

# The Gissing Journal

Volume XLIII, Number 2, April 2007

“More than most men am I dependent on sympathy to bring out the best that is in me.”  
*Commonplace Book*

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## Bella Curtis: the Canadian Connection

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### I

In the remarkable and exciting account<sup>1</sup> of his successful efforts to identify the elusive Miss Curtis from Eastbourne over whom Gissing lost his head in 1888, Markus Neacey is reluctantly forced to the conclusion: “[a]fter this date [1906] Bella and her husband vanish from official records. [...] Neither can they be traced in historical directories nor in the death register.” From what follows it will become clear that the Napper family (Henry George Napper and his wife Bella Alice Mary Napper, née Curtis and their four children) did not literally vanish into thin air, but decided to try their luck across the Atlantic, settling in Western Canada.

Between 1896 and 1911 the flood of immigrants that Canada had long been expecting finally arrived. In 1871, the Census reported 43,000 people living in the Prairie West. In 1901, the number was 414,000 and by 1911 it had risen to 1,328,000 people. A number of factors led to this dramatic increase. Clifford Sifton, Canada’s Minister of the Interior (1896-1905), initiated an aggressive advertising campaign for the Canadian West. He flooded Europe, Scandinavia and America with travelling promoters and with reports, posters and books that described the Canadian West in glowing terms. As cultivable land was fast disappearing in many European countries, or was being divided into smaller and smaller parcels that were not large enough to sustain a family, people were increasingly prompted to leave the old world. In other regions, industrialization was growing, and the slums and poor living conditions left many seeking a better life. Some sought adventure, others tried to escape persecution. Canada thus rapidly became an appealing choice to those searching for a new home.<sup>2</sup>

A chance reference found in the *New General Catalog of Old Books and Authors*<sup>3</sup> put me on the track of a Doris Maud Fern[e], née Napper, whose given birth year (1896) was close enough to the actual date of birth of

Bella's first (and only) daughter, viz. 14 March 1894, for me to begin to hope that in this Canadian poet I had traced the Napper line. Turning to the 1911 census of Canada for confirmation I did indeed find the entire Napper family listed there. At the time they were residing in the MacLeod district in the province of Alberta and their personal details were specified as follows:

<b>Surname</b>	<b>First name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Province</b>	<b>District</b>
Napper	Bella	42	Alberta	MacLeod
Napper	Doris	17	Alberta	MacLeod
Napper	Henry	40	Alberta	MacLeod
Napper	Jack	5	Alberta	MacLeod
Napper	Leslie	15	Alberta	MacLeod
Napper	Roy	8	Alberta	MacLeod

From the original census forms I learned that Henry George Napper was employed as a car foreman by the Canadian Pacific Railway, that Doris Napper was a telephone operator and that her brother Leslie had found himself a job as devil, i.e. errand-boy in a printing office. Another interesting fact found on the census form is that all the Nappers list their religious affiliation as Anglican. In view of Neacey's most plausible suggestion that Bella Curtis should have "spurned Gissing on religious grounds," we may regard this as proof that Bella's religious scruples of 1888 had not been a passing fancy.

In addition the census form revealed that Henry George Napper had emigrated to Canada in 1906, preparing the way for the other members of the family, who came to Canada one year later, in 1907. These findings fully matched those of Neacey, who in his article claimed the complete disappearance of the Nappers from the English official records.

Like many other Canadians of English descent Henry Napper returned to the old world as a volunteer in the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force. He was a lieutenant in the 54th Canadian Infantry Battalion (Kootenay) and was awarded a Military Cross for "conspicuous gallantry in action" at Ourton (France), in the Lens sector, on December 18, 1916.<sup>4</sup> He was to end his military career with the rank of Major. After his return to Canada, he continued working for the Canadian Pacific Railway until the end of his life. We find later references to him in Manitoba, where he drew up his will on 1 September 1928, and he finally ended up in Victoria, British Columbia, where he died on 23 July 1936, at the age of 65.

Neacey established the existence of only two of the Napper children: Doris Maud, born at Richmond, 14 March 1894, and Leslie Raymond, born

at Richmond, 23 September 1895. Leslie died on 31 October 1953, at Victoria, B.C. Further research showed that there had been two more additions to the family. These were boys too: Arthur Roy Napper (Roy), born in 1903 and Jack Ronald Paul Napper (Jack), born in 1906. It seems likely that it was Jack's birth in 1906 that accounts at least in part for the later departure for Canada of Bella and her children in 1907. We may assume that these two boys were born at Richmond too, but I have not seen their birth certificates. Roy Napper died at Saanich, B.C. on 18 March 1966, at the age of 63 and his brother Jack Napper died at Sidney, B.C. on 24 August 1949, aged 43. Somehow the family links must have been quite strong, as all of the Nappers died on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Perhaps the lasting influence and presence of their mother was an important factor. Bella Alice Mary Napper, née Curtis, after a long life died on 3 January 1971, 101 years old. In other words, when in 1963 Jacob Korg was writing *George Gissing: a Critical Biography* in Seattle, Washington he was only a few hours away from a 93-year-old lady who had known Gissing in person.

The last Napper whose life story can be traced is Doris Maud Ferne, née Napper. She acquired a reputation for herself as one of Canada's minor modernist poets, publishing three volumes of poetry: *Ebb Tide*,<sup>5</sup> *The Paschal Lamb and Other Poems*<sup>6</sup> and *Forest Music: Symphonic Poem, a Pastoral*.<sup>7</sup> She, her husband and elder son, moved to Victoria, B.C. in 1927 where she developed her literary talent as a poet. She was a founding member of the poetry group of the Victoria and Islands Branch of the Canadian Authors' Association in the early 1930s. Together with other west coast writers she founded the modernist literary magazine *Contemporary Verse* in Victoria in 1941. It ran until 1953 under the editorship of Alan Crawley, assisted by Doris Ferne. She also wrote short stories and reviews and gave many radio broadcasts. In a letter dated 27 July 1936, written by the prominent Canadian poet Edwin John Pratt (1882-1964) there is a reference to Doris Ferne: "Mrs Doris Ferne is a charming delicate little lady, the convenor of the Poetry Society." In 1946 Pratt, who acted as a reader for Macmillan, recommended the publication of *Paschal Lamb, and Other Poems*, adding the appreciative comment: "Doris has a large group of friends in Victoria and her personal leadership for years over the poetic sorority should mean a few sales there. Her artistic modesty is seen in the slim collection presented, for she has been writing good stuff for 20 years."<sup>8</sup>

In addition to her poetic activities, Doris Ferne found time to serve the Victoria community as a Christian Science practitioner (more or less

equivalent to a minister) and she was an active member of the local Church of Christ, Scientist for over 35 years.<sup>9</sup>

About 1917 Doris Napper married Ernest George Ferne, who was also of English descent, born in Camberwell (London) in early 1888. He had emigrated to Canada in 1909, together with an older brother of his, Leonard Valentine Ferne (b. Lambeth, 1882). In the 1911 census of Canada we find the brothers at Nanaimo, B.C., in the subdistrict of Saanich. The brothers style themselves “poultry experts.” Ernest George Ferne died on 14 March 1983, at Victoria, at the age of 95. Late in life the one-time poultry expert turned into poetry expert: he published a volume of verse under the title *Come Walk with Me, and Other Poems*.<sup>10</sup> Doris Ferne also died at Victoria, on 12 November 1986, having reached the age of 92.

The Fernes had two sons; the elder was Harry C. Ferne (1917-2003), who joined the Royal Canadian Navy for the duration of World War II, later becoming a Commissioner with the Canadian Pension Commission. He ended his active career as a solicitor with the Attorney General’s department. Harry Ferne, like his father and mother before him, also tried his hand at writing poetry. His brother, David M. Ferne, is a retired investment adviser. He worked for 35 years in that capacity. David received a Bachelor of Commerce from the University of British Columbia and in 1977, he obtained a Master of Public Administration degree from the University of Victoria. He served on the University Foundation and is a past president of the UVic Alumni Association.

I should like to give the texts of two of Doris Ferne’s poems, one in which she elegizes her soldiering father’s death in 1936, while simultaneously anticipating the horrors of the second World War, the other, a sonnet inspired by childhood fears associated with the house in England in which she and her brother Leslie were born, set against “the stark / Reality” of the second World War, with her dread of bombs falling upon Richmond, Surrey. Themes that would have been dear to the father she never had.

### **Ebb Tide**<sup>11</sup>

I shall remember forever the night you died.  
The roses were leaning forever on the wall.  
The silver birch hung quiet without a quiver  
For a brooding shadow of heat was over all.  
The only sound in the garden was an echo  
Of the only sounds in the room, your shallow breath  
And the ruthless tick of the clock told off to measure

The slow recessional, death.  
And we were drawn in a void between two worlds,  
Strangely strong and secure we seemed to be  
As down the garden path and out of the room  
Crept the embracing sea.  
When the night grew pale as a moth you raised your head  
And gave me one clear look. "The dawn" you said.  
The dawn for you? For us the sky is grey  
And desolate yet, heavy with sullen thunder  
Of hungry guns you thought you helped to still  
Just two decades ago. You lived to wonder  
What was the use of those tormented years  
If all's to do again? Body and will  
To be cut to the age-old pattern of blood and tears  
Designed by war. It is false dawn,  
Faint as the line of foam on this ebb tide,  
Quiet as your silent heart. When at your side  
Stood our growing lad the light grew dim.  
I did not grieve for you. I wept for him.

### **But One Tall Gable<sup>12</sup>**

You say the house where I was born is gone,  
But one tall gable stands up to the sky...  
I remember how the moonlight shone  
Through that tall window. You and I  
Were little children then and feared the night,  
We crept down the dark hall and creaking stairs  
To beg our kindly Nannie for a light  
Because the shadows might be lions or bears.  
But now a child alone would pray for dark  
For moonlight means the planes are overhead.  
No fancies throng the shadows for the stark  
Reality of war has wiped the dread  
Of all but bombs away. I have no tears  
To shed for houses or for vanished years.

## II

Markus Neacey towards the end of his ground-breaking article raises the question: "But what of Bella after she closed the door on Gissing forever?" And he then goes on to speculate that she may have treasured "the memory of [the] man who had briefly loved her until her dying day."<sup>13</sup> I should like

to approach the question Neacey poses from Gissing's perspective and ask: "But what of Gissing after Bella closed the door on him forever?" For an answer to that question I suggest that we look to his writing, because for Gissing the natural way of coping with the series of traumatic experiences in his life was to work them into the fabric of his imaginative world and in the process to create a therapeutic distance from the pain and disappointment that so often marked his life.

