

Exploring the Sexuality of William Sharp/Fiona Macleod

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***The Life and Letters of William Sharp and “Fiona Macleod,”* ed. William F. Halloran (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2020), 3 Vols., 1801 pp., £83.88 cloth, pdf free: <https://www.Openbookpublishers.com/product/793>.**

William F. Halloran first became interested in William Sharp/Fiona Macleod in 1960. Six decades later sees the publication of his magnum opus on the Scottish poet (1855-1905): three volumes of his letters, meticulously and fully annotated, handsomely produced and illustrated. In the introductory matter, Halloran comes to a measured evaluation of Sharp:

a unique individual who was talented, ambitious, determined to succeed as a writer, and aware of his shortcomings [...] [he was] a talented, attractive, sensitive, and conflicted man. Difficult to pin down with precision, he was immersed in the cross-currents of ideas and in the artistic and social movements of the last two decades of the nineteenth century in Great Britain and continental Europe. He participated in spiritualist efforts to affirm the existence of some form of life after death; he embraced new ideas about the place of women in society, the constraints of marriage, the fluidity of gender identity, and the complexity of the human psyche. (I.4)

These are all important issues, and any student of late Victorian England will benefit from immersion in Sharp’s life and letters. The volumes are important too, for, as Halloran notes, Sharp

knew and corresponded with many influential writers, among them Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Walter Pater, George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, and William Butler Yeats. He wrote extensively as William Sharp and as Fiona Macleod to the firms that published his books and to the editors of magazines, journals, and newspapers for which he wrote essays and reviews. Individuals interested in literary and publishing activities in Great Britain and the United States in the 1880s and 1890s may find the letters useful (I.5)

But I have several reservations. One is relatively minor: that, as in too many scholarly editions, the notes to each letter are not on the same page but at the back of the volume—not easy to move back and forth between text and note (thank goodness for small Post-It Notes!). The inconvenience is worse for anyone using the pdf version of the volumes.

More than an inconvenience is the lack of an index; there are close to 1800 pages of texts and notes and no way to find the references to, say, D.G. Rossetti. The pdf edition can be word searched, but even that is not as helpful as a good index. Many scholars whose work might well benefit from what is available here simply won't take the time to read so many pages with no certain results to anticipate. The loss is considerable, for it is Sharp's position within networks of Victorian writers and thinkers that makes him of such interest to many. His own network was extensive, as indicated by even just the summary in volume I of Sharp's youthful acquaintances, friends, and activities:

Walter Pater, Robert Browning, Mr. and Mrs. Ford Madox Ford, Mr. and Mrs. William Morris, Mr. and Mrs. William Rossetti, Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Wilde, and Sir Frederick Leighton, the painter [...]. At the close of 1884, both Sharps [William and Elizabeth] embarked on a six-year period of editing and reviewing that placed them near the center of London's literary elite. (I.74)

Among the eminent Victorians Sharp would later move among were such as D.G. Rossetti, George Meredith, Swinburne, and, most interestingly, W.B. Yeats.

For each "Chapter" of letters (delineated by years or parts of years), Halloran writes a biographical essay, drawing on the letters and their notes and the memoir of Sharp by his wife, to write in effect a new and compelling, if narrowly sourced, biography of Sharp. Halloran includes biographical readings of works by Sharp and Macleod and the narratives move along smartly and lucidly, helping to give the letters their context and to flesh out Sharp and his times.

My most serious reservation concerns Halloran's silences about, or conflicted representations of, Sharp and sexuality. Halloran knows all there is to know about Sharp, including Elizabeth Sharp's central work on her husband (*William Sharp/Fiona Macleod: A Memoir* [1911]) and other biographical works, e.g., Flavia Alaya's *William Sharp—"Fiona Macleod": 1855-1905* (1970) (still an important work on Sharp), my own *The Sexual Tensions of William Sharp* (1996), and Steve Blamires' sometimes quirky but carefully researched *The Little Book of the Great Enchantment* (2008).

