

William Sharp and "Fiona Macleod"

A Life



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Preface

Who Was William Sharp?

William Sharp was born in Paisley, near Glasgow, in 1855. His father, a successful merchant, moved his family to Glasgow in 1867; his mother, Katherine Brooks, was the daughter of the Swedish Vice Consul in Glasgow. A talented, adventurous boy who read voraciously, he spent summers with his family in the Inner Hebrides where he developed a strong attachment to the land and the people. In the summer of 1863, his paternal aunt brought her children from London to vacation with their cousins. Months short of his eighth birthday, Sharp formed a bond with one of those cousins, Elizabeth Sharp, a bright girl who shared many of his enthusiasms. Their meeting led eventually to their engagement (in 1875) and their marriage (in 1884).

After finishing school at the Glasgow Academy in 1871, Sharp studied literature for two years at Glasgow University, an experience that fed his desire to become a writer. Following his father's sudden death in August 1876, he fell ill and sailed to Australia to recover his health and look for suitable work. Finding none, he enjoyed a warm and adventurous summer and returned in June 1877 to London where he spent several weeks with Elizabeth and her friends. A year later he settled in London and began to establish himself as a poet, journalist, and editor. Through Elizabeth's contacts and those he made among writers, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, he became by the end of the 1880s a well-established figure in the literary and intellectual life of the city. During this decade he published biographical studies of Rossetti, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Robert Browning; three books of poetry; two novels; many articles and reviews; and several editions of other writers. None of those publications brought the recognition he sought. By 1890

he had accumulated enough money to reduce his editing and reviewing and devote more time to poetry and prose.

That autumn he and Elizabeth went to Heidelberg for several weeks and then to Italy for the winter. In January, Edith Wingate Rinder, a beautiful young woman and the wife of Frank Rinder, accompanied her aunt, Mona Caird, a close girlhood friend of Elizabeth, on a three-week visit to Rome. There Edith spent many hours exploring the city and surrounding area with Sharp who fell deeply in love with her. Inspired by the joy he felt in her presence and the warmth and beauty of the country, Sharp wrote and printed privately in Italy a slim book of poems, *Sospiri di Roma*, that exceeded in quality those he had written previously.

After returning to England in the spring of 1891 and under the influence of his continuing relationship with Edith, Sharp began writing a prose romance set in western Scotland. When he found a publisher (Frank Murray in Derby) for *Pharais, A Romance of the Isles*, he decided to issue it pseudonymously as the work of Fiona Macleod. In choosing a female pseudonym, Sharp signaled his belief that romance flowed from the repressed feminine side of his nature. The pseudonym also reflected the importance of Edith in the novel's composition and substance. Their relationship is mirrored in the work's depiction of a love affair doomed to failure. Finally, it disguised his authorship from London critics who, he feared, would not treat it seriously if it appeared as the work of the prosaic William Sharp.

Pharais changed the course of Sharp's life. Along with *The Mountain Lovers*, another west of Scotland romance that followed in 1895, it attracted enthusiastic readers and favorable notices. When it became clear that his fictional author had struck a sympathetic chord with the reading public and the books were bringing in money, Sharp proceeded to invent a life for Fiona Macleod and project her personality through her publications and letters. In letters signed William Sharp, he began promoting the writings of Fiona and adding touches to her character. He sometimes functioned as her agent. To some, he asserted she was his cousin, and he implied to a few intimate friends they were lovers. In molding the persona of Fiona Macleod and sustaining it for a decade, Sharp drew upon the three

women he knew best: Elizabeth, his wife and first cousin; Edith Rinder, with whom he had developed a deep bond; and Elizabeth's friend and Edith's aunt, Mona Caird, a powerful and independent woman married to a wealthy Scottish Laird. He enlisted his sister Mary Sharp, who lived with their mother in Edinburgh, to supply the Fiona handwriting. His drafts of Fiona Macleod letters went to her for copying and mailing from Edinburgh.