There is in the "Ideas" section of Gissing's *Scrapbook* the following entry:

"Man wishes to marry a girl of seventeen. Parents insist on delay. His arguments: Wishes to form her mind, &<sup>c</sup>, and dislikes her present influences. Consent at last won. Then he refuses to be married in a church, insists on civil marriage. And so on."

The item is crossed out, which means that Gissing used it in his fiction and I think that by turning to a subplot in one of his major novels, *Born in Exile*, written in 1891 and published in 1892, we shall discover how Gissing put the idea developed in the above entry to good use. Apparently feeling he had not quite exhausted the full potential of the idea, he returned to it a year later in the short story "A Lodger in Maze Pond" (written in 1893 and first published in 1895).

Turning to *Born in Exile* first, we find that at the end of the novel Malkin finally succeeds in marrying the seventeen-year-old Bella Jacox. It was not only her first name that made me think of Bella Curtis, but there are a number of additional parallels between the characters of Bella Curtis and Bella Jacox that make such an identification inevitable. In the whole of Gissing's oeuvre the name "Bella" is used only four times. There is an otherwise unidentified girl in a pub in *The Unclassed*, whose name only crops up once, and there is an abbreviated version (Bella) of the eponymous heroine of *Isabel Clarendon*, but Gissing used the name for more than merely incidental characters only twice: Bella Royston in *The Odd Women* and Bella Jacox in *Born in Exile*.

Not until Markus Neacey's discovery of Miss Curtis's first name, did it become possible to realize how the traumatic circumstances of Gissing's failure to win Bella Curtis were used and humorously transformed in an attempt to come to terms with them. Gissing's considered views of marriage in the years after Nell's death and Bella's rejection of him can be found in a letter to Eduard Bertz: "Marriage, in the best sense, is impossible, owing to my insufficient income; educated English girls *will* not face poverty in marriage [...] They remain unmarried in hundreds, rather than

accept poor men.— I know that my danger, if I become connected with a tolerable girl of low position, is very great: I am weak in these matters.”<sup>14</sup>

In fact Gissing’s susceptibility to the female charm of shop-girls is well-attested, and in a poem dated to his year in America there is a humorous account of his (or, at least somebody resembling him pretty closely) being bewitched by a girl serving in a candy store. I quote the most relevant passages:

### **The Candy Store**<sup>15</sup>

Thickly lay the snow and frost on  
Those long winding streets of Boston

...

[When] I beheld a sight amazing,  
Past description, blinding, dazing,  
I shall ne’er forget it more;  
For there close at hand I  
Saw a beauteous figure stand, I  
Saw a someone putting candy  
In the window of a store!

...

O there ne’er again will come one,  
Half so cruel, half so sweet; —  
'Twas a maiden,— nay a goddess,  
In a tightly fitting bodice,

...

As I stood in admiration,  
In a sort of fascination  
With a look of invitation  
She turned round to me and smiled,  
And so pleasantly she bent her  
Eyes on me, as if she meant a  
Special hint for me to enter,  
That, alas, I was beguiled.

...

From that day began my sorrow,—  
I was there upon the morrow,  
Every day that I could borrow  
Beg or steal a little cash;  
There I sat from hour to hour  
In a sort of spicy bower,  
Munching on with all my power,  
O how could I be so rash!

For I thought not of expenses,  
Had no heed to consequences.  
She had mastered all my senses  
With the magic of her eye;  
And I thought I should ensure her  
If I could but kneel before her,  
And declare I did adore her,  
But I never dared to try!

...

O, how could you be so cruel,  
Mary, if you only knew all,

...

You would not have left me so,

...

And it's all through you, you know.

Waltham. January 1877.

It is amazing to realize how what occurred in a candy store in Boston in December 1876, repeated itself in a tobacco shop at Eastbourne in February 1888. Surely, Bella Curtis was the maiden, half cruel and half sweet, who, dressed like a goddess in a tightly fitting bodice, sold him the sweetly blended tobacco Gissing needed for his pipe. And he kept coming back for more. Of course, we need to remind ourselves of the dangers of uncritically equating the imaginative features of an author's books with the details of his lived experiences, but a close reading of the circumstances surrounding the Malkin-Jacox marriage will show to what extent Gissing relied on his memories of the Eastbourne *débâcle*.

In an early conversation between Earwaker and Malkin, the latter claims that his only chance of getting a suitable wife is to train some very young girl for the purpose. He continues in terms quite close to Gissing's entry in the *Scrapbook*: "Don't misunderstand me, for heaven's sake! I mean that I must make a friendship with some schoolgirl in whose education I can have a voice, whose relatives will permit me to influence her mind and develop her character."<sup>16</sup> The dream of a man without money to find himself an ordinary girl with sufficient brains to be trained by himself to become an acceptable partner in marriage is one to which Gissing returns time and again. The reference to "a tolerable girl of low position" in the letter to Bertz may serve as one instance among many.

In the whirlwind character of the globetrotting Malkin Gissing has created an ironical, self-critical and humorous portrait of a man whose



foolish infatuation with young Bella Jacox is clearly based on his own experiences at the Eastbourne tobacconist's. Having expressed his determination to find himself a schoolgirl who would allow him to influence, to train, educate and civilize her and develop her character, Malkin continues his conversation with Earwaker by a significant reference to a Mrs Jacox and her two adolescent girls:

‘But let us talk of that poor Mrs. Jacox and her girls. You feel that you know them pretty well from my letters, don’t you?’

...

‘May I [= Earwaker], without offence, inquire if either of these young ladies seems suitable for the ideal training of which you spoke?’ Malkin smiled thoughtfully. He stood with his legs apart and stroked his blond beard. ‘The surmise is not unnatural. Well, I confess that Bella has inspired me with no little interest. She is rather mature, unfortunately; I wish she had been Lily’s age. We shall see; we shall see.’ (*Born in Exile*, pp. 192-93).

When Earwaker first meets the Jacox girls they strike him as “of more promising type, though Earwaker would hardly have supposed them so old as he knew them to be. Bella, just beyond her fourteenth year, had an intelligent prettiness, but was excessively shy; in giving her hand to the stranger she flushed over face and neck, and her bosom palpitated visibly.” (*Born in Exile*, p. 279). Malkin’s enthusiasm is unabated and he confides to Earwaker: “‘You remember what I said to you long since? My mind is made up—practically made up. I shall devote myself to Bella’s education, in the hope—you understand me? Impossible to have found a girl who suited better with my aspirations. She has known the hardships of poverty, poor thing, and that will keep her for ever in sympathy with the downtrodden classes. She has a splendid intelligence, and it shall be cultivated to the utmost. [...] For these next three years I shall live as becomes a man who has his eyes constantly on a high ideal—the pure and beautiful girl whom he humbly hopes to win for a wife.’” (*Born in Exile*, pp. 281-82).

In the last few pages of *Born in Exile* Gissing rounds off Malkin’s marital aspirations, after the latter’s return from New Zealand, where he had fled to avoid being married to Mrs. Jacox. Three years have passed and Bella Jacox has reached the age of “seventeen and a few months.” Malkin announces his decision to marry Bella without further delay, but a few obstacles remain to be overcome, the major one being their different views of religion:

‘Now don’t suppose that this marriage entirely satisfies me. Bella has been fairly well taught, but not, you see, under my supervision. [...] As it is, I shall have to begin by assailing her views on all manner of things. Religion, for example. Well, I have no religion, that’s plain. I might call myself this or that for the sake of seeming respectable, but it all comes to the same thing. I don’t mind Bella going to church if she wishes, but I must teach her that there’s no merit in doing so. It isn’t an ideal marriage, but perhaps as good as this imperfect world allows.’ (*Born in Exile*, p. 502).

But troubles were yet in store. Malkin was strongly opposed to a religious marriage; he wished the wedding to be at the registrar’s office, and had obtained Bella’s consent to this, but Mrs. Jacox would not hear of such a thing. [...] ‘O Mr. Malkin, you will break my heart, indeed you will!’ And she wrote an ejaculatory letter to Earwaker, imploring his intercession. The journalist took his friend in hand.

‘My good fellow, don’t make a fool of yourself. Women are born for one thing only, the Church of England marriage service. How can you seek to defeat the end of their existence? Give in to the inevitable. Grin and bear it.’

Dire was the conflict [...] there were floods of tears. In the end, Bella effected a compromise; the marriage was to be at a church, but in the greatest possible privacy. No carriages, no gala dresses, no invitations, no wedding feast; the bare indispensable formalities. And so it came to pass. (*Born in Exile*, pp. 502-03).

There is no doubt at all that Markus Neacey was right in identifying Gissing’s lack of religious conformity as the major obstacle to his desired union with Bella Curtis. The humorous version of the disappointment of his marital hopes in the story of Malkin and Bella Jacox proves that it was indeed on account of religious differences that Anglican Bella and agnostic George decided to go their different ways. Compromise was apparently out of the question. Does the *Born in Exile* version of the events at Eastbourne in 1888 suggest that Gissing came to regret his own (and Bella’s?) stubbornness? However that may be, in one of his major novels, there is abundant evidence that Gissing did return to the scene of his trauma even after Bella had closed the door upon him.

