

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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Appendix I

William Butler Yeats and Elizabeth Amelia Sharp

News of Sharp's death was wired to Edith Rinder in London, and she passed it to the newspapers with the information that Sharp was the author of the writings of Fiona Macleod. Six years before he died, Sharp wrote on small white cards a message confessing that he, and he alone, was "the author — in the literal and literary sense — of all written under the name of Fiona Macleod." He identified individuals who were to receive the cards from Elizabeth after he died. She sent one to W. B. Yeats on December 28, and he replied on January 6 (*Collected Letters IV*, 302–303):

I want to tell you how much I sympathize with you in your great trouble. Your husband was a man of genius who brought something wholly new into letters & thousands will feel his loss with a curious personal regret. To me he was that, & a strange mystery too & also a dear friend. To talk with him was to feel the presence of that mystery, he was very near always to the world where he now is & often seemed to me to deliver its messages. He often spoke to me of things of my personal life that were unknown to him by the common channels of sense. I knew he was ill — but never knew how ill. I had a letter from him only two days before I saw his death in the paper. I had been looking forward to seeing him again very shortly. I feel now that one of the Gates of Wisdom has been closed for much as I admire his writing he was, as a man should be, more than his writing. What must you feel at so great a loss. You must however know that one, who was so often as it seemed out of the body while he lived, cannot have undergone any unrecognizable change or gone very far away. Blake said of death that it was but going into another room. He was certainly the most imaginative man — I use the word in its old & literal sense of image making — I have ever known, not like a man of this age at all.

This letter was written to comfort Elizabeth in her grief. Read in the context of Sharp's last letter to Yeats which admonished him for his long silence, it may also have been motivated by guilt. Yet admiration for the life and work of a fellow writer comes through clearly and sincerely.

Elizabeth began planning a book about her husband's life and work shortly after he died. She asked some of his correspondents if she could see and use some of his letters in what became her *Memoir*. Yeats was one of those, but Elizabeth had a special request of him. Among Sharp's papers she had come upon what looked like a Masonic rite, and she wondered if Yeats could cast some light on it. She was also curious to know if her husband had written or spoken to Yeats about any visions. Initially she was skeptical about her husband's effort to see visions and interact with spirits, but gradually she had come to share his beliefs. After he died, she began searching for a means of contacting him.

Writing from Lady Gregory's Coole Park on July 21, 1906, Yeats told Elizabeth he had intended to call on her when he was in London in the Spring, but other matters intervened (typed letter signed, Private collection). He will see her in the fall when he will have found and sorted out his letters from Sharp and Fiona: "I think there are one or two visions recorded amongst them," he wrote, "but I am not sure."

I think too that I have some notes of a vision of your husband's, but it took place five or six years ago, and I am not certain that I should be able to understand the notes. I made a search through my papers when I was in London, but I have not yet found a bundle of rather interesting letters which your husband wrote me at the outset of the Fiona Macleod books. "The Masonic Rite" you speak of was made in the first instance by me and then after a vision which your husband had working with me, was worked by him. He never sent it to me, and I would be very much obliged if you would let me see it. There are a good many things I can tell you about this rite and others of the same sort, and there are still more matters which I am most anxious to ask you about.

His "absorption in the theatre" had caused interests he shared with Sharp to fade into the background, and he had drifted farther apart from Sharp than he liked. When his theatre work becomes "instinctive," he will return "to what are still to me the supreme interests." Irish Nationalism and the creation of an Irish National Theatre had intervened, but he had not abandoned his effort to establish a Celtic Mystical Order in the West of Ireland and obtain its rites through dream and vision.

