4 rooms at the top of a sunny & charming new small hotel in the sunniest & healthiest part of Rome. Our rooms all face S.E. & S.W. — and so we have unbroken sunshine from sunrise till sunset: & from our windows & balconies of our Salotto we have superb views over Rome and to the hills & to the Campagna.

Despite the rooms and the views, the Sharps found Rome less desirable than anticipated. It was much colder than usual, and shortly after they arrived the flu overtook Elizabeth and spread to her husband with dire consequences for his diabetes.

Writing to Howells again in mid-January, Sharp said they knew too many people in Rome, "Italian, English, Russian, American, & French — Society & Bohemia in a perpetual league against work." He doubted they would remain in Rome beyond the end of February: "I'm afraid Italy is not a good place for work: I think we of the Anglo-Celtic

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stock need the northern bite of Great Britain or North America to do our best in the best way." According to Elizabeth, they "saw a few friends — in particular Mr. Hichens who was also wintering there; but my husband did not feel strong enough for any social effort." By the time Sharp wrote again to Howells in late January, they had decided to leave at the end of February. He was sorry to cut their stay short, but he could not afford to be any place he couldn't work, and "in every way Rome is about the last place for that."

In a February 5 birthday letter to Lauretta Stedman, E. C. Stedman's granddaughter, Sharp described their charming rooms and continued,

> For reasons of health (for my perilous diabetic ailment has been seriously touched up again, in consequence I suppose) & also for work-conditions, & other reasons, we have decided to leave Italy at the end of February for "The English Riviera," in other words for Ventnor in the South of the Isle of Wight — where, indeed, we think of some day making a home.... I am tired of so many years of continuous wandering, & I'm sure Mrs. Sharp is eager for a home, tho' she loves being in Italy also. For work's sake, too, (& I don't mean the financial side of the question) it is in all ways better for me to be more in touch with my own country.

For six years, the Sharps had been without a permanent residence; their furniture and belongings had been in storage since 1899. That he was thinking about ceasing his constant travel and finding a permanent home in Ventnor signaled his waning energy, but also his expectation of a longer life. Given its climate and his illness, the Isle of Wight was an unlikely place to settle permanently, but he may have chosen it as the southern-most reach of his "own country." He concluded by asking Lauretta to convey greetings to her grandparents and apologized for such a short letter, but he was not well and "under exhausting pressure of accumulated work & correspondence."

In a February 21 letter to Thomas Mosher, whom he met in Boston in December, Sharp thanked him for the leather-bound little books. Both he and their author [Fiona] preferred them to the parchment-bound copies, "both to handle and to look at." They are a reminder of their pleasant December meeting in Boston. He continued:

> I am very glad we had time for that confidential chat, too, and I think you will now better understand certain reserves & puzzling things, & the more readily see, or at any rate *feel*, how they are not all by any means

> arbitrary or foolish, but more or less inevitable. I have of course seen a good deal of my friend since I came to Italy, and before she left Rome the other day I explained to her about our talk, & how that whatever she wrote to you at any time in privacy would be kept absolutely private by you. I dare say now, too, you understand a good deal more than what was said, by inference. When we meet again, or someday, things may be made still clearer to you.

This passage suggests Sharp told Mosher he and Fiona were lovers to explain their frequent, furtive meetings and her allusiveness. What might someday be made "still clearer" to Mosher was the true relationship between Sharp and Fiona, the woman he claimed to love.

Before leaving Rome, Sharp completed a two-part travel guide for Americans visiting Sicily and sent it to Richard Watson Gilder, editor of the *Century Illustrated Magazine.* Gilder accepted Sharp's proposal for this article when they met in New York in December. It was published posthumously in three parts in the March, April, and May 1906 issues of the *Century*. In a letter transmitting the article, Sharp asked for quick payment since he would need the money when he reached Ventnor. The Sicilian articles were preceded in the February 1906 issue of the *Century* by "Portraits of Keats: With Special Reference to those by Severn," the article Sharp wrote in the summer of 1904. Immediate payment was not forthcoming, but these four articles helped allay Elizabeth's financial circumstances following her husband's death.

The Sharps left Rome in late February and arrived in Ventnor via Paris in mid-March where Sharp worked on several articles that appeared in *Country Life* under his own name and several Fiona books published by Mosher in the United States. Not lingering long in Ventnor, the Sharps departed at the end of March and rented rooms at 5 Gordon Place between Kensington Church Street and Holland Park. After a few days in the city, Sharp went to Edinburgh to visit his mother and convinced his sister Mary to go with him to the Inner Hebrides. They made their way west to the small island of Lismore in Loch Linnhe north of Oban to stay with the MacCaskills, the elderly Gaelic-speaking couple Sharp had known for years. On April 19, the day after their arrival, he described to Elizabeth, who had accompanied him to Lismore in the summer of 1902, his pleasure in being there again and in the stories of strange apparitions which his host recounted by the fire at night. The weather was a drawback:

> The cold is very great, & as it is damp cold you'd feel it hard. Even with a warm blanket below me, & six above I was cold — & when I got up and had a partial bath (for I scooted out of it to dress) my breath swarmed about the room like a clutch of phantom peewits. No wonder I had a dream I was a seal with my feet clammed on to an iceberg. You couldn't stand it. Even Mary said it was like mid-winter. A duck went past a little ago seemingly with one feather & that blown athwart its beak, so strong was the north wind blowing from the snowy mass of Ben Nevis.

Having arrived on Lismore on Tuesday, April 18, he told Elizabeth it was almost certain they would leave the next Tuesday as he could not stand the penetrating cold much longer. He was glad to have come as it was unlikely he would ever be in Scotland again so early in the year.