For a decade before his death in 1905, he conducted through his publications and correspondence a double literary life. As Fiona, he produced poems and stories which, in their romantic content, settings, characters, and mystical aura, reflected the spirit of the time, attracted a wide readership, and became the principal literary achievement of the Scottish Celtic Renaissance. As Sharp, he continued reviewing and editing and tried his hand at several novels. As Fiona's chief advocate and protector, he deflected requests for interviews by insisting on her desire for privacy. If it became known he was Fiona, critics would dismiss the writings as deceptive and inauthentic. Destroying the fiction of her being a real woman, moreover, would block his creativity and deprive him of needed income. So, he persisted and maintained the double life until he died. He refused to disclose his authorship even to the Prime Minister of England to obtain a much-needed Civil List pension. The popular writings of Fiona Macleod may have obtained Parliament's approval, but not those of the journeyman William Sharp

His rugged good looks and exuberant manner obscured the fact that Sharp had been ill since childhood. Scarlet fever in his youth and rheumatic fever as a young man damaged his heart. In his forties, diabetes set in, and attacks increased in frequency and seriousness. Given his declining health after the turn of the century, though interrupted by occasional bursts of exuberant creativity, his death in December 1905 was not a surprise to his family and close friends. It occurred while he and Elizabeth were staying with Alexander Nelson Hood, the Duke of Bronte, at his Castello Maniace on the northwest slopes of Mount Etna in Sicily. Sharp is buried there in the estate's Protestant Cemetery where a Celtic cross marks his grave.

Biographies of William Sharp

The first book-length account of William Sharp's life was written by his wife, Elizabeth Amelia Sharp. Her *William Sharp (Fiona Macleod): A Memoir* was published in 1910 by William Heinemann in London and Duffield and Company in New York. Comprehensive and beautifully written, this book contains all Elizabeth wanted to say about her husband, and it remains an essential source of information about his life. The next book-length effort to understand Sharp and his creation of Fiona Macleod was Flavia Alaya's *William Sharp — "Fiona Macleod"* published by the Harvard University Press in 1970. This work depends on Mrs. Sharp's *Memoir* for the basic facts of Sharp's life and work, but it differs in intensions. The author's insightful reading both of Sharp's writings and that of his European and American contemporaries enabled her to place Sharp in the historical context of Late Victorianism. In this book, Sharp emerged from obscurity into a writer to be read for the quality and range of his work and for his insights into the cultural landscape of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

The next bibliographical study of Sharp — Steve Balmires's *The Little Book of the Great Enchantment* — was published by R. J. Stewart Books in Arcata, California in 2008. This book profits immensely from Mr. Balmires's ability as a storyteller, his knowledge of the Gaelic language and Celtic civilization, and his access to my first rendition of Sharp's life and letters known as *The William Sharp "Fiona Macleod" Archive* sponsored by the Institute of English Studies in the School of Advanced Study in the University of London. (The *Archive* has been superseded by my three volume *Life and Letters of William Sharp and "Fiona Macleod"* published by Open Book Publishers in 2018–2020.) What may be a limitation of this book for some readers is the author's treatment of William Sharp and Fiona Macleod as two separate individuals. Beyond that, the reader's ability to "suspend disbelief" may be tested by the author's assertion that Fiona was a product of the realm of fairies, and her writings were a "personal, first-hand account of her own Fairy tradition." Fairies were and for some are still a constant among the people of the Inner and Outer Hebrides. Mr. Balmires professes to share their belief in spirits who make themselves known in the material world with negative as well as positive results.

Professor Terry L. Meyers published in 1996 a short but important book with a very long title: *The Sexual Tensions of William Sharp: A Study of the Birth of Fiona Macleod Incorporating Two Lost Works, "Ariadne in Naxos" and "Beatrice"* (New York: Peter Lang). Drawing on recent studies of gender identification and male and female homosexuality in the late nineteenth century, Meyers observed that repressed homosexuality was the source of Sharp's sexual tensions. He presented the two lost works as additional evidence that Sharp, from an early age, recognized feminine traits in his make-up and identified with the plight of women. In the mid-nineties he compartmentalized his masculine and feminine inclinations and invented a woman through whom he could give voice to the latter. That bifurcation, the presence of two individuals, one male and the other female, Meyers observed, became a means of alleviating, as he acutely concludes, though not eliminating, Sharp's sexual tensions. Sharp recognized the complexities of gender identification and the varied combinations of masculine and feminine traits in his associates. He was sexually attracted to both women and men. Though there is ample evidence of its overt expression in his realtions with women, there is no such evidence in his relations with men. Lack of evidence, of course, does not preclude its occurring.