I am indebted to Christina Sjöholm for pointing out—while I was engaged on the research for this article—that Gissing was indeed still haunted by what happened at Eastbourne at the time of conceiving the short story “A Lodger in Maze Pond.” The story’s chief character, Henry Shergold, is a clerk in an office, with poetic ambitions, and radical political views. After a year in the office, at the age of twenty-three, he suddenly announces his decision to marry. “His chosen bride was the daughter of a journeyman

tailor—a tall, pale, unhealthy girl of eighteen, whose acquaintance he had made at a tobacconist's shop, where she served. He was going to marry her on principle—principle informed with callow passion, the passion of a youth who has lived demurely, more among books than men. [...] The girl, he declared, had fallen in love with him during conversations across the counter; her happiness was in his hands, and he would not betray it. She had excellent dispositions; he would educate her.”<sup>17</sup>

It has long been agreed that the lodger in Maze Pond resembles his creator in a great many crucial respects. For instance the editors of the *Collected Letters* observed that Shergold's “life embodies several thinly veiled elements of Gissing's own.”<sup>18</sup> And in a letter to his friend Clara Collet, which amounts to an unprecedented attempt to explain the desperately unhappy relations with his first wife, Nell Harrison, and Edith Underwood, his second wife, Gissing makes the self-incriminating confession concerning the latter: “There is no one to blame but myself, in the last resort. I, of course, am to blame for taking that poor girl out of her natural sphere, whence all her trouble & mine. It was grossly selfish; it was utterly unintelligent behaviour; it showed the unteachable man (Do you remember my story ‘A Lodger in Maze Pond’? There is my own silly self).”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the protests of his friend Harvey Munden, Shergold marries the girl from the tobacconist's shop and, unsurprisingly, the marriage proves to be a “hideous disaster,” ending after some seven years with the wife breaking her neck after a fatal fall from the stairs. Shergold's new-won freedom is soon traded in for another entanglement, this time with Emma, his landlady's daughter, to whom on a sudden impulse he proposes marriage. In a conversation with his friend Munden he seeks to explain his crazy action: “I didn't persuade myself that I cared for Emma, even then. Her vulgarisms of speech and feeling jarred upon me. But she was feminine; she spoke and looked gently, with sympathy. I enjoyed that evening—and you must bear in mind what I have told you before, that I stand in awe of refined women. I am their equal, I know; I can talk with them; their society is an exquisite delight to me;—but when it comes to thinking of intimacy with them—! Perhaps it is my long years of squalid existence. Perhaps I have come to regard myself as doomed to life on a lower level. I find it an impossible thing to imagine myself offering marriage—making love—to a girl such as those I meet in the big houses.”<sup>20</sup>

What is remarkable is that in Shergold's analysis of his reasons for proposing to Emma (note the vocalic similarity to Bella), Gissing seems to undertake simultaneously a critical examination of his own motives for

“making love” to Bella Curtis. However, in the fictitious recycling of the Eastbourne events what is significant is that Shergold cannot resist the temptation to marry and that his two marriages end equally in disaster. The first, with the fatal fall of the girl from the tobacco shop and the second with his own death, of dysentery, less than two months after his wedding. It would seem that by the time he wrote “A Lodger in Maze Pond” Gissing had persuaded himself that he ought to be grateful to Bella for her superior practical wisdom in closing the door upon him for good, thus saving herself and him from himself.

<sup>1</sup>Markus Neacey, “‘A crazy idea...All gone off in smoke’: George Gissing and Miss Curtis,” *Gissing Journal*, January 2007, pp. 1-22.

<sup>2</sup>Chris Kitzan, “Immigration to Western Canada: the Early 20th Century,” *Oracle: A Journey through Canadian History and Culture*, online, Internet, 24 January 2007.

<sup>3</sup><http://www.kingkong.demon.co.uk/>

<sup>4</sup>See *London Gazette*, 10 January 1917: Napper, M. C., Lt. Henry George, “For conspicuous gallantry in action. He displayed great courage and devotion to duty in carrying a wounded officer four hundred yards across the open under heavy fire.”

<sup>5</sup>*Ebb Tide* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1941).

<sup>6</sup>*Paschal Lamb and Other Poems* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1946).

<sup>7</sup>*Forest Music: Symphonic Poem, a Pastorale* (Victoria, B.C.: D. Ferne, c. 1979).

<sup>8</sup>Edwin John Pratt, “To Ellen Elliott,” November 1946. Ellen Elliott was the director of Macmillan of Canada.

<sup>9</sup>Obituary notice, “Ferne, Doris Maude [sic],” *Times Colonist*, Victoria, B.C., 15 November 1986, p. D-5.

<sup>10</sup>Ernest Ferne, *Come Walk with Me, and Other Poems* (Victoria, B.C., 1972).

<sup>11</sup>“Ebb Tide,” *Ebb Tide*, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup>“But One Tall Gable,” *Paschal Lamb and Other Poems*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup>Markus Neacey, “‘A crazy idea...All gone off in smoke’: George Gissing and Miss Curtis,” *Gissing Journal*, January 2007, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup>“To Eduard Bertz,” 6 September 1890, *The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, vol. IV, 1889-1891, eds. Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young, Pierre Coustillas (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press), p. 235.

<sup>15</sup>Bouwe Postmus, ed., *The Poetry of George Gissing* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), pp. 75-79.

<sup>16</sup>*Born in Exile*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (Hassocks: Harvester Press), p. 191.

<sup>17</sup>“A Lodger in Maze Pond,” *The House of Cobwebs* (London: Constable), p. 248.

<sup>18</sup>*Collected Letters*, vol. VI, 1895-1897, p. 238, n. 3.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 237-38.

<sup>20</sup>“A Lodger in Maze Pond,” *The House of Cobwebs*, p. 260.

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## Against the Modern: Rural Idylls and Urban Realities in George Gissing's Fiction

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In George Gissing's *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), the child Arthur Golding flees from Rev. Edward Norman's home in Bloomford, where he was taken after his father's death, to London and the building and the very room in which he lost his father. It is a grim scene, an urban hell in its bleak squalor, and Arthur's life can, by comparison, only improve even if he remains for a while alone and friendless in the city. Henry Ryecroft, the title character in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), reflecting, as John Halperin observes, "Gissing's deep love of the English countryside" (p. 309), retires with an unsuspected legacy to rural Devon from a hard life as a writer and to the rhythms of nature experienced in a quietness hardly broken by Mrs. M, his housekeeper. Golding, too young to appreciate the rustic retreat to which Rev. Norman takes him and where he meets Helen Norman, and Ryecroft, too ill long to enjoy a peace that he never expected to know, both suffer in the city and from the city. In *Demos: A Novel of English Socialism* (1886), a work that Jacob Korg calls "an extensive examination of lower-class character" (p. 87), Gissing sharply dramatizes the incompatible worlds of country and urban-industrial England in the conflict between Hubert Eldon and Richard Mutimer and their competing visions over the future of the valley near Wanley in the West of England. Gissing shifts the novel from a pastoral setting to an industrialized outreach of urban forces represented by New Wanley to the valley's complete restoration to its original state at the beginning of the story, paralleling the ascendancy of either Mutimer or Eldon. In these and other novels, Gissing draws positive cultural and physical portraits of rural environments, but in most instances the modern city ultimately dominates, determining the destinies of people and societies.

First, Arthur Golding's return to London, his blind desire to be where his father was, is a significant comment on the dominance of the city in Gissing's fiction. In *Victorian Cities* (1963, 1968), Asa Briggs states, "Nearly all his characters are London characters, and when he talked about social problems, as he often did, he saw them in a London context. London provided him with his facts, his experiences, and his ideas" (p. 350). When Golding finally leaves, it is ultimately to meet his death in Niagara Falls, a place of wildness and even greater blindness in the water's roar. Nearly forty years before in *American Notes* (1842), Charles Dickens had written of the splendor of the

American and Canadian falls (pp. 228-30). It was one of the last places he saw in his westward swing as he returned to New York City. Golding has no similar aesthetic response. For him, one place of sound and struggle replaces another, both having obliterated all hope of life. His loss of love and the loved one when Helen dies is only a concomitant to the unavailing struggle that the city represents. David Grylls summarizes their plight:

And yet in spite of all their striving, their passionate concern for art and philanthropy, both come to miserable ends. Radical unhappiness infects their rapture, as they lurch between surges of co-operative zeal and pacing their rooms in isolation and despair. (p. 12)

Gissing draws the portrait of Arthur undergoing his trials as a child in London, but these trials do not have decisive effects on his ultimate decisions. Until he meets and comes under the protection of Samuel Tollady, Golding's picaresque experiences in the city represent potential dangers only. One gets a sense that these are preliminary exercises before his real life begins. Helen has lived abroad in Germany and has studied religion and philosophy and learned German. With activity reminiscent of George Eliot's early years, Helen, nevertheless, moves in a different direction when she returns to London to work with the poor. Arthur's life before he receives Rev. Norman's legacy consists almost entirely of urban experiences. Mr. Tollady raises and educates him, encouraging his early artistic talent. However, Arthur never leaves London again until the end of the novel, and what he knows of life comes from within its boundaries.

Carrie Mitchell contributes profoundly to Arthur's education as a young man in London. Her importance lies in the fact that she is London-made, and made from the lower-middle-class. Her aunt Mrs. Pettindund runs a boarding-house where Carrie and Arthur reside. Carrie is an attractive young woman who becomes pregnant, believing the blandishments of a man of higher social class. When he deserts her and when Carrie tells her aunt about her condition, Mrs. Pettindund orders her out of the house. Up to this point, Arthur is an innocent bystander. However, he helps her with her rent and, strongly attracted to her, mistakenly marries her. Arthur's kindness and sense of humanity, derived in part from Mr. Tollady's influence, are no match for Carrie's fundamentally intemperate character. Not only her vulgar relatives but the city as well have reinforced her natural desire to indulge herself. When Arthur tries to teach her better ways, a fatal error, Carrie endures his instruction only so long and then rebels against what she sees as a too constrictive lifestyle:

"Why don't you let me speak as I'm used to?" cried Carrie, starting up with flashing eyes, one night when Arthur had interrupted her in every sentence for a quarter of an

hour. "What's the good of tormenting me in that way. If you wanted to marry a grammar-machine you should have looked somewheres else, and not have taken up with me!" (*Workers in the Dawn*, II, p. 148)

A secret drinker, Carrie turns to disreputable friends and prostitution, and she and Arthur part. Gissing essentially portrays London as an entanglement from which Carrie is unable to extricate herself. Her dilemma is a moral one which she can neither cope with nor begin to understand. Trapped in the city and his marriage to Carrie, Arthur subsequently loses Helen, with whom he has fallen in love, after he reveals his relationship to Carrie. All three characters die young. Melodramatic as it sounds, the novel shows Gissing's unrelenting attention to his story as it unfolds. For these characters, the city offers no respite.