On April 23, he told Elizabeth he had decided not to go out to Iona as his presence there would be noted by islanders on the lookout for Fiona Macleod. Anything he heard there and later used in the Fiona writings could be traced to him. Neither would he visit other islands since he had much of what he wanted, "above all, the atmosphere: enough to strike the keynote throughout the coming year and more, for I absorb through the very pores of both mind and body like a veritable sponge." He added: "I love that quiet isolated house on the rocks facing the Firth of Lorne." The weather played a major part in his decision to forego other islands and return Mary to the warmth of her Edinburgh home.

Fig. 79 The Lismore ferry in winter. This ferry was not available to Sharp and his sister in 1905. Photograph by Magnus Hagdorn (2012), Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lismore_Ferry_(8120112835).jpg, CC BY-SA 2.0.

Despite the cold that required a large fire burning all day, Sharp was able to put the finishing touches on a revision of his "Iona" essay and send it to Mosher with a long letter copied by Mary into the Fiona handwriting. Fiona preferred *Iona* as a title for the volume in which it would appear, but Mosher settled on *The Isle of Dreams*, Fiona's second choice, and published it in his *Old World* Series before the close of the year. When they met in Boston, Sharp, acting on behalf of Fiona, obtained Mosher's agreement to publish a book of previously unpublished Fiona Macleod poems. In the Lismore letter, Fiona told Mosher the volume would not be ready until late May as she had to go to Wales "to be near one dear to me," one who was seriously ill. Sharp did not want Mosher to believe Fiona was ill, as that would threaten the flow of money. The one dear to her was, of course, Sharp, and it was he who had taken the cure for diabetes in Wales (at Llandrindod) in September 1903 and 1904. His proposal of *Runes of Women* as the title of the volume of new poems suggests it would contain at least some of the runes, perhaps altered, that were in the first edition of *From the Hills of Dream* which Patrick Geddes and Colleagues published in 1896 and which Mosher, through arrangements with the Geddes firm, published in America in 1901 with new editions in 1904, 1907, 1910, and 1917. Those volumes did more than any others to expand readership of Fiona in the United States. The volume of new poems discussed in his letter to Mosher materialized only after Sharp's death when Mosher, in 1907, published *The Hour of Beauty: Songs and Poems*, which contained poems written between 1901 and 1905.

While on Lismore, Sharp learned Fiona had been made an honorary member of the French League of Writers "devoted to the rarer and subtler use of Prose and Verse." In an April 20 letter, he told Elizabeth he just received "a charming letter from Paul Fort acting for his colleagues." Fort was a well-known poet who founded and edited a literary review appropriately called *Vers et Prose.* He was writing to Fiona on behalf of his colleagues, members of the League and well-known French writers, among them: Jean Moréas (1856–1910) who founded the periodical *La Symboliste* in 1886 and played a leading role in the French Symbolist Movement; Emile Verhaeren (1855–1916), a Belgian poet who wrote in French; and René François Armand (1839–1907), a Parnassian poet who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1901. Receiving this honor as Fiona

must have caused Sharp to reflect on what might have been had he been able to claim the writing as his own. In addressing Elizabeth, there was no remorse: "We're glad, aren't we, you and I? She's our daughter, isn't she?" In the late 1890s, Sharp sometimes cast Fiona as his daughter with Edith Rinder. This stopped when Edith became pregnant and gave birth to a real daughter in 1901. Referring to Fiona as Elizabeth's daughter signaled Sharp's renewed love for her in the year of his death. It was Elizabeth after all who had nursed him through illnesses, and it was she who would hold him in her arms as he died.

After their week on Lismore, Sharp and Mary crossed to the mainland on April 24, spent the night in Oban, and took the train back to Glasgow. During the train ride, Sharp wrote a note to Elizabeth that humorously echoed MacCaskill's speech: "Tarling | It will pe ferry difficult to write in this unusually shaky train, which to use a slight hyperbole will almost pe hitting the horizon on each side in its ferry pad swayings." He marveled at the isolation of the MacCaskills. Mrs. M had not made the brief trip across the water to Appin for six years.

> From year end to years end, life is the same, save for the slow change of seasons, & the slower invisible movements of the tides of life. Such isolation is restful for a time, but wd. be crushing after a spell, & mean stagnation for any not accustomed to daily manual toil or without local engrossing work. They on the other hand look with mingled awe & amusement at the to them inexplicable longing to get away from such conditions, & for the already strong desire to leave this gloomy & dull climate for abroad, where life is (for us) so far far easier as well as happier now. But even when I told MacC. that it was a matter of prolonged life & energy & "youth" for me, & that I invariably recede on an ebbing tide over here, & go high on a strong flowing tide over yonder, he'd only shake his head & say Ishe miann na lach an loch air nach bi I (i.e., in effect, the duck's desire is to be on some other loch then that on which she happens to find herself!)

Sharp was glad to have stayed with the MacCaskills on Lismore again and sorry to leave as it might be the last time in the Gaelic West at any time of year. His friend and host was equally sad as he sensed it would be their last meeting. After dropping them off at Port Appin, MacCaskill "shook hands (with both his)" and said in Gaelic "My blessing on you — and goodbye now!" and then "he turned away & went down the

pier-side & hoisted the brown sail & went away across the water, waving a last farewell."

Having said this might be his last time in the Gaelic West, Sharp added parenthetically:

> I don't say this "down-ly" — but because I think it likely: and, in a way I'll explain later, am even glad. There is much I want to do, and now, as much by W. S. as F. M., & that I realize must be done abroad where alone (save for spring-time in London) can I keep well — & and mentally even more than physically. (How I hope Fontainebleau may someday suit us.)

This comment is interesting not only for his recognition of the limitations imposed by his physical and mental health. It is the only surviving instance of his admitting a waning interest in Fiona Macleod and all she represented. He had found an audience for the travel writings of William Sharp which were as remunerative as the stories and poems of Fiona Macleod, if not more so. He hoped his income from those writings would be sufficient to enable them some day to enjoy the beauty and manage the expense of living in Fontainebleau.

