



## the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

### MATTHEW PHIPPS SHIEL (1865-1947)



MR. M. P. SHIEL

"M.P. Shiel." 1901. Photograph. Kind acknowledgment is extended to Henry Billings and Gwilym Games for assistance in attaining and permission to publish this photograph.

Matthew Phipps Shiell, who published primarily under the name M. P. Shiel, was born on the West Indian island of Montserrat in 1865. He was of mixed-race descent at least on his mother's side, a not uncommon occurrence on an island whose economy had been based on slave-worked and Irish-run sugar plantations. Shiel finished his schooling on Barbados, although he would later claim to have studied for a number of years in Devonshire, England (no record of which school he attended, if any, has been discovered). This

unsubstantiated claim was the first of many later made by Shiel, the most famous of which was that, at the age of fifteen, he was crowned King of Redonda, a tiny, rocky island north of Montserrat.

In 1885 Shiel sailed to London to begin a literary career. Like many young people before him, he discovered that the expense of London life required him to take up other employment. Over the following years, Shiel would teach at boys' grammar schools, work as an editor for *The Messenger*, and write short biographical sketches and translate foreign authors' stories for *The Strand*. One of the authors whom he translated was Villiers de l'Isle Adam, who was, like Shiel, a great admirer of Edgar Allan Poe.

In 1893, the newspaperman W. T. Stead was considering publishing a series of stories that would be plotted around contemporary news developments (only one

series ever went to press). Shiel would later state that Stead had dictated to him the plot of *The Rajah's Sapphire*, which, although subsequently unused by Stead, Shiel eventually extensively revised and published as a novel in 1896. The year prior, Shiel published the collection *Prince Zaleski* for John Lane's Bodley Head *Keynotes* series with a frontispiece by Aubrey Beardsley. He would publish another collection, *Shapes in the Fire*, for the same series in 1896. Many see the work as stylistically the quintessential English, Decadent text.

Shiel's association with Lane introduced him to a number of the leading artists and publishers of the day, although he was already familiar with a few. Based upon references in Shiel's *The Weird o' It* (1902) and Ernest Dowson's letters, scholars believe that the two men may have shared rooms in the early 1890s. In the mid-1890s, Shiel almost certainly had a romantic relationship with Ella D'Arcy, an assistant editor for Henry Harland and Lane on *The Yellow Book*. He was also acquainted with Richard Le Gallienne and Lionel Johnson, and Theodore Wratishaw and Arthur Machen attended his first wedding in 1898. Mrs. Machen even arranged the wedding breakfast. John Gawsworth would later claim that Shiel dined with Oscar Wilde on at least one occasion, although this is less likely.

Shiel seems to have been less interested in the social side of literary London in the 1890s. He was never fully accepted into the Decadent movement's inner circle of urbane sophisticates, and he expressed occasional bitterness towards the troupe of young men in John Lane's artistic stable. This may explain why, despite being published by Lane, Shiel (like Machen) was never asked to write for *The Yellow Book*.

Shiel's popular success came upon the publication in 1898 of *The Empress of the Earth* as a serial for Cyril Arthur Pearson's *Short Stories*. The work was published in novel form as *The Yellow Danger* the same year. The story depicts the political and cultural crises that were unfolding in China and were being closely followed in the press. This work was immediately followed by another serial for Pearson

portraying the events of the Spanish-American conflict, *Contraband of War*. Despite the former novel being his most commercially successful publication, Shiel always seems to have considered it hackwork rather than a true artistic achievement.

In 1898, Shiel also began to plan a loosely connected trilogy of novels that would be published as *Lord of the Sea* (1901), *The Purple Cloud* (1901) and *The Last Miracle* (1906). Each of these novels details some future catastrophe befalling humankind. Together these works greatly influenced the development of the genre of apocalyptic fiction. In the following years, Shiel would unsuccessfully attempt to regain the achievement of *The Yellow Danger* by publishing novels based on contemporary news, including *The Yellow Wave* in 1905 and *The Dragon* in 1912. *The Weird o' It* (1902), first serialized and then published as a novel, explored a radically reinterpreted Christianity, an example of the spiritual side of Shiel's work that would remain important to the author throughout his life: *This Above All* (1933) and an annotated translation of Luke's gospel he was working on when he died in 1947 both examine Christian themes from his unique perspective.

In 1914, Shiel was convicted and sentenced to sixteen months in prison under the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act. This is the same Act that Wilde had been convicted under in 1894 and that had been championed at the time by Stead. The Act had, amongst other things, raised the age of sexual consent from thirteen to sixteen years of age. Shiel was found guilty of assault and "carnal knowledge" of his twelve year old *de facto* stepdaughter (he had been living with her mother for enough time that the girl could be considered as such). Shiel was unapologetic, writing about the injustice of his sentence to the Home Secretary and unsuccessfully appealing his sentence. He would hide the details of his offence from his publisher, Grant Richards, dissembling over the identity of the victim and her age at the time.

The writer John Gawsworth helped acquire a Civil List pension for Shiel, providing the elderly writer with some financial security. He also collaborated with Shiel in completing and publishing several literary fragments. Upon Shiel's death, Gawsworth became his literary executor (and inherited the Kingdom of Redonda).

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### **Selected Publications by M. P. Shiel**

*Prince Zaleski*. London: John Lane, 1895.  
*The Rajah's Sapphire*. London: Ward, Lock & Bowden, 1896.  
*Shapes in the Fire*. London: John Lane, 1896.  
*The Yellow Danger*. London: Grant Richards, 1898.  
*Contraband of War*. London: Grant Richards, 1899.  
*Lord of the Sea*. London: Grant Richards, 1901.  
*The Purple Cloud*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1901.  
*The Weird o' It*. London: Grant Richards, 1902.  
*The Yellow Wave*. London: Ward, Lock & Co., 1905.  
*The Last Miracle*. London: T. Werner Laurie, 1906.  
*The Pale Ape*. London: T. Werner Laurie, 1911.  
*This Above All*. New York: The Vanguard Press, 1933.

### **Selected Publications about M. P. Shiel**

Billing, Harold. *M. P. Shiel : A Biography of His Early Years*. Austin, Texas: Roger Beacham, 2005.  
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Fox, Paul. "A Whirlpool Still More Rapid: M. P. Shiel's 'Vaila' and Gothic Impressionism." *Wormwood: Literature of the fantastic, supernatural and decadent* 13 (2009): 1-15.  
MacLeod, Kirsten. "M. P. Shiel and the Love of Pubescent Girls: The Other 'Love

- That Dare Not Speak Its Name.” *English Literature in Transition* 51.4 (2008): 355-80.
- Morse, A. Reynolds. *Shiel in Diverse Hands: a Collection of Essays on M. P. Shiel*. Cleveland, Ohio: The Reynolds Morse Foundation, 1983.
- . *The Shielography Updated*. Cleveland, Ohio: The Reynolds Morse Foundation, 1980.