As Gissing finishes *Workers in the Dawn* with the waters of Niagara Falls overpowering Arthur Golding's senses and ending his life, his fiction offers no stronger instance of nature's force, and this hyperbolic image seems a fitting closure to a novel of extremes situated in a London literally and metaphorically destroying the lives of many of its inhabitants. John Sloan states, "Directing the novel is an overriding pessimism and sense of urban degeneration that lies beyond explicit correctives to middle-class philanthropy" (p. 19). The question arises as to whether Gissing literally sees the city as a moral problem. The above reference to Carrie's moral dilemma and Sloan's concept of "urban degeneration" present two opposed sources of moral difficulties, i.e., the individual and the environment. Gissing complicates matters by suggesting that Carrie's problems derive both from her own moral failings and from the environment. Carrie met the women she secretly drinks with before and after her marriage to Arthur. From his later perspective, they encourage her to drink and sell herself as a prostitute. However, Gissing obscures her first steps in this direction. Apparently open to temptation and with the means at hand, Carrie cannot resist herself or her surroundings. Golding represents a possible social, if not moral, corrective in his offer of marriage and in his efforts to educate her afterwards. Art and knowledge combine in his tutelage, but as the above quote from Carrie shows, she strongly resists. Gissing suggests that neither art, knowledge, nor nature are enough to overcome moral failings. Carrie has no easy access to the natural world, and Arthur's last scene in the novel militates against any blind trust in nature. In addition, art does not offer him a way out of his own difficulties, much less Carrie's. Few of Gissing's novels present such a bleak picture. In fact, Osmond Waymark helps redeem Ida Starr from a life of prostitution in *The*

*Unclassed* (1884), but no escape is available for Carrie or Arthur. Gissing generally rules out redemption as a thematic means to rescue his characters.

Other Gissing novels than *Workers in the Dawn* use the idea of the roar, the fray into which various characters plunge in different ways but not always in London. The eponymous Denzil Quarrier (1892) stands for election as a Liberal candidate for Polterham. One indirect effect of his action is his “wife” Lilian’s suicide. Mrs. Wade, who wants Quarrier for herself, convinces Lilian that the revelation of her marriage to Northway will ruin her husband’s political career. *New Grub Street* (1891) opens with Jasper Milvain’s visit to his mother and sisters in Finden near Wattleborough. He goes to the quiet village to recuperate as much as to see his family. London is his scene of struggle, and the train, in the incident with Marian Yule on the bridge, is an outreach of the city. Marian, as her father’s literary helper, views herself, unfortunately, as a part of that city. Rachel Bowlby observes, “Marian sees her work as a writer as an anachronism, something which ought to be done not by ‘such poor creatures as herself,’ but by ‘some automaton’ perfectly programmed to meet the requirements of present-day industry” (pp. 98-99). In *Our Friend the Charlatan* (1901), Dyce Lashmar’s every visit to his parents in Alverholme or to Iris Woolstan’s home in London, the lady he eventually marries, is a lull in his efforts to make himself known. In contrast, every moment at Lady Ogram’s home near Hollingford is a combat. Lashmar stands to win or lose through the sharp-eyed autocrat’s favor, and since he generally deceives her as to his intentions at every level, he never relaxes his tense watchfulness. With his skeptical friend Constance Bride serving as Lady Ogram’s private secretary, Lashmar has little chance to succeed. Although *New Grub Street* is primarily set in London, it and the other two novels above offer examples of the projection of the central city’s conflicts into the rural world of small towns and villages. Intentionally or not, characters bring London and its problems and concerns with them.

Second, the natural world not only acts as a force opposed to the urban environment, but it also occasionally produces a position from which to efface it by remembering it and by that act partially contain it. One initial effect of this effacement through memory is to balance both rural and urban portraits, surrounding them with language. If the rural is the viewpoint from which the urban is observed, the latter diminishes in power. *The Paying Guest* (1895) suggests a need for such containment but shows that urban invasions cannot easily be resisted. Clarence and Emmeline Mumford live in the suburbs of London. Though the situation presses them financially, they determine that their lives are better away from than in the city. However, the city arrives in



the form of Louise Derrick who comes to be improved by the Mumfords and the society of their friends. Perhaps this could be successfully accomplished, but Miss Derrick appears with her lower-middle-class accent and attitudes strongly in place. The Mumfords manage to survive her presence but not before part of the house catches fire; Louise's vulgar parents visit unexpectedly; Emmeline becomes jealous of Clarence's attentions toward Louise, however innocent; and Tom Cobb, a no-nonsense engineer, arrives to claim Louise. For the Mumfords, the money is not worth the contention. After Louise departs, they gratefully return to their peaceful lives, far from the world that produced her. The city has the ability to injure the Mumfords in their personal and social relationships, but whether the injury be emotional, physical, psychological, or moral, distance and desire lessen the city's impact on their lives. Bringing Louise into their home opens them to the city's entanglements and thus requires strong action to restore their suburban calm. Proximity to London is one of the dangers to that calm, and in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, Ryecroft moves to Devon, two hundred miles from his scene of suffering.

Physically, the city no longer looms over Ryecroft, but mentally and emotionally it still reverberates in his life. Kevin Swafford observes, "Ultimately, Ryecroft's sense of loss is directly related to his perception of art. For Ryecroft, the capacity to know and enjoy art recedes through the experiences of modernity" (p. 1). Thus, Ryecroft must actively efface memories of the city by writing about it and its attendant miseries, mixed with the visual, olfactory, and aural presence of the rural world. Divided into the seasons, the autobiographical novel usually begins each chapter with an appropriate description and comment on the physical world's rich profusion before being drawn back into the past and the city. The effect of this literary structure is to attenuate the city's menace, its ability to do harm even when the person remembering is so far away. The more Ryecroft weaves his descriptions and images of the natural world with the past urban struggle, the more that struggle lessens in intensity. Gillian Tindall remarks on "its theme of a self-centred and quiescent identification with the British landscape" (p. 126). But Ryecroft must fully unburden himself. He is his own best therapist, knowing that he cannot withhold any part of his former fight for survival as a writer. The quiet and silence of his retreat are essential to him, but he knows that silence as to his past will not further his quiet. Adrian Poole argues that "[...] the Utopian calm so affectionately pictured here can only be considered as a deplorable but logical capitulation." He refers to it as an "indulged withdrawal" (p. 204). However, the coexistence of past and present is not possible. Ryecroft's tools

are words, and with them, he can change the balance to his present favor. Obviously, he is now safe, but the very extremes of his two worlds require preemptive action. Just as he has moved to Devon and limited his human contacts to his housekeeper Mrs. M, occasional visits from N, an old friend, and infrequent trips to nearby towns, Ryecroft must now put the past between the covers of a book. In one way, his memoir allows him to enfold his Grub Street existence into nature's rhythms just as he has enfolded himself, burying both in the peace not so much of the grave as the quiet life. Yet, this is a too passive construction. And, Ryecroft's "sharply marked out circle" (Poole, p. 206) which separates him from the world is a far more active image that leads one to perceive what he accomplishes in his book. *The Crown of Life's* (1899) Jerome Otway and his study of Dante in his Wensleydale retreat enlighten one as to Gissing's appreciation of the engaged withdrawal.

Six years earlier, Gissing employed two characters to represent Ryecroft's duality. *The Whirlpool* (1897) dramatizes the temporary estrangement of Harvey and Alma Rolfe when it becomes evident to the former that his wife cannot give up her desire for a successful music career even when it appears obvious that she does not have the talent to reach the first rank of performers. Alma is a daughter of the city, and her life is replete with its sufferings. Michael Collie remarks, "Harvey Rolfe is himself on the edge of the whirlpool, is not independent of its motion." Collie continues:

It is the whirlpool of materialism, in which the individual, however frugal, however adventurous with money, struggles for financial independence in a world whose capitalist mechanisms make independence from the system virtually impossible. (p. 157)

Her father Bennet Frothingham was exposed as a fraud and embezzler in the conduct of his assurance and banking business and subsequently committed suicide. Not quite twenty-one years old, Alma studies at the Royal Academy of Music and tries to make her way as a musician, but success comes slowly. She and Harvey marry and they have a son. Eventually, Harvey realizes that her unrequited obsession will not allow her to enjoy life. They are reasonably well off, but Alma only reluctantly gives up her hopes for a career when she falls ill. Her suburban sojourn with Harvey and their son Hugh at Gunnersbury near Richmond and Kew lasts only briefly, and she dies from an accidental drug overdose (p. 448). Ryecroft also dies soon after he moves to the country. Both Alma and Ryecroft come to these venues marked by their urban experiences. In an 1893 letter to Eduard Bertz written from Exeter, Gissing states, "Before long, I shall go back to London for good. I want the streets again" (*Collected Letters*, vol. 5, p. 105). While Ryecroft would shudder at such a thought, Alma lives in the suburbs by default. Ironically, both Ryecroft

and Alma reject the idea of community as a saving grace. The structure of Ryecroft's life precludes it, and Harvey and Hughie cannot replace what Alma has lost.

The rural world's effacement of the looming, menacing city may often be no more than shutting one's eyes to it. Given enough distance, the illusion of control will be successful. In *The Odd Women* (1893), after Monica leaves her husband Edmund Widdowson, gives birth, and dies, her sisters, Alice and Virginia Madden, the latter presently institutionalized for alcoholism, plan to set up a school for young children and with the financial help of Widdowson raise his and Monica's daughter. They live far from London and the pain endured there. The city with all its strife and struggle still exists, but their small world of three, along with Rhoda Nunn's moral support, faces in a different direction. Of course, Rhoda and Mary Barfoot, mutually supporting one another, and the "odd women" they train to be self-sufficient, create an urban community that denies the city's heretofore omnipresent control of women's lives. Rhoda falls in love with Everard Barfoot, Mary's cousin, and he becomes a threat, but one finally avoided. Annette Federico states:

Gissing seems finally to suggest, though, that however brave and attractive the New Woman may be (and clearly he feels she is potentially ideal), she cannot fulfill men's desires completely if she does not consent to subdue her will to his [...]. (p. 94)

Rhoda and Mary, as it were, look away from the world that grinds on around them. If the city ultimately controls these two female communities, it is a loose control, one that allows some to escape if not triumph over it. A more problematic urban dominance occurs in *Born in Exile* (1892) with the Warricombe family and their circle of friends and acquaintances. Buckland Warricombe exposes Godwin Peak's attempt to deceive Sidwell Warricombe and his parents by claiming to be sincere in his desire to become a Church of England priest. In reality, Peak is an atheist and a representative of the new, urban culture threatening the rural peace and harmony of the Warricombes' Exeter life. However, the Warricombes' strength lies more in the traditions of life to which they adhere than to any overt turning away from the city. Even Sidwell's reaching out to Peak after his exposure suggests more the solidity of her character built on family and religious belief than a defeat of the urban world's influence. However, Peak is an intrusion into her society and a dangerous one. Peter Keating contrasts him to *New Grub Street's* Jasper Milvain:

Godwin Peak in *Born in Exile* is also set on getting to the top through marriage. He is more devious, more fastidious, and less successful than Milvain. Peak could never be satisfied with an Amy Reardon: the quality he seeks in a wife is "refinement." (p. 203)

The Warricombes' community maintains its cohesion by rejecting him, but just barely.