He told Elizabeth he had learned a great deal of Gaelic lore on Lismore, but nothing about his current interest in Gaelic astronomy. Surprisingly, the man opposite him on the train was Ralph Copeland, the Astronomer of the Edinburgh Observatory. He was surprised by what Sharp knew: "When I told him about certain groups & constellations & said I had lists of many Gaelic star-names, gathered at long intervals, & thro' a hundred sources, he hinted he would like to know who I was, for, as he said, he hardly ever met anyone away from astronomical sets interested in these things." The two men lunched together and enjoyed each other's company. Unfortunately, both would die before the year's end: Copeland in October and Sharp in December.

When Sharp returned to London at the end of April, his health was in decline. Elizabeth attributed it to the cold weather on Lismore and said his doctor advised him to go to Bad Neuenahr in Germany for treatment of his diabetes (*Memoir*, 399). It was June before he could get away as he felt compelled to spend May in London writing an article on Joseph Severn's portraits of John Keats. He had proposed the article to the editors of the *Century* when they met in New York the previous December, and he needed the money. He sent the article to New York on May 27 along with copies of Joseph Severn's portrait of Keats and a

rendition of that portrait by William Hilton which, according to Sharp, was favored by many over that of Severn. Though Sharp may have been paid upon submission of the manuscript, the article, "The Portraits of Keats: with special reference to those by Severn," did not appear until February 1906 (Volume LXXI, 535 and following).

Fig. 80 John Keats (1793–1879), by Joseph Severn (1819). Oil on ivory miniature, 105 x 79 mm, National Portrait Gallery. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:JohnKeats1819_hires.jpg, Public Domain.

Fig. 81 John Keats, by William Hilton (c. 1822). Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm, National Portrait Gallery. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Keats_by_William_Hilton.jpg, Public Domain.

Sharp left London on June 10 or 11 and planned to spend four weeks at the Villa Elsner in Bad Neuenahr. The warmth and beauty of the Villa, its gardens, and the strict diet produced a dramatic improvement in his emotional and physical health. While there and on his way home, Sharp wrote a series of letters to Elizabeth which she exempted from the mass of Sharp's papers she burned before she died in 1932. In preserving these letters (now in the National Library of Scotland) and printing portions in her *Memoir*, Elizabeth wanted to demonstrate his continuing love for her and emphasize the happy times of her husband's last year.

In his first letter, Sharp told Elizabeth the Villa Eisner was "deliciously quiet and reposeful." He had not undergone any treatments, but he was already feeling better due to

> rest of mind & body, the sense of reposefulness, the escape from the perturbing & exhausting forces & influences of town life especially at this season, the absence at night and by day when I am in my room or in the garden of all noise, no sounds save the susurrus of leaves and the sweet monotony of the rushing Ahr, & the cries & broken songs of birds.

He had not realized how much "nervous harm" he'd "had for long, & especially at the Gordon Pl. rooms, where the whole nervous system was frayed by the continual noise and old-exhaustedness of everything, from the air to the rooms themselves & the gas-poisoned atmosphere." A doctor at the Villa could not understand why, given his condition, he was not more anxious. He explained his physical troubles meant little to him. They were "the bodily effect of other things, & might be healed far more by spiritual wellbeing than by anything else: also that nature & fresh air & serenity & light & sun warmth & nervous rest were worth far more than all else." He wanted to be helped "but all the waters in the world & all the treatment in the world can only affect the external life."

The treatment he was about to receive would, nonetheless, enable him to keep well when "away from England for the autumn to spring months." Even in Germany the "difference climatically" was very great; he felt the immediate gain, and the "balmy warmth" suited him. He was convinced he and Elizabeth could regulate their lives better than any doctor. They would continue to plan their future as though they had many years to live. In a brief note, he told Alexander Nelson Hood he had a "narrow squeak, […] a hard tussle at the brink of 'Cape Fatal' and a stumble across 'Swamp Perilous.'" That was all behind him now.

He assured Hood he would soon "be as well in body" as he is "happy and serene in mind." He knew it was only "a reprieve, not a lifetime-discharge," but he hoped it would be an extended furlough. He knew his diabetes and weak heart could end his life at any moment; early death was inevitable. But he took what cures he could, and he was "well content," determined to enjoy the world and his life until the end.

The positive effects of the month at Villa Elsner cure were dimmed in the final week by the excruciating pain of a passing kidney stone. He did not want Elizabeth to know about the incident, but someone at the Villa sent her a telegram. The stone passed on Saturday, July 8 shortly before he boarded a train in Neuenahr bound for Doorn in Holland where he stopped to visit the Grandmonts, a couple he and Elizabeth met in Taormina. Shortly before noon on July 9, the day after his arrival, he told Elizabeth he had "a beautiful and restful afternoon and evening in this most charming and simpatica home of dear and good friends — and a long sleep from about 9:30 p.m. till about 8 this morning, I feel perfectly well again." He regretted she had known about the kidney stone before it was a thing of the past. It troubled him to think of the distress of her "dear tender heart." He hoped his telegrams first from Neuenahr and then Doorn had reassured her. After a good breakfast, he was feeling fine.

> Today there is not a trace of any kind of trouble. As I told you [in the telegrams] the stone penetrated no intestinal or other complications — & I am now of course ever so much better for having got rid of it & all the allied uric acid poison. Last night there was naturally the diabetic symptom of continuous thirst — but that was natural after the longish journey in great heat & in the vibration of a train. Today, despite that I woke to 75 degrees in my room (with both front and side French-windows wide open all night, and a large shadowy spacious room outlooking on sunlit green forest-glades a stone's throw away) I have had no thirst, no symptoms of any kind. The heat is very great, but to me most welcome and regenerative and strengthening.

Having briefly described his survival of the kidney stone and a minor diabetic episode, Sharp pivoted to the beauty of his surroundings and the hospitality of his hosts. He planned to stay the week and leave on Saturday, July 15.

