



WILLIAM SHARP [pseud. Fiona Macleod, W.H. Brooks] (1855-1905)



WILLIAM SHARP
After a pastel drawing by Charles Ross, 1891

Charles Ross. *William Sharp*.
Pastel drawing, 1891, Mark
Samuels Lasner Collection,
University of Delaware
Library, Museums and Press.

Born in Paisley, Scotland, in 1855, William Sharp was the oldest of eight children. His father was a merchant with a great admiration for the West Highlands, where the family would summer. Sharp's own love of nature was enhanced with a mystical bent fostered by the Gaelic singing and storytelling of one of his childhood nurses. At 18, he spent three months living in the countryside with a community of gypsies before his parents got him to return home. At Glasgow University he studied, among other things, poetry, philosophy, occultism, spiritualism, and folklore. With no strong sense of career path, he found a trip to Australia via the South Pacific in 1876-77 equally undirected, although it proved creatively stimulating.

He moved to London in 1878 and quickly became friends with an ever growing community of authors and artists that included Ford Madox Brown, Mona Caird, Robert Browning, William Holman Hunt, George Meredith, William Morris, Walter Pater, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Olive Schreiner, and Algernon Swinburne. The influences of Rossetti and Pater are particularly apparent in his first volume of poetry, *The Human Inheritance, The New Hope, Motherhood and Other Poems* (1882), although Sharp chose a Walt Whitman quotation for the book's epigraph.

The poems' settings in various locations including Scotland, England, Australia, and the South Pacific further distinguish Sharp's interests from the best known forms of Pre-Raphaelitism and aestheticism.

The collection also reveals Sharp's early belief in the *genus loci* (spirit of place) that, while akin to views offered by Pater and Vernon Lee, supports a stronger mystical core. *The Human Inheritance* suggests a cosmic, cyclical reality that gives rise to individuals momentarily, only to let them fade. This aspect of his aesthetic is also apparent in his next two books of poetry, *Earth's Voices* (1884) and *Romantic Ballads and Poems of Phantasy* (1888), which are characterized by the mysticism and folklore that gained strength as his career progressed.

Early on, in addition to writing biographies of Percy Bysshe Shelley (1887), Heinrich Heine (1888), and Robert Browning (1890) and other creative works, he was also often editing series for publishers or writing articles and essays on contract with periodicals. He wrote for *Good Words*, was the managing editor of the Canterbury Poets series (his first contribution being an anthology of Walter Scott's poetry), and worked for a time as editor of the *Young Folks' Paper*.

Sharp's 1891 trip to Italy appears to have imbued him with a deep appreciation for the Italian landscape as an embodiment of the natural and mythic. The experience is captured in his self-published book of free-verse poetry *Sospiri di Roma* (1891). In addition to the sexually charged energy in the poems' natural imagery, the volume also attests to an increased confidence in Sharp's poetic voice. Following this trip, Sharp entered his most productive decade, demonstrating the greatest breadth and complexity of his creative talents and philosophic interests. While he reduced his obligations to various publishers and journal editors, he continued to produce numerous literary essays, journal articles, short stories, travel sketches, and other works.

In 1892, Sharp published one of his most remarkable works, *The Pagan Review*. It was a single-issue journal that rode in on a wave of popularity for paganism and Celtic history. It turned out Sharp was the pseudonymous author of *all* the pieces in the publication, in

addition to occupying the role of editor under the pseudonym of W.H. Brooks. The manifesto-like introduction positions the project within the Decadent Movement that was, at the time, making strong inroads from France to Britain. The various pieces (including Sharp's first dramatic work) reveal an extremely broad range of knowledge of earth-based spiritualities from around the world. While some of the elements of the religions are fabricated, the works in *The Pagan Review* collectively reflect a sincere investment in suggesting a larger cosmic coherence for the Celtic and pagan nature-based spirituality that he admired.

In the 1890s, Sharp joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. He also became a central figure of the Edinburgh group that was part of the movement known as the Celtic Twilight or the Celtic Revival. Indeed, he became most famous as its ur-authoress "Fiona Macleod," the pseudonym under which he ultimately garnered the greatest attention during his lifetime. That this pseudonym was not just a means of obfuscation but, in Sharp's view, an aspect of his authorial identity, is reflected by the fact that, in his early 20s and before his literary career existed, he had already informed a close friend that "in some things I am more a woman than a man" (Elizabeth A. Sharp, *Memoir* 33).

Fiona Macleod was presented to the world as Sharp's protégé, and the facade was extremely well maintained until his death, in part by having Sharp's sister Mary pen Fiona's correspondences. Sharp envisioned Macleod as Roman Catholic, but her works evoke a Celtic world that combines images of idyllic or harsh highland nature with mystical stories of the brave and the beautiful. The gender and women's issues suggested by Sharp's choice of a female pseudonym are readily explored in virtually all of Macleod's novels. The authorial identities of Sharp and Macleod were both sufficiently successful that, in 1895, the journal *The Evergreen* published both of them as contributors to the same issue.

Sharp suffered from chronic heart and nervous conditions throughout his life. He died in Sicily in 1905 at the age of 50. After his death and the public announcement of his two literary personae, his reputation plummeted. Generally, Sharp was assessed for his more popular works as Macleod and found derivative, condemned for his feminine voice and his unabashed admiration for the Romantic poets. When Sharp's work under both his own

name and his pseudonyms is interpreted as a single oeuvre, the critiques come across not only as misogynistic but as an oversimplification of the man's creative innovations.

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Selected Publications by William Sharp

As William Sharp

Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study. London: Macmillan, 1882.

Ecce Puella and Other Prose Imaginings. London: Elkin Matthews, 1896.

The Human Inheritance, The New Hope, Motherhood and Other Poems. London: Elliott Stock, 1882.

Literary Geography. London: Pall Mall, 1904.

Selected Writings of William Sharp. 5 vols. London: Heinemann, 1912.

Silence Farm. London: Grant Richards, 1899.

Sospiri di Roma. Rome: Società Laziale, 1891.

As W.H. Brooks

The Pagan Review, I. Rudgwick, Sussex, 1892.

As Fiona Macleod

Green Fire. New York: Harper's, 1896.

The Sin-Eater and Other Tales. Edinburgh: Patrick Geddes, 1895.

The Mountain Lovers. Keynote Series. London: John Lane, 1895.

The Washer of the Ford. Edinburgh: Patrick Geddes, 1895.

The Winged Destiny: Studies in the Spiritual History of the Gael. London: Chapman and Hall, 1904.

The Works of Fiona Macleod. 7 vols. London: Heinemann, 1910-1912.

Selected Publications about William Sharp (aka Fiona Macleod)

Alaya, Flavia. *William Sharp – "Fiona MacLeod" 1855-1905*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1970.

Halloran, William F. "William Sharp as Bard and Craftsman." *Victorian Poetry* 10.1 (Spring 1972): 57-78.

Harris, Jason Marc. *Folklore and the Fantastic in Nineteenth Century British Fiction*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008.

Hodd, Thomas. "The Celtic Twilight in Canada: William Sharp's Early Occult Influence on Charles G.D. Roberts and Bliss Carman." *Canadian Poetry* 54 (Spring/Summer 2004): 36-55.

Sharp, Elizabeth A. *William Sharp (Fiona Macleod): A Memoir*. New York:
Duffield, 1910.