Finally, if Henry Ryecroft, exhausted in his rural retreat from the worst the city could do, represents a modest effacement of the city's power, Hubert Eldon's triumph in *Demos* over the forces of urban industrialization raises more questions than it answers. As earlier indicated, Wanley undergoes dramatic changes as New Wanley, an outpost of the modern industrial world, before once more presenting a pristine natural image, one that competes against that of the modern city in *Workers in the Dawn* and *The Nether World* (1889). Should not *Demos* take primacy over these earlier and later figures of urban desolation? An examination of this latter novel and two others, *The Town Traveller* (1898) and *Will Warburton* (1905), reveals the city's ability to open the dialogue to other ideas. After Eldon starts to restore Wanley, a mob kills Mutimer in London. Mutimer's death and Eldon's action operate as darkness and light, respectively. The city appears in its most repellent aspect while the rural world gleams with its own rebirth. However, Eldon plans to marry Adela Waltham Mutimer, the dead man's widow. Adela rejected Eldon when his mother revealed his checkered past. She then married Mutimer who had inherited the estate that Eldon expected to receive. Although she comes to despise her husband, Adela of her own free will said yes to the marriage. And, she is a representative of that civilized rural world that Mutimer, with a different concept, plans to alter beyond recognition. A later will disinherits Mutimer in turn, and Adela goes with him to the city even though she views him with contempt. After Mutimer's death, Eldon proposes to Adela, and the novel ends with the two "natural" partners finally planning to marry. Mutimer's dynamic personality succumbs to the static one of Eldon who now has exactly what he originally desired, i.e., Wanley and Adela *redux*. Removal and replanting on the one hand and marriage on the other supposedly return innocence to place and person. Nevertheless, the urban world, standing for a larger reality, however flawed, still exists in Wanley even if as no more than past echoes.

*The Town Traveller* and *Will Warburton* have no such difficulty with competing rural images that unsettle choices and enjoyments offered by their urban settings. With two such ultimately positive stories, one wonders, given Gissing's consistently ambivalent relation to city and country, what their effect is on the rural image of peace and harmony in his fiction. *The Town Traveller* is generally a novel of struggle, choice, and settlement within an urban, lower-middle-class environment that gives fulfillment to many of its characters. There is, literally, no hankering after lost pastures. Everything is

contained within the city, even the missing Mr. Mark Clover, Louisa Clover's errant "husband" who turns out to be Lord Polperro and a bigamist. Mr. Gammon, the traveler of the title, is the core of the novel. His life satisfies him greatly—his work, his home life, and his recreational pursuits. Gammon lives in Mrs. Bubb's boarding house and takes great enjoyment in the swirl of activity there, especially in the morning as the house awakens and sends Moggie, the general, careening with hot water from one room to another. The gloom of working-class life in *Workers in the Dawn*, *The Unclassed*, *Demos*, *Thyrza* (1887), and *The Nether World* is gone. Gammon temporarily engages himself to Polly Sparkes, another inhabitant of Mrs. Bubb's establishment. However, they part since Polly intends to rule in any relationship she forms, and so does Gammon. She eventually accepts Christopher Parish whom she plans to reform, and Gammon marries Louisa Clover, who owns a china shop, after being rejected by her for her daughter Minnie's hand in marriage. The improbable plot—it even contains at least four upper-class characters—exudes great vitality and discovers no disgust with London. Except for Lord Polperro-Mark Clover's preference for "a humbler station" (p. 269), there is no alternative world to which the other characters wish to escape. In reality, *The Town Traveller* erases the country more thoroughly than the reverse examples in *Born in Exile*, *The Odd Women*, *The Paying Guest*, *The Whirlpool*, and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. Not only do the characters not wish to flee the city, they do not travel—except for Lord Polperro who demonstrates a character flaw in abandoning his "wife" and daughter. Gammon also reveals no anxiety regarding his work. He is good at what he does, enjoys it thoroughly, and if one employer does not suit him, another will.

*Will Warburton*, a novel of middle-class life, also focuses its story on London with hardly a notice of the outside world. Warburton goes behind the counter in a grocery store after his partner Godfrey Sherwood defrauds him of his and his family's money. But Warburton shows his hardihood by making a success of his venture. Known as Jollyman, Warburton hires his former housekeeper's brother-in-law, Mr. Allchin, and together they not only prosper but also demonstrate values of friendship and loyalty that Norbert Franks and Rosamund Elvan, Warburton's former friend and fiancée, singularly lack. Bertha Cross, a book illustrator, admires Warburton's courage and sense of responsibility towards his family after his partner Godfrey Sherwood loses all Warburton's and his family's money in speculation. Jane, Warburton's sister, earns her living at horticultural work. The five working-class novels from the 1880s show a city destroying the people's lives, but the novels from the 1890s to the early 1900s, while often revealing the country as a haven, also show the

city as a place of energy and life. This mixed perspective on modern and traditional life, usually represented by the city and country, respectively, demonstrates an evolution in Gissing's thinking. The competing visions of these years allow Gissing to trace out his characters' lives in a slightly more objective manner.

*New Grub Street* furnishes strong examples of this balancing of forces. Jasper, Dora, and Maud Milvain go to the city and succeed; Edwin Reardon and Harold Biffen either die from the city or in it. Biffen collapses the city-country image into one by poisoning himself on Putney Heath (pp. 492-93). Along with Marian Yule and Dora Milvain, Reardon and Biffen are two of the best people in the book, and even the occasionally obtuse Jasper recognizes Biffen's fine nature and the hopelessness of his chances in the modern city. John Goode states:

Biffen, who has a more serious interest in the aesthetic potential of fiction, is determined to write about life without rearrangement, and echoes one of the other great topics of the 1880s, the influence of French naturalism. Like Flaubert, he sets out to make art out of the banal; like Zola, he confers epic seriousness on the everyday. Naturally it is going to be a commercial failure. (Introduction, p. xvii)

After receiving a letter from Amy Reardon regarding Biffen's death, Milvain remarks to his sister Dora:

"Really, one can't grieve. There seemed no possibility of his ever earning enough to live decently upon. But why the deuce did he go all the way out there? Consideration for the people in whose house he lived, I dare say; Biffen had a good deal of native delicacy." (p. 495)

As he lies in his little copse immediately before taking the poison, Biffen only has the light of the moon, a sense of "ineffable peace," "thoughts of beautiful things," "the memory of his friend Reardon," "but of Amy he thought only as of that star which had just come into his vision above the edge of dark foliage—beautiful, but infinitely remote." (p. 493)

*In the Year of Jubilee* (1894) presents several examples in which neither rural nor urban life appear to good effect. Nancy Lord of Camberwell, while on vacation in Teignmouth, becomes pregnant by Lionel Tarrant. After they marry and Nancy discovers her condition, she goes to Falmouth, far from London and prying friends, and has their child. Unhappily for her, circumstances relating to the provisions of her father's will and Tarrant's absence from the country prevent them from openly cohabiting, and Tarrant, on his final return to England, convinces Nancy to make that arrangement permanent. Beatrice French and Luckworth Crewe, in apparent contrast, make a success of their businesses in the city, with Crewe helping Beatrice, but he

reveals a hard side to his personality when he ultimately dominates Beatrice and shows no interest in her as a woman. Gissing appears to make Crewe's career in advertising a symbol of the falseness of the modern world. Crewe wishes to paper over his environment, substituting image for substance and establishing the former, paradoxically, as the essence of the modern world. Goode remarks:

The particular line of business is important here. For Crewe is not like those self-made men of the mid-Victorian novel: he does not produce goods, does not even work in their sense. Rather he sells, and what he sells are images—advertising—the modern science which makes suburbia what it is—clean, healthy, endlessly aspiring to greater consumer power. (*Ideology*, p. 174)

This essence-less, paper-thin, but nonetheless powerful vision reminds one of Hubert and Adela in *Demos* as they view New Wanley's new-old picture. Have there been too many changes ever to see again the original valley? In Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759), the protagonist returns to his happy valley, chastened by experience and ready to accept what he formerly rejected. Of *Demos*, Robert L. Selig states, "The novel allows aestheticism a final triumph: Eldon demolishes the mines once run by the socialist and remakes the valley into a natural work of art, a place for the happy few who appreciate good things [...]" (p. 30). At this final point, Gissing makes too little of Hubert's and Adela's earlier experiences to know whether they can truly dislodge the modern and escape its possibly harsh echoes.

What is the modern? What can one do to deal with it successfully? Gissing clearly shows the modern most intensely in an urban environment and dramatizes one solution after another for its stringencies only to leave his readers with *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, the last novel published in his lifetime, not so much a *Notes from the Underground* as a "Ms. Found in a Bottle," a final communication from a brief survivor of the modern world, an ominous place gaining energy as he writes. Walter Allen notes, "His general view of his times was very close to Flaubert's; he too might have used the word *muflisme* to characterize the age, which he found vulgar, shallow, naively self-satisfied, and which, like Flaubert, he judged by standards drawn from his notions of classical antiquity" (p. 343). If he could not be in another time, Gissing could think himself there, and *Veranilda: A Romance* (1904) is the vehicle even if, ironically, set in the decline of the Western classical world.

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### The Inimitable "Day of Silence"

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Gissing's short story "The Day of Silence" (1893) depicts the hardships of London's working classes with an empathy exceeding that of all of his working-class novels except *The Nether World* (1889). Pierre Coustillas, appropriately, has honored this fine sad tale as the title piece in his volume of selected Gissing stories: *The Day of Silence and Other Stories* (1993). The author's newly found literary agent, William Morris Colles, originally sold "The Day" to the *National Review* (1893) and praised Gissing for an "inimitable piece of work." If the author himself belittled this comment with a "pooh" in his diary (*Diary*, pp. 316, 320), he also told Colles on the very same day that the story was "a favourite of mine" (*Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 158). How can one explain Gissing's slighting of "a favourite"? When his old friend Eduard Bertz also liked "The Day," Gissing wrote back that "these minor efforts are doing me good with the public; they make my name better known, & enable me to ask higher prices" (*Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 175). Plainly enough, no matter how good his short fiction might be, he

valued it far below his novels. Yet with its own compact excellence, “The Day” surpasses many of these.