The Grandmonts were an established Dutch family who, like many wealthy Europeans, wintered in Taormina, and Witte Huis, their home in

Doorn, was a large white structure in a park-like setting. Sharp's hostess was a well-known painter with an exceedingly long name: Abrahamina Arnolda Louise "Bramine" Hubrecht (Donders) (Grandmont) (1855–1913). In 1888, Bramine Hubrecht, as she was known, married Professor Franciscus Donders (1818–1889) an ophthalmologist, a professor of physiology at the University of Utrecht, and a highly-regarded authority on eye diseases. He died shortly after their marriage, but not before she painted his portrait. Four years later, in 1902, Bramine married Dr. Alphons Marie Antoine Joseph Grandmont (1837–1909) (who was sixty-five; she was forty-seven). She painted him reading to two young women sometime before he died in 1909. Bramine's paintings of her two husbands reveal her considerable skill as an artist.

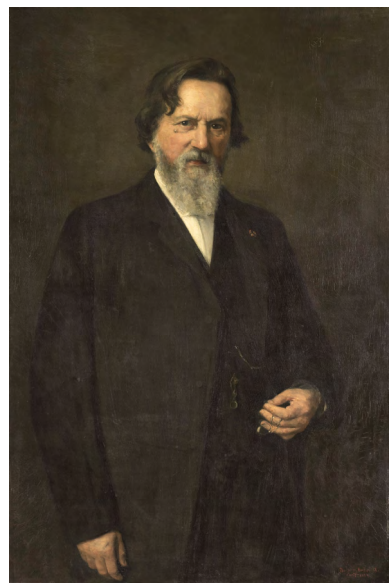

Fig 82 Professor Franciscus Donders (1818–1889), by Bramine Hubrecht (1888). Oil on canvas, 142 x 95 cm, Rijkmuseum. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Professor_Franciscus_Donders_(1818-89)._Fysioloog_en_oogheelkundige_Rijksmuseum_SK-A-2508.jpeg, Public Domain.

Fig. 83 Alphons Marie Antoine Joseph Grandmont (1837–1909), by Bramine Hubrecht (1900–1909). The painting depicts the artist's second husband tutoring two Italian girls. Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm, Rijkmuseum. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alphons_Marie_Antoine_Joseph_Grandmont_(1837-1909)._Tweede_echtgenoot_van_de_schilderes,_lesgevend_aan_twee_Italiaanse_meisjes_Rijksmuseum_SK-A-2794.jpeg, Public Domain.

In his letter to Elizabeth on the morning of Monday, July 10, Sharp praised his hosts: "How good and dear the Grandmonts are. She is so thoughtful and tender, too; and so good when I was tired after my journey and yesterday in bringing cushions when I was lying in a chair outside — and seeing to everything about food, often at no little trouble here." In addition to executing over a hundred well-regarded paintings, Bramine had a full social life and an especially high regard for elderly, infirm men. His July 10 letter to Elizabeth is addressed to "Linky Blue Dear, | How you'd love to be here!" Now he planned to leave Wednesday July 12, since the Grandmonts had to go to Utrecht. After four days of leisure in a beautiful setting, Sharp took a train north to Rotterdam on the twelfth and an overnight ferry to England from Hoek von Holland on Saturday, July 15.

In London Sharp found a letter from Richard Underwood Johnson requesting revisions in the Severn article and asking if Sharp could obtain photographs of another Severn portrait of Keats mentioned in the article. Coincidentally, Sharp also had a letter from Nigel Severn — son of Walter Severn and grandson of Joseph Severn — asking him to examine and authenticate what he thought was the death mask of Joseph Severn. On Sunday July 16, Sharp asked if he could call the following Tuesday and added: "You have I suppose no other Keats-Severn portraits of any kind?" It turned out he had two — one a miniature that resembled Joseph Severn's portrait of Keats in the National Portrait Gallery and the other a painting, now well-known, titled "Keats and the Nightingale (the Spaniards, Hampstead Heath)." Sharp observed these two paintings and the death mask sometime during the week of July 16, revised his Severn article for the *Century Magazine*, and arranged for Frederick Hollyer to photograph the two paintings for inclusion in the article. On Tuesday, July 25, Sharp mailed the revised manuscript to Johnson and left to visit friends in Yorkshire. The two Hollyer photographs caught up with him there, and he sent them on to Johnson for inclusion in his article. Sharp accomplished a good deal during his ten days in London, but they took a toll. In a July 27 letter to Johnson, he said he was glad to be out of the city again, and "With rest and fresh air and early hours" he would soon be well again. His recuperation in Germany and Holland was short-lived.

By July 30, Sharp was in Edinburgh writing apocalyptically to Dr. John Goodchild, his friend in all things mystical: "Between now and September-end (perhaps longer) many of the Dark Powers are going to make a great effort. We must all be on guard — for there will be individual as well as racial and general attack. But a Great Unloosening is at hand." Having stayed on in London, Elizabeth arrived in Edinburgh by train on the thirtieth. Sharp boarded her train, and they proceeded north to Nairn, a market town east of Inverness where they had taken a cottage on the shore of the North Sea. Before leaving Edinburgh, Sharp received a letter from Thomas Janvier informing him of the death of Laura Stedman, E. C. Stedman's wife. On November 24, 1904, the Stedmans entertained the Sharps in their substantial Lawrence Park home in Bronxville, New York for Thanksgiving Day dinner. Sharp wrote a deeply moving letter of sympathy to Stedman from the North British Station Hotel while waiting for Elizabeth's train.

> I cannot let the first available mail go without sending you my deep and loving sympathy — to you and Lauretta and your daughter-in-law, but to you most who have lost a tender and loving and life-long companion. Nor is it only deep regret for you, dear friend, but on my own account, for I have ever had the truest affection for dear Mrs. Stedman. I know too how sorry my wife will be when she hears (I join her Mail Train for the North tonight) — for she drew closely to your dear wife during our recent visit.

Sharp had a genuine affection for Stedman who introduced him to American editors and writers and paved the way for his American publications. The perilous state of his own health weighed heavily on his mind: "I am here in Edinburgh enroute for the North (after a narrow squeak for my life, with two distinct illnesses, & treatment for a month in Germany)."