Halloran does make clear, in a brief account, that what governs his use of secondary sources is that "with some exceptions, neither the introductions nor the notes to the letters take account of what others have said or written about William Sharp" (I.4). I raise this because Sharp's creation of a female persona and his career under her name almost always immediately raise a question germane to his life: was he gay, straight, or bisexual? The question has been around a long time and may even have troubled Sharp (I.534); it is raised especially by Alaya and me (and it is also explored in a work I've only recently discovered and not heretofore in the *MLA International Bibliography*: Konrad Hopkins' "The Strange Case of William Sharp/Fiona Macleod 'Wilfion,'" *Gay Scotland* [September 1982], p. 19). The question is not easy to answer, and what we have are a number of characterizations of Sharp's life experiences that seem sometimes inconsistent; a sustained examination in all its complexity in an appendix would have been helpful.

I believe, for example, that Sharp's friendships with Walter Pater and John Addington Symonds and his admiration of Walt Whitman seem to

flag some degree of interest in male relationships. But in these volumes, *mum*'s sometimes the word. The note to Pater, for example, includes only his dates. And though Halloran observes, in his biographical essay to Vol. 1, that Sharp in 1883 in Italy "formed a close friendship with" Symonds (68), his notes on Symonds make no mention of Symonds' standing as a gay man, writer, and theorist:

John Addington Symonds (1849-1893) settled in Switzerland in 1877 and remained there until his death, with regular trips to Italy, especially Venice. He and Sharp developed a warm friendship, and Symonds encouraged Sharp's literary pursuits throughout the eighties. (I.609)

E.A.S. [Elizabeth Sharp] confirms that Venice, where he enjoyed the 'frequent companionship of John Addington Symonds' and long hours in the gondola, was the 'crowning pleasure' of Sharp's Italian sojourn. (I.610).

Students new to the Victorian Age will not be well served by such discretion; more established scholars may notice the ellipsis, which might in fact drive them to wonder if there is something to suppress.

Halloran's wording when he describes Sharp's relations with other gay Victorians sometimes gives clearer hints, as when he describes his connection with Alexander Nelson Hood and R. Murray Gilchrist as two of his "intimate friendship[s]" (III.150). He even writes that Robert Hichens was "a recognized and unapologetic homosexual" who spent time at a place Sharp loved to visit, Taormina "where he [Hichens] found a group of men, including Alexander Nelson Hood, who shared his sexual preference," going on to note that "Sharp formed a bond with Hichens, as he had with Alex Hood and R. Murray Gilchrist" (III.195). In the case of Gilchrist we are told simply that he, his "life-long partner [George Alfred Garfitt]," and Sharp "formed a close friendship that lasted many years" (I.418). Many readers, I think, will—again—infer a common gayness among these men.

Where he openly addresses the issue, Halloran suggests that homosociality underlies these ties, writing that "Sharp seems not to have desired or needed a sexual relationship with another man, but he had a

compelling need for a male friend to whom he could confide his deepest feelings" (II.87). In one instance it seems that Halloran accepts Sharp's core sexuality as gay, though forced by the times into the closet: "by necessity if not by choice, Sharp's paganism was heterosexual, but he had many homosexual friends during his life, and he was perfectly comfortable with love and desire no matter its form" (I.418). Furthermore, Halloran prints a poem never published by Sharp, "The Sheik," a poem with homoerotic overtones that, Halloran ponders, may have been copied by Sharp "perhaps for one of his many gay friends" (I.463). For those inclined to see the creation of Fiona Macleod as perhaps in part a crisis of sexual identity or orientation, Halloran's richly and sympathetically nuanced account of the situations of Sharp, Gilchrist, and Garfitt (I.518-24, 573-74) may merit special attention. See, too, Halloran's estimation that "throughout his correspondence with Gilchrist, there is the suggestion that Sharp had shared with Gilchrist, whose desires were directed entirely toward men and who lived with a male lover, his need for an intimate relationship with another man and the duality of his sexual orientation" (II.372). Seeing Sharp simply as a suppressed homosexual is complicated, however, by two instances of heterosexual activity, one a late love in Sharp's life and one his apparently fathering a child.