The story depicts the underlying decency of the hard-working Burden family in spite of poverty’s many discomforts. Their type name suggests the challenges that they face: *burden* – figurative, “a load of labour, duty, responsibility, ... etc.” (*O.E.D.*). Yet “The Day” avoids a kind of high-cultural sentimentality running through such novels as *Workers in the Dawn* (1880) and *Thyrza* (1887), where lower-class characters’ commitment to the arts lifts their human worth far above the crowd’s. Seven-year-old Billy comes across as nicer than most slum boys. He touchingly expresses his concern to his mother about her heat exhaustion. Nevertheless, out on the street, he “now and then ... lost his temper and began to punch the heads of boys several years older than himself....” And the family expects Billy, after required minimal schooling, to settle for low wages, just like themselves, at some honest but physically demanding work (“The Day,” pp. 96, 94, 100). Yet without any sentimentality, the story also shuns the frequent condescension of Gissing’s working-class novels towards the unpolished poor. The Burdens remain good and really caring people, though they lack high culture or even much articulateness. Indeed, they carry on their brief but decent conversations in the same Cockney dialect that Gissing often mocks.

Although a working-class friend’s excessive ale-drinking leads to the deaths of both Billy and his father, the story does not demonize the drunkenness of the poor, as Gissing’s novels frequently do. We have no equivalent here of debased Carrie Mitchell’s intoxicated brawling or secret binge-drinking (*Workers*, Vol. II, pp. 166-67, 179-82), Richard Mutimer’s drunken attempt at marital rape (*Demos*, pp. 284-85), or Bob Hewett’s drunken fistfight out on the streets (*Nether World*, pp. 107, 108, 112). In spite of all the heat, the temperate Mrs. Burden tries to ease her thirst with just plain water.<sup>1</sup> When she and her husband turn to stronger drink, they share between them in their overheated attic just a quart of supper beer. In a pub the next day, he again drinks beer in moderation, though he does let Billy taste it (“The Day,” pp. 96, 100-01, 102). Even ale-guzzling Pollock, Solomon Burden’s wharfside friend, has little resemblance to the drink-maddened monsters of Gissing’s lower-class novels.

Mr. Burden allows this somewhat disorderly man to take the boy and himself on the Thames for one simple reason: Pollock has “the use of a boat.” Still, unlike Gissing’s brawling drunks, Jem Pollock becomes more “jovial” with every drink that he takes (“The Day,” p. 102). On this after-

noon, unfortunately, he takes more than usual: a “gallon or two of ale.” Though Solomon drinks some of it too, he fights to keep Jem from giving little Billy “more than half a mug.” After the father’s long swim, Pollock at last gets *his* chance, but the ale so hinders him that he soon must struggle back to the boat. Accordingly, the father takes another swim, again leaving the steering and also his boy in Pollock’s hands. Then this well-meaning yet ale-befuddled friend tempts little Billy, who cannot swim, into letting himself be held down into the water. Alarmed and incensed, Mr. Burden swims back in their direction, guilt-ridden Billy tries to climb back inside, and Jem falls overboard. In his rather drunken state, he panics and overturns the boat. The helpless Billy floats downstream, and his now-exhausted father chases him. Soon they both drown (“The Day,” pp. 102, 104-08).

Yet in spite of his drink-induced recklessness, Pollock only wanted Billy to have some fun. And even in his quite inebriated state, he does attempt to save the boy, although in a muddled way. Finally that night, Pollock tries to carry out a very painful duty: informing Mrs. Burden of the family deaths that he himself has caused. Because she, too, has suddenly died away from the home—another grim event unknown to their neighbors—Pollock finds no one to tell (“The Day,” pp. 106-07, 109-10). For all of his failures and weaknesses, though, he remains a not-bad person.

In comparison, however, with this blundering ale-drinker, Mr. Burden seems a working-class paragon. Yet if we put this comparison aside, the story hardly depicts him as a saint in overalls. Although he knows that his wife has struggled in the heat to straighten up their attic, he plunges his head in a basin of water that she thoughtfully put out for him and slops it “over the floor.” When she complains, he argues with her loudly (“The Day,” pp. 97-98). In his least saintlike action, he remains too involved with his own relief and pleasure to take care of Billy all the time on the Thames. If Burden hadn’t swum while his son stayed on board with the “half-drunken” Pollock, no one would have drowned. Still, this quite caring father had labored the whole day before even in the heat and had also worked half this Saturday. To grab a chance to cool off in the Thames hardly seems unreasonable. And he ends by losing his own life while trying to save his boy.

Billy’s loving, dutiful, and hardworking mother stands out as the most admirable character in the entire story. Yet Gissing avoids sentimentalizing even Mrs. Burden:

She was a woman of active habits, in her way a good housewife, loving moderate cleanliness and a home in order. Naturally, her clothing was coarse and begrimed; she did the coarsest and grimest of work. Her sandy hair had thinned of late; it began to show the scalp in places. There was always a look of pain on her features, and her eyes were either very glassy or very dull. For thirty years—that is, since she was ten years old—struggle with poverty had been the law of her life, and she remained victorious; there was always a loaf in the house, always an ounce of tea; her child had never asked in vain for the food demanded by his hearty appetite. She did not drink; she kept a guard upon her tongue in the matter of base language; esteemed comely by her equals, she had no irregularity of behaviour wherewith to reproach herself. Often enough at variance with her husband, she yet loved him; and Billy she loved more. (“The Day,” pp. 96-97)

Though she struggles to take care of their room in the heat, she must settle for no more than “moderate cleanliness,” for she works elsewhere too—on her knees—scrubbing warehouse floors, stairs, and offices, and she always comes home worn-out and dirty. For all her ill health, she works very hard to supplement her husband’s freelance jobs at a wharf in order to make sure that their child has the food he needs. Mrs. Burden and her husband refrain from blows or curses during quarrels made almost inevitable by their badly cramped spaces, but they often do quarrel (“The Day,” pp. 99, 108, 94, 97-98). Although she still loves him and remains a faithful wife, her feelings about him hardly approach the intensity of her love for her son. Taken all in all, she becomes a kind of tragic heroine of impoverished city life. Yet premature aging and also bad health make her look and move less like a heroine than a secondary character remaining on the edges in one of Gissing’s working-class novels.

Even this mother’s decency and tender loving care cannot prevent catastrophe. On the day before the drowning, she persuades little Billy, whom she must leave alone, to stay close-by, so that he won’t explore unknown streets and get “run over.” She explicitly warns her husband not to put their boy “into the water” during the trip. But she cannot come along to mother him, for she needs to earn money for them all. Then, too, she warns against taking Billy on the river if it rains, and her husband promises not to if it pours down steadily. Nevertheless, “now and then” she “felt a slight uneasiness” during the excursion day, “for Jem Pollock was a reckless fellow at all times, and in weather like this he was sure to have been drinking freely...” Still, she remains convinced that Mr. Burden “would look after the boy” (“The Day,” pp. 94-95, 98-99, 101, 109). In fact, he tries but fails.

Neither moral weaknesses nor truly foolish choices by either of the Burdens lead to the double drowning. Gissing’s splendid opening para-

graph points forward instead to a wholly different cause beyond their control: poverty itself. It surrounds them always with a basic vulnerability—the daily threat of sudden death by accident, attack, or untreated illness. This ever-present risk for the poor contrasts with the relative safety enjoyed by well-off men and women, who can travel when and where they please:

For a week the mid-day thermometer had marked eighty or more in the shade. Golden weather for those who could lie and watch the lazy breakers on a rocky shore, or tread the turf of deep woodland, or drink from the cold stream on some mountain side. But the by-ways of Southwark languished for a cloud upon the sun, for a cooling shower, or a breath from its old enemy, the east. The cry of fretful children sounded ceaselessly. Every window was wide open; women who had nothing to do lounged in the dusk of doorways and in arched passages, their money all gone in visits to the public-house. Ice-cream men found business at a standstill; it was Friday, and the youngsters' ha'pence had long ago come to an end. Labourers who depended upon casual employment chose to sleep through the thirsty hours rather than go in search of jobs; a crust of bread served them for a meal. They lay about in the shadowed spots, shirt and trousers their only costume, their shaggy heads in every conceivable attitude of repose. ("The Day," p. 92)

Poor city-dwellers such as the Burdens remain imprisoned in the heat. Rich Londoners, by contrast, can go relax on beaches, explore cool woods, or enjoy refreshing streams in the mountains. But the poor lack all these easy escapes. They turn, instead, to drink, for one main reason: they have very little else to do. Even so, the Burdens themselves continue to behave like truly model prisoners. In spite of all the sweltering weather, they keep working hard, stay away from too much drinking, and eat full meals. After his job, the father chooses a very different form of relief from just gulping beer in a pub: a long ride on the Thames in a decrepit old rowboat—although, inescapably, with an ale-swilling friend—and a cooling river swim ("The Day", p. 100).

With sadly grim irony, Mr. and Mrs. Burden's virtuous avoidance, even in the most oppressive heat, of their neighbors' utter sluggishness and stupefied indifference leads straight on to catastrophe. Unlike other working-class families in the district, the Burdens try hard to make their child happy. But the father's well-meant boating scheme for freeing his son from the hot summer pavement ends in both their deaths. And the mother's brave choice to remain onshore and to go on doing her work triggers a sudden fatal attack from the heat. If the Burdens had simply drunk their money away in pubs or lounged around the streets like tramps, nothing really bad would have happened to them on this particular day. In a stultifying world of poverty, decent behavior, ironically enough, involves its own grave risks.

<sup>1</sup>This oppressive fictional heat parallels an actual heat wave recorded in Gissing's diary on three consecutive days just before he began his story. In fact, Billy's report of a bus-horse's death from sunstroke comes from the diary. But instead of shaping Gissing's own sweat and discomfort into autobiographical fiction—a self-reflective process that certain critics always find in his works—this highly imaginative story portrays the hard lives of the poor during the same sort of “terrible heat” that he had just endured (*Diary*, pp. 312-13; “The Day,” p. 95).