In Nairn, Sharp found time to read a collection of John Masefield's stories, *A Mainsail Haul,* and to thank Masefield for sending him a copy of the book which was "rich in atmosphere" and written with "delicate art." Still, he had some suggestions for improvement: "Is it not a mistake to introduce in 'Sea Superstition' words such as 'august' and 'wrought' in a sailor's mouth?" On August 19, Masefield replied to Sharp from Greenwich that he would make use of his suggestions if the book went to a second edition (*Memoir*, 404–405). It was, he said, a product of his youth, and he had now passed into manhood. "Between those two times (forgive me for echoing Keats) one has little save a tag or two of cynicism, a little crude experience, much weariness, much regret, and a vision blurred by all four faults. One is weakened too by one's hatreds." In 1905, Masefield (1878–1967) was twenty-seven — half Sharp's age — and willing to accept advise from the older writer. Named Britain's Poet Laureate in 1930, Masefield held that position until he died thirty-seven years later. Elizabeth quoted Masefield writing of Fiona to a friend: "I think the genius of a dead people has found re-incarnation in her" (*Memoir*, 404). His life and work spanned the great divide between the late romanticism of the 1890s and the post-war modernism of the 1920s and beyond.

After two weeks in Nairn, the Sharps returned to his mother and sisters in Edinburgh. From there, according to Elizabeth they visited, among other friends, Mary Wilson, D. Y. Cameron, and David Erskine. Mary Georgina Wade Wilson (1856–1936) was an accomplished artist

who specialized in garden scenes. Her paintings, some depicting Venice and other locations in Italy, are still valued by collectors and museums. She was the daughter of John Wilson (1815–1881) who had at the age of twenty-one inherited his father's coal mining business and turned it into one of the most profitable companies in Scotland. In 1860, he built South Bantaskine House on the field of the Battle of Falkirk to house his family of eight girls and one boy. Mary was about Elizabeth Sharp's age. Unmarried, she lived on the family estate with several sisters, also unattached. She and Elizabeth may have met when they were young girls. More likely, Elizabeth's position as the London art critic for the *Glasgow Herald* brought them together. They must have been close friends since Mary, in October, went to Italy with the Sharps and she was with Elizabeth at the Castle Maniace when Sharp died. D. Y. Cameron was, at the time, one of Scotland's most accomplished painters and engravers and a close friend of the Sharps. They had come together in the mid-nineties at the height of the Celtic revival in Edinburgh. The origin of David Erskine's friendship with the Sharps is unknown, but his family and their estate in Linlathen near Dundee were deeply entrenched in Scottish history.

At the end of August, the Sharps returned to London and began preparing for Italy. On his birthday, September 12, Sharp posted two letters, one from Will to Fiona and another from Fiona to Will. He sent these letters every year, but only one other seems to have survived — a letter to W. S. from F. M. dated September 12, 1897. The letters, according to Elizabeth, helped him retain the separate identity of Fiona and take stock of the year's literary output. The 1897 Fiona letter to William Sharp was hard on "dear Billy":

> I am very disappointed with you this past year. You have not been well, it is true: but you have also been idle to a painful degree, and your lack of method makes me seriously anxious. [...] But do for heaven's sake put your shoulder to the wheel, and get soon in good working trim at something worth doing. You ever put pleasure first, and think so much of youth that you don't like billiards merely because the balls are bald. This is sad, Billy.

The 1905 Fiona letter is hard but also resigned to the inevitable:

> I note not only an extraordinary indolence in effort as well as unmistakable laziness in achievement. Now, either you are growing old (in which case

> admit dotage, and be done with it) or else you are permitting yourself to remain weakly in futile havens of ignoble repose or fretful pseudo rest. You have much to do, or that you ought to do, yourself: and as to our collaboration I see no way for its continuance unless you will abrogate much of what is superfluous, curtail much that can quite well be curtailed, and generally serve me loyally as I in my turn allow for and serve you.

Unless he can summon the strength to persevere in the face of declining health and attendant indolence, his own writing will suffer and that of Fiona will disappear.

Sharp's 1905 letter to Fiona projects a stronger sense of declining powers and a tone of regret that verges on the elegiac:

> All that is best in this past year is due to you. [...] I have not helped you nearly as much as I could: in this coming year I pray, and hope, it may be otherwise. And this none the less tho' I have much else I want to do apart from our work. But we'll be one and the same au fond even then, shall we not, Fiona dear? [...] You say I can give you what you have not: well, I am glad indeed. Together we shall be good Sowers [...] I wish you Joy and Sorrow, Peace, and Unrest, and Leisure, Sun, and Wind, and Rain, all of Earth and Sea and Sky in this coming year. And inwardly swell with me, so that less and less I may fall short of your need as well as your ideal. And may our "Mystic's Prayer" be true for us both, who are one.

Sharp wanted to do more of his own work apart from the Fiona writings which he calls "our" work. He then suggests Fiona also takes part in the Sharp writings. Will they become "one in the same"? Probably not, so Sharp will try to give Fiona more of what she lacks. He hopes she will swell with him so he will not fall short of her need, her ideal. If that sounds confusing, it is. Near the end of his life, Sharp, encouraged by his wife, was trying to resolve the contradictions he had created when he decided to give life and form to a pseudonym. He was struggling to merge the two identities that produced two separate bodies of work into a single identity who could produce a single, unified body of writings, some to be signed William Sharp and others Fiona Macleod. Failure in that struggle was inevitable. Preserving Fiona and continuing to publish under that name was essential, financially and to avoid derision, but Sharp was losing interest in the Celtic cause, especially its growing association with nationalism — Irish, Scottish, and Welsh. With only a few months of life remaining, Sharp faced a conundrum with no obvious path of escape.