Yeats called on Elizabeth in London not in the fall but in the first week of January 1907, and he described their meeting in a letter to Maud Gonne dated January 14 (*Collected Letters IV*, 591–594). He now knew a great deal more about the Fiona Macleod mystery. It was as he thought:

Fiona Macleod was so far as external perception could say a secondary personality induced in Sharp by the presence of a very beautiful unknown woman whom he fell in love with. She, alas! has disappeared from everyone's sight, no one having set eyes on her except George Meredith who says she was the most beautiful woman he ever saw. Whether there was more than this I do not know but poor Mrs. Sharp, though generous and self-sacrificing as I can see does not want to enlarge that unknown woman's share. A great deal, however, which Sharp used to give in letters as an account of Fiona's doings were she insists a kind of semi-allegorical description of the adventures of his own secondary personality and its relation with the primary self.

Yeats then recalled an instance in which Sharp wrote to say he would leave Yeats' letter for Fiona to read when she woke up. According to Elizabeth this meant the secondary personality would read it and respond when it awoke. That response from Fiona, Yeats said, though written for her by Sharp, was "much more impassioned" than the rest of the letter. Yeats doubted there would be much of this in the biography Elizabeth intended to write because when he suggested she tell the whole story, she said "How can I! Other people are so much involved."

The Sharp letter Yeats remembered was written on May 5, 1898 in St. Margaret's Bay near Dover where Fiona's sudden illness was invented to prevent Sharp from taking her across the channel to meet Yeats and others in Paris (*Letters to Yeats II*, 394–396). After his conversation with Elizabeth, Yeats thought the woman who would read his letter when she woke up was not Sharp's secondary personality but the "beautiful unknown woman" he loved, the woman who "awakened" the secondary personality. Elizabeth "never talked quite openly about things," he continued, "except it being a secondary personality, but told things in a series of hints and yet, at the same time, quite clearly. I noticed that each time she said this personality was awakened in him by a beautiful person she would add as if to lessen the effect, 'and by beautiful scenery.'" We can now see Elizabeth was trying to be as truthful as she could without revealing that Edith Wingate Rinder was the beautiful woman who induced Fiona Macleod, the beautiful woman

Sharp introduced to George Meredith as Fiona Macleod, the beautiful woman who refused to accompany Sharp to Paris, the beautiful woman who, according to Yeats, has disappeared from everyone's sight.

It is now apparent the beautiful woman had not disappeared. In fact, Yeats must have been among the friends of the Sharps who met her at the parties and "at homes" given by the Sharps and Mona Caird. Among their friends in Rome in the winter of 1890–1891, including Mona Caird, Elizabeth mentioned "Mrs. Wingate Rinder" who joined them for three weeks. "With her," she wrote, "my husband greatly enjoyed long walks over the Campagna and expeditions to the little neighboring hill towns" (*Memoir*, 173). She did not say many of the poems he wrote and privately published in Italy in 1891 as *Sospiri di Roma* were written about Mrs. Rinder, their long walks through hills near Rome and his love for her. Elizabeth saw those poems, nonetheless, as the "turning point" in his career as a writer.

[They] are filled not only with the passionate delight in life, with the sheer joy of existence, but also with the ecstatic worship of beauty that possessed him during those spring months we spent in Rome, when he had cut himself adrift for the time from the usual routine of our life, and touched a high point of health and exuberant spirits (*Memoir*, 222).

He found there, Elizabeth continued, "the desired incentive towards a true expression of himself in the stimulus and sympathetic understanding of the friend to whom he dedicated the first of the books published under the pseudonym." That book was *Pharais*, and it was dedicated to E. W. R.

In the dedication, Sharp, writing as Fiona, said he and the dedicatee met a long while ago in a "resting place" of friendship and "found that we loved the same things, and in the same way." The place they met was paradisaical, thus *Pharais*, and there "we both have seen beautiful visions and dreamed dreams. Take, then, out of my heart this book of vision and dream." Edith appeared often in the Fiona writings but always by her initials or as an anagram, a made-up name, or a fictional character. In the *Memoir*, Elizabeth said her husband's friendship with the woman to whom he dedicated *Pharais* began in Rome and "lasted throughout the remainder of his life." Although there are hints throughout her *Memoir* and the Fiona writings, Elizabeth refrained from describing the true nature of that friendship.