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### Edmund Widdowson and the Rev. John Todd's *Student's Manual*

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Because it is a novel written by George Gissing, *The Odd Women* contains a number of characters to whom study is, or might have become, important. Gissing's chronic interest in the socially and financially disadvantaged would-be scholar is not as prominent here as in the works that treat so sympathetically figures like Julian Casti, Gilbert Grail, and Godwin Peak. But the Gissingesque sympathies and preoccupations are still to be found, perhaps as submerged rocks of which one is imperfectly aware rather than

jutting cliffs and promontories that demand one's attention. If we leave to one side study performed for professional reasons, like that demanded by Everard Barfoot's false call to engineering, the examination of the woman question by his cousin and Rhoda Nunn, and Micklethwaite's work in mathematics, admittedly a labour of love too, then we find three people who manifest a disinterested wish to acquire knowledge.

The first is the most pitiable. Virginia Madden, who is a wretched alcoholic thinking of entering an "institution" by the end of the novel, "circumstances favouring, . . . might have become an erudite woman." We are told that "Up to about her twenty-fourth year she had pursued one subject with a zeal limited only by her opportunities; study absolutely disinterested, seeing that she had never supposed it would increase her value as a 'companion,' or enable her to take any better position. Her one intellectual desire was to know as much as possible about ecclesiastical history" (Gissing, p. 14. All future references to this edition). Her studying is incompatible with long hours of work and she ruins her health. After a breakdown Virginia is capable only of reading trashy fiction.

Mildred Vesper, Monica Madden's fellow-lodger in Rutland Street, "was a studious little person, after a fashion of her own. She possessed four volumes of Maunder's 'Treasures,' and to one or other of these she applied herself for at least an hour every evening." Mildred claims that she has a "frivolous" mind, that she needs "solid information, to reflect upon" and that "by persevering I manage to learn one or two facts a day" (p. 79). She pretends to read a *Treasury* when disturbed by Monica's marriage plans (pp. 123, 126). Samuel Maunder (1785-1849) produced compendia of knowledge with titles like *Biographical Treasury: A New Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Biography Comprising about 12,000 Memoirs* (1838) and *The Treasury of Natural History; or, A Popular Dictionary of Zoology* (1849). Here, then, we have not a scholarly passion for a relatively obscure subject but a "self-help" approach using a series of popular and popularizing guides.

If Virginia's studies are aborted and Mildred's peripheral to the major interests of her life, then the case of Edmund Widdowson is different again. Widdowson's self-created marital difficulties make him an unsympathetic figure. He ends the novel sadly, prematurely aged and embittered. The last we hear of him is that "Widdowson's books would go back to London; not to the Hampstead lodgings, however. Fearful of solitude, he proposed to his friend Newdick that they should live together, he, as a man of substance, bearing the larger share of the expense" (p. 385). "*Widdowson's books . . .*"

Remembering the later pitiable figure, uncomprehending and jealous, we forget, perhaps, just how typical a Gissing creation Widdowson is in his modest background and earnest attempts at intellectual self-improvement.

Self-educated, Widdowson deemed it his duty to make acquaintance with the great, the solid authors. Nor was his study of them affectation. For the poets he had little taste; the novelists he considered only profitable in intervals of graver reading; but history, political economy, even metaphysics, genuinely appealed to him. He had always two or three solid books on hand, each with its marker; he studied them at stated hours, and always sitting at a table, a notebook open beside him. A little work once well known, Todd's "Student's Manual," had formed his method and inspired him with zeal. (p. 175)

Virginia and Mildred are not "methodical"; and "inspired" and "zeal" are strong words. Who was this inspirer and what was his *Student's Manual*? The Reverend John Todd, D.D. (1800-73) was an American Congregational clergyman and author who preached in Philadelphia and Massachusetts and whose *Lectures to Children* (1834) was translated into five languages. But his best known work was, to give its full title, *The Student's Manual: Designed, By Specific Directions, to Aid in Forming and Strengthening the Intellectual and Moral Character and Habits of the Student* (1835). The *Manual* was even more successful than its predecessor: 150,000 copies were sold in London alone (*Shaping*; "Todd," *DAB*).

Todd's book is a 400-page volume divided into ten chapters. For Widdowson's purposes the most pertinent would have been Chapters 2, on the importance of forming good habits, 3 ("Study"), 4 ("Reading"), 5 ("Time"), and 8 ("Exercise. Diet. Economy"). If the author's tone is somewhat parsonical, with warnings against tobacco, "that Indian weed" (p. 76), alcohol, and, in the obscurity of a learned language, self-abuse, if his Christianity is militant, and his sweep occasionally too wide ("Pay particular attention to your teeth" [p. 79]), the book yet contains good and useful common-sense advice leavened with anecdotes drawn from Todd's personal experience and the lives of historical figures.

The source of Widdowson's method of studying can be traced quite precisely to sections in the *Manual* dealing with posture and with the necessity of note-making. Todd does not write that one must study at a table or desk, taking this as self-evident. But he does devote some pages (pp. 109-11) to what his "Contents" summarises as "Positions of the Body" and "Chairs and Lights":

2. *Have regard to the positions of the body while engaged in study.*

Some men, from early life, habituate themselves to study, sitting at a low, flat table. This ought to be avoided; for, as you advance in life, that part of the body which is



between the shoulders and the hips, becomes more and more feeble, and consequently the stooping habit is acquired. . . . The great desideratum in the choice of positions, is to keep the body as straight as possible (pp. 109-10. Italics in original).

There is another very important point to be kept in mind; and that is, in reading, you should always have your pen by you, not merely to make a minute in your index, but to save the thoughts which are started in your own mind. Did you never notice, that, while reading, your own mind is so put into operation, that it strikes out new and bold trains of thinking,—trains that are worth preserving, and such as will be scattered to the winds, if not penned down at the moment of their creation? A wise man will be as careful to save that property which he himself makes, as that which he inherits. The student should be; for it will be of vastly more value to him. (p. 162)

Widdowson studies “at stated hours.” Here again his inspiration is Todd:

Order is essential to a proper division and improvement of our time. Any one who has never made the trial, is an utter stranger to the calmness and pleasure with which the soul meets her daily duties, however various, or however arduous, if they return periodically at the same hour. . . . But the order should be as complete as possible. . . . if you try to have order in all your arrangements of study, you will suffer whenever it is broken in upon. (p. 184)

Do not fear to undertake to form *any* habit which is desirable; for it *can* be formed, and that with more ease than you may at first suppose. *Let the same thing, or the same duty, return at the same time every day, and it will soon become pleasant.* No matter if it be irksome at first; but how irksome soever it be, only let it return periodically, every day, and that without any interruption for a time, and it will become a positive pleasure. In this way all our habits are formed. (p. 49. Emphasis in original.)

But, of course, Widdowson performs activities other than studying “at stated hours”:

He had a passion for routine. Every night, before going upstairs, he did a number of little things in unvarying sequence—changed the calendar for next day, made perfect order on his writing-table, wound up his watch, and so on. That Monica could not direct her habits with like exactitude was frequently a distress to him; if she chanced to forget any most trivial detail of daily custom he looked very solemn, and begged her to be more vigilant. (p. 176)

Studying steadily and effectively is one thing; exasperating one’s wife is another. Consolidated by long years of bachelordom, Widdowson’s Todd-inspired rituals help weaken his marriage. (The acute Mildred had seen as much: “For one thing, . . . he’s too old. Your habits and his won’t suit” [p. 125].) Even after a post-quarrel *rapprochement* complete with apologetic baby-talk from the “old bear,” his commitment to routine does not falter: Widdowson moves straight on to “Isn’t it account-book morning?” (p. 177).

This quarrel takes place at the end of an unfortunate day. Widdowson and Monica have visited the house of Mary Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn. Widdowson is aware that he has not shown to advantage in the world of his wife's former teachers, and his jealousy of Everard Barfoot has already begun to bite. On the way home Monica suddenly has the idea of visiting Mildred, to which her husband replies:

“Why didn't you speak of it before we left home? You ought to be more methodical, Monica. Each morning I always plan how my day is to be spent, and it would be much better if you would do the same. Then you wouldn't be so restless and uncertain.” (p. 170)

Here again he is the apt pupil of Todd:

1. *Have a plan laid beforehand for every day.*

These plans ought to be maturely formed the evening previous, and, on rising in the morning, again looked at, and immediately entered upon. It is astonishing how much more we accomplish in a single day, (and what of else is life made up?) by having the plan previously marked out. (p. 50. Emphasis in original)

Monica gets her way and visits Mildred, while her husband sulkily clumps around neighbouring streets. She is ten minutes late returning to him:

“I'm very sorry. We were talking on—”

“Yes, but one must always be punctual. I wish I could impress that upon you. Life without punctuality is quite impossible.” (p. 171)

Again, Todd writes:

2. *Cultivate the habit of punctuality.*

There is no man living who might not be a punctual man; and yet there are few that are so, to anything like the degree to which they ought to attain. . . . The punctual man can do twice as much, at least, as another man, with twice the ease and satisfaction to himself and with equal satisfaction to others. (p. 62. Italics in original)

The dolorous day ends with tea being late:

Their Sunday custom was to dine at one o'clock, and at six to have tea. Widdowson hated the slightest interference with domestic routine, and he had reluctantly indulged Monica's desire to go to Chelsea this afternoon. Hunger was now added to his causes of discontent.

“Let us have something to eat at once,” he said on entering the house. “This disorder really won't do : we must manage better somehow.”

Without replying, Monica rang the dining-room bell, and gave orders. (p. 171)

On a later occasion, Widdowson replies to Monica's question, “When would you like to have dinner?” with the words, “I never care to alter the hours” (p. 236). Todd had written, “*Be regular in your diet.* Nature loves regularity. She will permit you to dine at any hour you please, and will

conform to your wishes in almost every thing, if you will only allow her to depend upon regularity” (p. 281. Italics in original).