In the eight brief lines of "The Mystics Prayer," which, he asserted, was written by both William and Fiona, they pray "both, who are one" may awake with the ability to see things clearly:

> Lay me to sleep in sheltering flame
> O Master of the Hidden Fire!
> Wash pure my heart, and cleanse for me
> My soul's desire.
> In flame of sunrise bathe my mind,
> O Master of the Hidden Fire,
> That, when I wake, clear-eyed may be
> My soul's desire.

The object of William Sharp's desire was a marriage of souls, an integration of the male and female aspects of his being. The poem is a final testimony to the failure of integration in this world; the speakers hope to reach the object of their souls' desire in the afterlife. Fittingly, Elizabeth placed the poem at the end of the Uniform Edition of the Fiona Macleod poems in 1910.

In a letter dated September 15, Sharp, writing as Fiona, responded to an unknown correspondent who asked to meet her and who sensed there was a great deal of Fiona's own life in her writings. Sharp's Fiona response to the first issue was, of course, negative, and brief. A meeting is not possible but they may meet in the Isles of Peace:

> the quiet isles beyond the foam where no memories could follow [...] and where old thoughts, if they came, were like phantoms on the wind, in a moment come, in a moment gone. I failed to find these Isles, and so have you: but there are three which lie nearer, and may be reached, Dream, Forgetfulness, and Hope.

Since the Isles of Peace are unreachable in this life, Sharp was again contemplating his death. His response to the second issue is significant because it was his most direct admission that his Fiona's writings were intensely autobiographical:

> There is a personal sincerity, the direct autobiographical utterance, in even, as you say, the most remote and phantastic of my legends as in the plainest of my words. But because they cover so much illusion as well as passion, so much love gone on the wind as well as love that not even the winds of life and death can break or uproot, so much more of deep sorrow (apart from the racial sorrow which breathes through all) than of Joy save in the deeper spiritual sense, they were thus raimented

> in allegory and legend and all the illusion of the past, the remote, the obscure, or the still simpler if more audacious directness of the actual, the present, and the explicit.

Knowledge of Sharp's relationship with Edith Rinder uncovers the autobiographical dimension of the Fiona Macleod stories and poems.

Given the excesses of much of those writings, the next sentence is also revealing: "There is, perhaps, a greater safety, a greater illusion, in absolute simplicity than in the most subtly wrought art." The sentence demonstrates the lingering effect of the admonition in Yeats' letter to Fiona of November 23, 1901: "when you use elaborate words you invent with less conviction, with less precision, with less delicacy than when you forget everything but the myth. [...] You, as I think, should seek the delights of style in utter simplicity, in a self-effacing rhythm and language, in an expression that is like a tumbler of water rather than a cup of wine" (*Collected Letters III*, 124). After receiving this advice, Sharp strove for greater concision and fewer flourishes in what he wrote as Fiona.

In the last of his many birthday letters to E. C. Stedman, Sharp frankly described the failing state of his health: "I all but 'went under' this summer from a severe access of my Diabetes malady — but a month's special treatment at Neuenahr in Germany tided me over — & in July & August I was not only convalescent but (in August) became wonderfully well." In mid-September, however, he experienced the "ebb-tide again," and now he had to leave Britain's "damp climate at once." He and Elizabeth planned to leave "in a few days" and go first to Venice, then to Sicily until late December and then "for 3 months to Algeria (mostly Biskra in the Sahara) for a thorough 'warming' & 'drying', for my chest is menaced." This ambitious itinerary was abruptly interrupted in mid-December.

Before leaving for Italy, Sharp wrote a Fiona letter to the Duchess of Sutherland (1867–1955) which described in the guise of advice what he has attempted to achieve in the Fiona writings: "Style (that is, the outer emotion that compels and the hidden life of the imagination that impels and the brooding thought that shapes and colours) should, spiritually, reflect a soul's lineaments as faithfully as the lens of the photographer reflects the physiognomy of a man or woman." This letter was a response to a volume of stories, *The Wind of the World: Seven Love*

Stories, the Duchess published as Millicent Sutherland in 1902. Despite her elevated social position and attendant obligations, the Duchess was an aspiring writer, a fellow Scot, and a devotee of Fiona Macleod. Though she did not know Fiona was Sharp, he had come to know her by claiming he was a relative of Fiona. In the summer of 1902, he included her among possible advocates when he sought (unsuccessfully) a Civil List Pension.

Fig 84. Portrait of Millicent Leveson-Gower, Duchess of Sutherland, by John Singer Sargent (1904). Oil on canvas, 254 x 146 cm, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Singer_Sargent_-_Portrait_of_Millicent_Leveson-Gower,_Duchess_of_Sutherland.jpg, Public Domain.

Writing here as one female author to another, Sharp encouraged the Duchess to aspire higher than she had in the 1902 volume. He sensed in her work

> An instinct for beauty, a deep longing for beautiful expression and because I believe you have it in you to achieve highly in worth and beauty that I write to you thus. [...] There is that Lady of Silence, the Madonna of Enigma, who lives in the heart of many women. Could you not shape something under *Her* eyes — shape it and colour it with your own inward life, and give it all the nobler help of austere discipline and control which is called art?

Insights, unique to the hearts of women — shaped, disciplined, controlled — may produce beautiful expressions that reach the status of art. It is tempting to believe Elizabeth included part of this letter in the *Memoir* to show her husband's connections with the paragons of British aristocracy, but that was not Elizabeth's nature. Her aim was to show the ideal to which her husband aspired in the poetry and fiction of Fiona Macleod. The revelation that Fiona was, in fact, Sharp and the attendant prejudices obscured, and still obscures, the fine quality, the "worth and beauty," of much of the writing, especially the lyric poetry, Sharp published under the female pseudonym.