Halloran, it seems to me, equivocates when he describes Sharp as manifesting in reality a role he sometimes played, that of "a romantic Lothario," when he became "captivated" (III.253) by a young American woman, Roselle Shields, who brought him, Sharp writes, "new life [...] and in more ways than one" (III.283), "her all surrounding love saved me" (III.388), he said. In analyzing a letter about the relationship by a friend, Halloran posits something kept from Sharp's wife, "presumably how close Roselle's relationship with her husband had been" (III.254), and he later comments that Roselle "returned his love" (III.155). But he then turns away from the intimacy implied, to suggest that the relationship was one of a father and a daughter (III.257). In another note, Halloran suggests that "Sharp had feelings for Shields he had not shared with Elizabeth," his wife (III, 462; note 68). Sharp's letters to Shields reveal little, though Halloran

notes that to Shields Sharp wrote “more personally and at greater length” than to another woman friend (III.462 n. 73).

The same friend wrote to Shields of Sharp in his last days, expressing how, she thought, “he longed for his wee ‘Roseen’”; Halloran speculates that two of Shields’ letters may have been held back from Elizabeth Sharp when she was gathering material for her biography, as “too personal, perhaps too frank on expressing his love for his ‘wee Roseen’” (III.464 n. 82). I am sympathetic to Halloran here—recovering details of an infatuation between two people over a hundred years ago with little evidence is hard. But a more frank discussion, perhaps in an appendix, might have been better.

My own belief that Sharp was likely drawn only to men and that his infatuation with Edith Wingate Rinder was idealized and platonic was complicated when I heard, long after I published my book, that he had fathered a daughter with Rinder, the inspiration for Fiona Macleod. This was first revealed, I believe, in Blamires’ 2008 biography. Blamires writes of two packages of letters Elizabeth Sharp directed to be destroyed upon her death, letters that he believes were

private letters between William and Edith Wingate Rinder [...]. They would also have contained as much evidence as she [Elizabeth Sharp] could gather and hide away concerning William’s relationship to Edith’s daughter Esther Mona Rinder. This would explain why so very few letters between the two lovers have ever surfaced and why Esther’s children have no material evidence of her paternity other than one of the sons bearing a striking resemblance to William Sharp, his grandfather. (232, see too 237)

Consider now Halloran’s account of the birth of Esther Mona Harvey, one of the dedicatees of his three volumes:

Edith Rinder gave birth on July 26 [1901] to Esther Mona Rinder [...]. Often in his decade-long relationship with Edith Rinder Sharp lamented, in private notes and in the Fiona

Macleod stories, their inability to have a child [...]. Given the interdependence of the relationship between the Sharps and the Rinders and the fact that neither marriage had produced a child, it is not surprising that the Rinder's [sic] baby girl meant a good deal to both couples. (III.76-77)

Halloran does once call Esther "the daughter of Edith and Frank Rinder" (III.448 n. 41), but more generally he avoids the question of paternity by creating an ambiguity which will lead most to assume that Frank Rinder is Esther's father, but will allow others to infer that her father was, indeed, Sharp.

The singular possessive in the account is revealing and not, in this reading, a typo: "the Rinder's baby girl" suggests that only one of the Rinders, the mother, was involved in the conception of the child, and Halloran is careful to use the singular elsewhere as well: "Edith Wingate Rinder's daughter" (I.[ix]). This leads to uncertainty too when Halloran writes, again in the singular, that "years later, in the 1960s, Edith Rinder's daughter, Esther Mona Harvey (1901-1993), told me several times that her parents when young in the 1890s had 'some very advanced ideas,' but they rejected those ideas and regretted some of their actions as they grew older." If Halloran is pointing to Sharp here, it would be worth exploring; if the comment is about Edith Rinder's husband, it is of less interest. Furthermore, Sharp's own comment on the birth ("a fantastically strange and to me a deeply moving development" (III.116)), is denied the resonance it might have if he is the father; and knowing his relationship will make us read the dedicatory missive to *Deirdé and The Sons of USNA*, "To Esther Mona," as well as his gifts to her on her second birthday (III.438 n. 15 & 17), differently.