Before Sharp went to America in 1896, he left Elizabeth a "letter of instructions concerning his wishes in the event of his death." In it he said he owed his development as Fiona Macleod to Edith Rinder. "Without her," he said, "there would have been no Fiona Macleod." Recalling that letter, Elizabeth said of this woman without identifying her:

Because of her beauty, her strong sense of life and of the joy of life; because of her keen intuitions and mental alertness, her personality stood for him as a symbol of the heroic women of Greece and Celtic days, a symbol that, as he expressed it, unlocked new doors in his mind and put him "in touch with ancestral memories" of his race (*Memoir*, 222).

It is revealing of Elizabeth's character that she included in her *Memoir* this description of the woman her husband deeply loved for many years. It is a well-deserved tribute to a remarkable woman, and now that Edith has remerged in the life of William Sharp, she may be recognized as an accomplished writer, translator, and editor. Elizabeth's description of Edith is also a lasting tribute to the remarkable qualities of the woman Sharp married. Elizabeth preserved long after her death the secret of Edith's identity by burning most of her husband's papers before she died. Through all the years between her husband's death in 1905 and hers in 1932, Elizabeth maintained a close friendship with Edith and Frank Rinder.

Elizabeth respected Edith's determination to erase from the historical record her role in the birth of Fiona Macleod, in the Fiona writings, and in the life of William Sharp. The relationship between William and Edith had begun to cool before Edith gave birth to a baby girl in July 1901, but the friendship between the Sharps and Rinders remained solid. Edith became Sharp's point of contact in London for the Fiona correspondence and functioned for several years as his secretary. After the turn of the century, Sharp came to regret his embrace of New Paganism in the early 1900s and his opposition to the restraints society placed upon marriage. Following the trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895 and events surrounding it, there was a seismic shift in attitudes towards what came to be called the "decadence." The desire to erase the nature of the relationship between Edith Rinder and William Sharp was motivated also by the desire to shield Edith's daughter from any recriminations that might befall her from what she came to call the "advanced views" of her parents and their close friends. Sharp was seldom mentioned in her presence, and as

a child she was warned not to touch any of the Sharp or Fiona books in her parents' library. When her mother died in 1962, all those books, many containing authors' inscriptions, had been removed and destroyed.

Given the course of events before and after Sharp's death, it is no wonder Elizabeth responded "How can I! Other people are so much involved" when Yeats suggested in his January 1906 meeting that she tell "the whole story" in her *Memoir*. Yeats concluded his description of that meeting by asking Maud Gonno to keep his letter: "For I am fresh from seeing Mrs. Sharp [...] and this will be a record. Put it in some safe place and I may ask you for it again some day for it is a fragment of history."



Fig. 86 Photograph of William and Elizabeth Sharp in 1904, unknown photographer. Gift of Noel Farquharson Sharp to William F. Halloran in 1968.

Yeats's meeting with Elizabeth did not unravel the mystery of Fiona Macleod. He remained perplexed. Was she a second personality or a female spirit speaking through Sharp? Yet he came away from his conversation with Elizabeth believing a real woman was intimately involved in the personality Sharp projected as Fiona Macleod and in the writings Sharp published under the female pseudonym. Yeats's description of his meeting with Elizabeth paints an intimate picture of her feelings about her husband's relationship with Edith. In reading

Yeats's account of the meeting, which he saw as a fragment of history, it is impossible not to share the sympathy for Elizabeth that breathes through his words. In her own writings and what others have said about her, Elizabeth emerges as an intelligent and accomplished woman who retained her patience and enthusiasm for life and her love for the cousin she met as a girl during summer vacations in Scotland, the cousin who proposed to her in an Edinburgh cemetery, the cousin she eventually married despite the concerns of their families, the cousin she followed all over Britain, continental Europe, and Northern Africa, and the cousin mediums brought to life for her many years after she buried him on the slopes of Etna in the Sicilian wilds.