In early October, the Sharps, accompanied by Mary Wilson, their painter friend from South Bantaskine, travelled by train to Zurich, then to Innsbruck, and finally to Venice. In transit, Sharp drafted a letter to Helen Hopekirk, the American pianist/composer, and sent it to Edinburgh for Mary to copy. Hopekirk had written to ask if she could rearrange the verses of Macleod's "The Lonely Hunter" in setting the poem to music. Fiona gave her permission to make whatever changes she wished: "I do not think the needs or nuances of one art should ever be imposed upon the free movement of another in alliance." We do not know if the American novelist Carson McCullers adopted the title of her first and most widely read novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), directly from the Fiona poem or from Helen Hopekirk's song. The poem, which appeared in the first (1896) and subsequent editions of *From the Hills of Dream*, is one of Sharp's loveliest. Its final quatrain reveals its haunting cadence:

> O never a green leaf whispers, where the green-gold branches swing:

> O never a song I hear now, where one was wont to sing
> Here in the heart of Summer, sweet is life to me still.
> But my heart is a lonely hunter that hunts on a lonely hill.

Fiona told Hopekirk she would soon be going to "Italy, and to friends, and to beautiful places in the sun, there and in Sicily and perhaps in Algeria." This was the itinerary the Sharps followed, though they did not make it to Algeria. Usually careful to place Fiona in places other than those he planned to visit, Sharp must have decided Hopekirk in America was too far away to matter.

After granting Helen Hopekirk permission, Fiona shared her sense of a foreshortened life:

> I think outward change matters less and less as the imagination deepens and as the spirit more and more "turns westward." I love the South; and in much, and for much, am happy there: but as the fatally swift months slip into the dark I realize more and more that it is better to live a briefer while at a high reach of the spirit and the uplifted if overwrought physical part of one than to save the body and soothe the mind by the illusions of physical indolence and mental leisure afforded by long sojourns in the sun lands of the South.

After describing her love of contemporary French poetry and music, loves reflecting those of both Sharps, Fiona concluded by saying she would send Hopekirk a copy of her new Tauchnitz volume, *The Sunset of Old Tales*, which was about to be published in Germany. She wanted her to have "something direct from a writer whom (to her true pleasure) you so truly care for, and who, as you say, has opened gates to you with others."

From Venice, the Sharps went to Florence where they stayed with the Eugene Lee-Hamiltons. During this last visit to the Villa Palmerino, a few miles north of Florence, the Sharps found their host ill and frail. He would suffer a debilitating stroke and die in 1907. From Florence, the Sharps went to Rome where Sharp wrote a note to Anna Geddes, promising to write more when they reached Sicily and expressing his hope to see Patrick Geddes on the Riviera after Christmas as they had decided to go there instead of Algeria, partly for "health reasons" and partly for "purse reasons." From Rome they went to Taormina where they spent the rest of November among friends, and then, on November 27, they went up to the Castello Maniace where they planned to spend

December with Alexander Nelson Hood. Sharp described their journey in a December 4 letter to Roselle Lathrop Shields:

> We left Taormina in a glory of mid-summerlike warmth and beauty — and we drove down the three miles of winding road from Taormina to the sea at Giardini; thence past the bay and promontory of Naxos, and at the site of the ancient famous fane of Apollo Archagêtês turned inland. Then through the myriad lemon-groves of Al Cantara, till we crossed the gorges of the Fiumefreddo, and then began the long ascent, in blazing heat, by the beautiful hill road to the picturesque mountain-town of Piedemonte. There we caught the little circum-Ætnean mountain loop-line, and ascended the wild and beautiful slopes of Etna. Last time we went we travelled mostly above the clouds, but this time there was not a vestige of vapour in the radiant air, save for the outriders' trail of white occasionally flare-coloured, smoke from the vast 4-mile-wide mouth of snow-white and gigantically-looming cone of Etna. At the lofty mediaeval and semi-barbaric town of Randazzo we were delayed by an excited crowd at the station, on account of the arrest and bringing in by the carabinieri of three chained and heavily manacled brigands, one of them a murderer, who evidently had the sympathy of the populace. A woman, the wife of one of the captured men, outdid any lamenting Irish woman I ever saw: her frenzy was terrible — and of course the poor soul was life-desolate and probably punished and would likely never see her man again. Finally she became distracted with despair and fury, and between her appeals and furious curses and almost maniacal lamentations, the small station was anything but an agreeable stopping place. The captive brigands were absolutely impassive: not a glance: only, as the small train puffed onward, one of them lifted a manacled arm behind one of the carabinieri and made a singular sign to someone.
>
> Thereafter we passed into the wild and terrible lava-lands of the last frightful eruption, between Randazzo and the frontier of the Duchy of Bronte: a region as wild and fantastic as anything imagined by Doré, and almost terrifying in its somber deathfulness. The great and broad and sweeping mountains, and a mightily strath — and we came under the peaked rocks of Maletto, a little town standing 3000 feet high. Then the carriage, and the armed escort, and we had that wonderful drive thro' wild and beautiful lands of which I have heretofore written you. Then about four we drove up to the gates of the Castle, and passed into the great court just within the gates, and had the cordial and affectionate welcome of our dear host.
>
> A few minutes later we were no longer at an ancient castle in the wilds of Sicily, but in a luxurious English country house at afternoon tea.

On December 8 Sharp wrote a second letter to Roselle which signaled his rapidly fading health. When he tried to sit down to his writing a "mental nausea seized" him and even "a written chat to a friend seemed [...] too exhausting." His need to continue writing was terribly pressing, but he confessed, "I simply can't."