This biography of William Sharp has a lengthy and checkered ancestry. It began when Professor Lionel Stevenson in the Duke University Department of English suggested I look at William Sharp, whom I had never heard of, as I explored topics for a doctoral dissertation. I did so and admired the quality of some of his writings. More important, I became fascinated by what was known or assumed about his personal life. A grant from the Duke Graduate School enabled me to travel to London where I met William Sharp's nephew and Literary Executor, Noel Farquharson Sharp, and to Edinburgh where I examined the Sharp manuscripts in the National Library of Scotland. That trip was the first of many to England and Scotland where I have been welcomed by people with various ties to the writer. Upon arriving at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) in 1966 as a member of its English Department, I began to collect copies of Sharp's letters — those signed William Sharp and those signed Fiona Macleod — from libraries and private collectors. With the help of graduate students and support from the UWM Graduate School, I eventually collected and annotated copies of hundreds of letters written

to a wide range of British, American, and European literary figures with whom Sharp corresponded between 1870 and 1905.

As the number of letters grew, I abandoned all hope of having them published. In the mid-1990s, I met Professor Warwick Gould, the eminent Yeats scholar who founded the Institute for British Studies in London University. He suggested I prepare the annotated Sharp letters to insert chronologically on a website supported by his Institute. I did so, and that website, known as *The William Sharp "Fiona Macleod" Archive*, was completed in 2010, and it has been consulted by many scholars interested in Sharp and his friends. In 2017, Professor Gould suggested I prepare a proposal to publish the letters and send it to Open Book Publishers in Cambridge, England. When that proposal was reviewed and accepted, I returned to the letters, checked the transcriptions, expanded the annotations, and reworked the introductory section for each chapter of letters. The happy result was *The Life and Letters of William Sharp and "Fiona Macleod,"* twenty-five chapters arranged chronologically in three volumes which are available from Open Book Publishers' website without charge and in hard or soft copies for a modest price (*Volume 1: 1855-1894* is available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0142>; *Volume 2: 1895-1899* at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0196>; *Volume 3: 1900-1905* at [10.11647/OBP.0221](https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0221)). The first volume was published in 2018, and the final two in 2020.

After finishing that project, I realized the introductory essays — the "Life" sections of *Life and Letters* — were an incipient biography buried in three large volumes of transcribed and annotated letters where they are likely to be read only by scholars interested in the period. I was, nonetheless, astonished to see recently that the three volumes of *Life and Letters* have been viewed online 9,000 times and downloaded 2,500 times. That aside, this compilation of the revised twenty-five chapters is more readable, both online and as a printed volume. Lacking annotations and strictly chronological, it is closely tied to *Life and Letters*. Quotations from and references to Sharp's letters are not annotated, but their dates are evident in the text. Readers may download the appropriate volume and chapter of *Life and Letters* to read the full letter, consult annotations to that letter, and use one of several widely used search engines to learn more about people and places. Page numbers of quotations from and references to other books and articles are given in parentheses. Since much of the information about Sharp's life is derived from Elizabeth

Sharp's *Memoir*, its page numbers are often omitted to enhance readability. Publication details of books and articles mentioned in the text may be found in the Bibliography. Books and articles by William Sharp are not included in the Bibliography. They await a full-scale bibliography, a major undertaking beyond the scope of this biography. The best listing of Sharp's writings remains that at the end of the two-volume edition of Elizabeth Sharp's *Memoir*.

Constrained by its ancestry, this biography focuses on Sharp's life and draws heavily on his extensive correspondence, Elizabeth Sharp's *Memoir*, and accounts by his contemporaries. It portrays his daily comings and goings, his interactions with publishers in Europe and America, his beliefs, his values, and his physical and mental condition. The letters reveal more than has previously been known, and from them Sharp emerges as a handsome, intelligent, talented, sensitive, and conflicted man. Difficult to pin down with precision, he was immersed in the crosscurrents of ideas and the artistic and social movements of his time. He took part in spiritualist efforts to affirm the existence of life after death, and he embraced innovative ideas about the place of women in society, the constraints of marriage, the fluidity of gender identity, and the complexity of the human psyche. Those issues and many others are addressed in his letters and, sometimes indirectly, in his writings. They are laid out in this volume in such a way that they may form the basis for a more comprehensive study of his life and work.

A singular contribution of this biography is its description of the autobiographical content of the writings of Fiona Macleod, of the remarkable extent to which Sharp used the feminine pseudonym and stories and myths from the Gaelic past to disguise his telling and retelling the complex story of his love affair with an exceptional woman who was not his wife. This revelation adds, I believe, depth and poignancy to the pseudonymous stories and poems.

Neither the annotated letters and introductions in *Life and Letters* nor the revised introductions that form this biography would have been possible without the tools bestowed on historians and literary scholars by computers and the internet. Nor would they be available without the foresight and generosity of Open Book Publishers which offers them to the public free of charge.