What is disturbing in all this is that I first read of Sharp's fathering a child in Halloran's work itself. An early form of his edition was hosted online at the Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London. Neither that version nor any date of posting is currently available, but on 23 September 2009 I addressed an email to the VICTORIA Listserv. In my message, I mentioned something I had read in

the on-line edition, which is that Halloran had “documented for the first time that Sharp fathered a child with Mrs. Rinder (see his introduction to the 1901 letters).” All this suggests more than just a wavering; here, as earlier, Halloran should have addressed the question directly and in detail. These equivocations surprise me—Halloran is a good scholar, and in corresponding with him, I had come to think him amenable to my views. He said that he had never found any evidence of Sharp’s engagement in homosexual acts, but I thought we had agreed that Sharp might be understood as bisexual. I gathered that the obfuscations around the paternity of Esther Mona Rinder reflected concerns from one of her sons.

This third reservation is a particularly serious one, but my focused comments don’t impeach the excellence otherwise of Halloran’s scholarship—his notes are often gems, meticulous and richly detailed. Most especially I would emphasize Halloran’s deep empathy with Sharp and with the complexity of the relationships he had with friends and acquaintances. And in this day of on-demand publishing, Halloran may still be able to make changes for a revised edition, should he wish to strengthen his comments on these issues.

These three thick volumes are the work of a scholar who has lived with Sharp/Mcleod for many decades. He is fond of both and yet judicious in his handling of what he calls “gender identity,” as in one of several careful and sensitive examinations of Sharp’s personality:

As Fiona Macleod he could write out of his heart in a way he could not do as William Sharp. Neither could he do so were he the woman Fiona Macleod was supposed to be, ‘unless veiled in scrupulous anonymity.’ He [Sharp] continues:

This rapt sense of oneness with nature, this cosmic ecstasy and elation, this wayfaring along the extreme verges of the common world, all this is so wrought up with the romance of life that I could not bring myself to expression by

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my outer self, insistent and tyrannical as that need is [...]. My truest self, the self who is below all other selves, and my most intimate life and joys and sufferings, thoughts, emotions, and dreams, must find expression, yet I cannot save in this hidden way.

This explanation of his adoption of the pseudonym, reproduced in part by Elizabeth Sharp in the *Memoir*, is one of his most extensive and forthright. There is no mention of supernatural beings or of a separate person speaking through him, but simply a recognition of multiple personalities, or 'selves,' within the single human being. The most basic of those he experienced could be expressed only by the adoption of the feminine pseudonym and by projecting a separate identity for a feminine hidden self. That the deeper self is female raises important questions concerning what is now called gender identity. These questions have plagued the reputation of William Sharp since his pseudonym was revealed upon his death in 1905. They have arisen earlier in this work, and will arise again later. Here it is enough to observe that possible answers to these questions lie in his recognition and the recognition of many of his contemporaries that men and women had the potential for multiple personalities, with different personalities achieving dominance at various stages of their lives. (II.12-13)

One final point should be made, though: Halloran is disingenuous when he writes that "there is no evidence that any of [... Sharp's] relationships—with women or with men—involved sexual intimacy just as there is no evidence they did not" (II.364)—he frequently suggests the physicality of Sharp's connection to Edith Rinder, noting at one point, for example, a "build-up of sexual tension" (II.21) when the two are apart. I obviously continue to be interested in the question of Sharp's sexual orientation. But reading Halloran's accounts of "the complexity of Sharp's personality and the difficulty his friends faced understanding him while he lived, and everyone has faced since he died" (II.371) underlines the difficulties involved. I see Halloran's deep and patient empathy with Sharp

as suggesting a new approach to him through the lens of Transgender Studies. My own work may have been unduly binary, too rigid perhaps to capture what Halloran calls the “fluidity of [Sharp’s] gender identity” (I.4).

The appearance of Sharp’s letters and Halloran’s life based on them is indeed a valuable addition to Victorian studies.

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