He did manage, in addition to his letter to Shields, a long letter to Robert Hichens on the eighth. It was a response to a letter from Hichens expressing his regret that Sharp's physical condition would prevent him from going to North Africa in January. Elizabeth explained in the *Memoir*: "It had been planned that after the New Year Mr. Hood, Mr. Hichens, my husband and I should go together to Biskra. But as the autumn waned, we realized the unwisdom of making any such plans" (*Memoir*, 413). Sharp described the changed plans in a December 7 letter to W. B. Yeats: they expected to remain at Maniace until after Christmas and then go to the French Riviera for three months. In this final letter, his last to Yeats, he was responding to a November 4 letter from Yeats. Hurt by Yeats's "continuous and apparently systematic ignoring of any communication," Sharp had made up his mind "to keep silence henceforth." After writing often to Sharp and Fiona for many years about his Celtic Mystical Order, Yeats had become distracted by his involvement in the creation of a theater in Dublin. He seems not to have communicated with Sharp since April 1904, when he said he had found many admirers of Fiona Macleod during his trip to America. Now he wrote to ask what messages Sharp had been receiving from the spirit world and to probe further his relationship with Fiona. Having finally heard from Yeats, Sharp expressed his "strong feeling as to the Noblesse-oblige of friendship" and informed Yeats he did not consider him "a mere acquaintance." Since Yeats had now written and Sharp has expressed his feelings in this letter, he will endeavor to put them "aside among the discharged things."

Sharp proceeded to tell Yeats he could not write about any visitations or about Fiona but would discuss those matters when next they met, perhaps in Paris, in the Spring.

> I may add, however, that neither I nor any person <u>personally</u> known to me "sent" any one to you on a veiled mission. At the same time — that a certain person sought you and that you did not recognize the person, the occasion, or the significance. [That sentence is crossed out but still legible

> in the letter.] As you know, we are in a crucial period of change in many ways, and there are circles within circles, veiled influences and good and evil (and non-good and non-evil) formative and disformative forces everywhere at work. Obscure summons, obscure warnings, meetings & partings, veiled messages, come to us all. All which sounds very absurd, or mysterious, or conveniently vague. However, you'll understand. Also my present silence.

It is quite amazing that, less than a week before he died, Sharp was able to revert so easily to his spiritualist exchanges with Yeats. He concluded by asking about the meaning of a dream he may or may not have had:

> I dreamt of you some time ago as going thro' a dark wood and plucking here and there in the darkness seven apples (as you thought) — but they were stars. And you came to the edge or cliff and threw three away, & listened, and then hearing nothing threw three more idly away. But you kept, or forgot, one — & it trickled thro' your body and came out at your feet, and you kicked it before you as you walked, & it gave light, but I do not think you saw the light, or the star. What is your star, here, — do you know? Or can you interpret the dream?

In describing this dream, Sharp must have had in mind the ending of Yeats's "The Song of Wandering Aengus": "And pluck till time and times are done | The silver apples of the moon, the golden apples of the sun." This poem appeared first in *The Sketch* on August 4, 1897 where it was called "A Mad Song," and then in 1899 in Yeats' *The Wind among the Reeds.*

One paragraph of Sharp's letter is particularly moving as it refers to both his physical and his mental illness:

> For many months this year I was ill — dying — but there were other than physical reasons for this, & I survived thing after thing and shock after shock like a swimmer rising to successive waves — & then suddenly to every one's amazement swam into havens of relative well-being once more. But the game is not over, of course: and equally of course is a losing game. Nevertheless I'm well content with things as they are, all things considered.

In his diary on December 8, Sharp said he and Elizabeth had that afternoon "a lovely drive," and she described that "fatal" drive in the *Memoir* (418).

> We drove far along a mountain pass and at the furthest point stopped to let him look at the superb sunset over against the hillset town of Cesaro. He seemed wrapt in thought and looked long and steadfastly at the wonderful glowing light; it was with difficulty that I persuaded him to let us return. On the way back, a sudden turn of the road brought us in face to the snow-covered cone of Aetna. The wind had changed and blew with cutting cold straight off the snow. It struck him, chilling him through and through. Half-way back he got out of the carriage to walk and get warm. But the harm was done.

When they returned to Maniace, he told Elizabeth he planned to talk a great deal that evening to "amuse" Alex Hood who seemed depressed. And Hood, as he said goodnight to Elizabeth, said "I have never heard Will more brilliant than he has been tonight." The next morning Sharp had a severe pain — perhaps a diabetic attack, perhaps a heart attack, perhaps both — which Elizabeth believed to be caused by the chill during their drive. A doctor was summoned, but he could only relieve the pain; Sharp died three days later — in the afternoon of December 12. Elizabeth described his death: About 3 o'clock, with his devoted friend Alex Hood by his side, he suddenly leant forward with shining eyes and exclaimed in a tone of joyous recognition, "Oh, the beautiful 'Green Life' again!' and the next moment sank back in my arms with the contented sigh, 'Ah, all is well.'" He was buried in the estate's English cemetery wo days later.

Ernest Rhys wrote in his *Letters from Limbo* (80): "A pity he did not live to see his own superb funeral when he was carried by torchlight up the mountain after his death at the Duke of Bronte's Castle Maniace in Sicily. […] He was a great romancer and died as he had lived, romancing." Rhys himself was not immune to romancing since the cemetery is not on a mountain and not far from the Castle. The procession from the residence to the cemetery made its way along a dusty road. "On the 14th," according to Elizabeth, "in an hour of lovely sunshine, the body was laid to rest in a little woodland burial ground on the hillside within sound of the Simeto,"a river running through the estate. Alex Hood read "Invocation to Peace" a poem from Fiona's *Dominion of Dreams,* over the grave. Later, he commissioned a large Celtic cross carved from the lava of Mount Etna which still marks the grave. On the cross, in accord with Sharp's instructions, is the inscription:

IN MEMORY OF WILLIAM SHARP
BORN 12TH SEPTEMBER 1855
DIED 12TH DECEMBER 1905
FIONA MACLEOD
"FAREWELL TO THE KNOWN AND EXHAUSTED
WELCOME TO THE UNKNOWN AND UNFATHOMED" W. S.
"LOVE IS MORE GREAT THAN WE CONCEIVE
AND DEATH IS THE KEEPER OF UNKNOWN REDEMPTIONS"
F. M.

Fig. 85 A Celtic Cross marking William Sharp's Grave. Castello Nelson's Protestant Cemetery, Sicily. Photograph by Warwick Gould (2016), reproduced with his permission.