Arlene Young, the editor of the fullest edition of *The Odd Women* we have, claims that Widdowson’s inflexibility helped in his working life: “His rigidity and obsession with routine are the very qualities that made him a serviceable clerk . . . . His passions are routine, punctuality, and organization, and he has no patience or understanding for those who do not similarly order their lives” (p. 13). Obviously, the qualities cited must have played their helpful role in the office. But their origin lies in a source that must command respect even as it increases compassion. Widdowson did not learn order and regularity in order to do his job, or be a better clerk, perhaps eligible for promotion. He learned them as part of an attempt to educate himself. There is a case for saying that all the blunders the husband commits on that representative day, from the moment the Widdowsons leave Queen’s Road to the consultation over the account-book the next morning, are due to his reading of the Reverend John Todd’s *Student’s Manual*. Admittedly, we cannot blame Todd for the fact that Widdowson’s attitudes have become entrenched over time, and the man desiccated. Nor can we blame him for the social and sexual insecurities that play so prominent a role in bringing Widdowson’s marriage to wreck.

Perhaps we should hardly blame Todd at all. To “inspire” with “zeal” is no mean achievement, as anyone who has attempted to teach will know. The depth of Widdowson’s suffering and disorientation after his separation from Monica is represented in the very loss of that “zeal,” replaced by a mechanical “plodding” through some of his “solid books”:

He had brought with him [to the new lodging in Hampstead] a selection of solid books from his library, and over these the greater part of each day was spent. Not that he studied with any zeal; reading, and of a kind that demanded close attention, was his only resource against melancholia; he knew not how else to occupy himself. Adam Smith’s classical work, perused with laborious thoroughness, gave him employment for a couple of months; subsequently he plodded through all the volumes of Hallam. (p. 377)

As far as I am aware, the reference to Todd in *The Odd Women* is the only one Gissing ever makes. We assume that he came across, or even sought out, the famous book as an aid when a ferocious student in Wakefield, at Alderley Edge, or at Owens. He must have read it with mixed emotions. On the one hand, its high-minded respect for hard, steady intellectual work could have fired with enthusiasm, “zeal,” the young man who is said to have worked as he walked, and perhaps given practical hints for academic success. On the other, he could have accepted neither Todd’s religious

views nor his dismissal of novel reading as a waste of precious time. (It may be Gissing's memory of Todd singling out Scott as especially pernicious because of his very talent that leads the more accommodating Widdowson to recommend *Guy Mannering* to Monica over the yellowbacks.)

Finally, it is unlikely that Todd's criticisms of the women's movement in his *Woman's Rights* (1867), probably unknown to Gissing, helped form Widdowson's views, avowedly inspired by Ruskin.

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## THIRD INTERNATIONAL GEORGE GISSING CONFERENCE

### “WRITING OTHERNESS: THE PATHWAYS of GEORGE GISSING'S IMAGINATION”

LILLE, FRANCE  
27-28 March 2008

(Thursday & Friday following the Easter weekend)

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The efforts of scholars in the last half-century have served to confirm George Gissing's ranking among the major writers of fiction of his age. The steady flow in recent years of multifaceted comment on his writings speaks for itself, and the impressive amount of unpublished material made available over the last two decades is providing invaluable new clues to his artistic practices. Interestingly, Gissing's growing pertinence is not merely that of a leading exponent and trans-

lator of late Victorian culture. His art is also increasingly regarded as rooted in his recognition of separateness, understood as aesthetic gesture as much as theme. Papers are therefore sought on all aspects of Gissing's contacts and/or confrontations with the Other, on his receptiveness to and negotiation of, ego-threatening novelty, to be defined in a variety of ways: cultural, intellectual, ideological, artistic. Discussions of his (mis-)representation of the defamiliarized self in his fictional constructs and personal writings, are also invited: the venue being Lille in France, Gissing's last homeland, papers on the correlative issue of his reading of Englishness and foreignness will be most welcome.

**Advisory Committee:** Professor Pierre Coustillas (University of Lille 3); Professor Constance Harsh (Colgate University); Dr Christine Hugué (University of Lille 3); Dr Simon J. James (Durham University); Dr Emma Liggins (Manchester Metropolitan University); Dr Diana Maltz (Southern Oregon University); Dr Bouwe Postmus (University of Amsterdam); Dr John Sloan (Harris Manchester College, Oxford).

**Proposals (200-300 words), together with brief CV, should be sent to** Christine Hugué (Conference organiser) at the following e-mail address:

[christine.huguet-meriaux@univ-lille3.fr](mailto:christine.huguet-meriaux@univ-lille3.fr)

**Deadline for submission of proposals:** 4 June 2007

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<http://evenements.univ-lille3.fr/recherche/colloque-george-gissing>

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## Book Review

Barbara Rawlinson, *A Man of Many Parts: Gissing's Short Stories, Essays and Other Works*, Costerus New Series 159 (Amsterdam-New York, NY: Rodopi, 2006), pp. xviii + 288.

This is a book which *had* to be written. Gissing's so called minor writings have been neglected by most critics. Articles on the subject by Desmond MacCarthy, J. M. Mitchell and Wendell V. Harris are listed in old bibliographies, then Robert L. Selig undertook a serious examination of stories he regarded as the author's best, first in his Gissing volume in the Twayne series, of which he published a second, revised edition in 1995, subse-

quently in a number of articles devoted to individual short stories, some of which were a prelude to the book in the Edwin Mellen group of Gissing titles. Concerning the texts of short fiction some efforts were made in Everyman's Library and in several attractively produced anthologies, but no book-length study of the *nouvelles* and sketches had so far been attempted. A big gap had to be filled and Barbara Rawlinson, whom some of us knew as the author of a Ph.D. thesis on the Other Gissing, that is the writer of varied poems and essays as well as 115 short fictional narratives, seemed the ideal scholar for the task.

If any doubts were ever entertained about the feasibility of such a project the present book will dispel them. Could Gissing read this 300-page volume, he would undoubtedly rejoice to see that he has been understood. In a sense Mrs. Rawlinson's study is a moving one. Not only does she interpret his works with great intellectual acumen, she also spontaneously goes to his rescue when publishers, editors or critics are recorded to have dealt with him unfairly. She misses no opportunity to stress his originality and artistic integrity. Her work in the Lilly Library at Indiana University has been turned to excellent account. She is familiar with all Gissing's works and published private papers, and one feels that on many points she thinks, over a hundred years after his death, very much as he did. As one reads her analysis of and commentary upon Gissing's minor writings one is frequently led to pause so as to savour the appropriateness of a remark, a parallel or a suggestion. More than once also one thinks of some quotation which would have confirmed a point made by the critic, a quotation which indeed may have been jettisoned by her because of the superabundance of relevant material. Thus on p. 116 the comment on Thomas Bird's self-damaging propensity to let himself be sponged on brings to mind a passage in Gabrielle Fleury's *Recollections*: "Once at Arcachon, G. told me that he had never been able to refuse any demand of money, if he knew he cld by it afford some pleasure. His first thought then was: 'I shall have to work more, that is all.'"

Among the most rewarding pages of the book are those in which the author builds a network of associations between incidents or situations in either several short stories or a story and a novel. Gissing's thoughts are followed with admirable patience and ingenuity. Only her most knowledgeable readers will guess how Barbara Rawlinson manages to construct bridges between stories written at different periods of Gissing's life. In fact, considering the temporal distance between the elements concerned, one may sometimes wonder whether Gissing himself was aware that he was

recycling old material traceable in his American journalism. No one but himself in his lifetime could possibly have a first-hand knowledge of all his American writings. The notion of “echo” from former works which the fine ears or eyes of present-day commentators are so prompt to perceive was simply non-existent to him. He could ransack his old publications freely and with total artistic impunity. Many enlightening comparisons between stories of the Chicago period and the period of intense production of short fiction covering the years 1893-1903 are offered in the book, for instance between “Twenty Pounds” and “The Poet’s Portmanteau,” between “Joseph Yates’ Temptation” and *A Life’s Morning*, between “A Terrible Mistake” and “Lou and Liz,” between “One Farthing Damages” and “The Riding-Whip.” As she proceeds with her systematic examination of the twenty-three stories that Gissing wrote for the Chicago and other American papers, Barbara Rawlinson throws some light on a number of old problems or pseudo-problems, notably the ill-advised rejection from the Gissing canon by Robert Selig of the Dr. Vargrave trilogy, that is “The Death-clock,” “The Serpent Charm” and “Dead and Alive.” She writes in particular: “In ‘The Warden’s Daughter’ Peston’s death-like trance closely parallels May Munroe’s drugged ‘sleep like death’ in the disputed tale; both victims are pronounced dead and come back to life, and as Aymer proves his innocence through a dying man’s confession in ‘The Warden’s Daughter,’ so does Shakovsky in ‘Dead and Alive.’”

Like the present reviewer some readers will be grateful to Mrs. Rawlinson for her courage and humanity when she analyses “A Test of Honor” in the light of the treatment received by young Gissing at the hands of the Owens College disciplinary board. “One cannot escape the notion,” she writes, “that Mrs. Woodlow symbolises [the said board]. Like the College Senate, Mrs. Woodlow lacks the humanity to forgive, and so condemns the penitent to exile.” There is no doubt that Gissing, only eighteen years of age at the time, saw his attempt, as Mrs. Rawlinson writes, “to save Nell from the evils of prostitution and alcoholism as the act of a redeemer, a just cause for his crime. Tim Ridley is similarly persuaded in ‘Too Dearly Bought.’ Anxiety over his grandchild’s health overrules moral scruple [...] ‘For his own sake only he would never have dreamt of committing the theft [...] It was the essential goodness of his heart that, by so forcibly presenting to him the excellence of the end to be attained, blinded him for the moment to the true nature of the means.’” It does not seem to have occurred to the members of the College disciplinary board that young Gissing’s offence could be seen from that (to us glaringly obvious) angle.

The stories of the mature period, when they received a modicum of attention from his more sympathetic critics, were too often seen independently of the author's major work, and this is a fault that *A Man of Many Parts* should greatly help to remedy. It is to be hoped that the book will contribute to federate enquirers into the different genres that Gissing practised—from the days when his juvenilia was supervised by a busy father to the time when, the ending of *Veranilda* being in sight, he was planning to write not only other historical novels but a second book in the Ryecroft manner and a study, dimly projected in his *Commonplace Book*, on the years 1859-1874, a time of predominant liberalism which he associated with the years of his father's ascendancy in Wakefield.

One of the present book's supreme merits lies in the writer's constant determination to do justice to Gissing's personal brand of realism, so clearly defined in his 1895 essay on "The Place of Realism in Fiction," a subject which informs the whole volume and which is touched upon in particular on pp. 66, 130, 131, 156 and 255. This approach to reality, unlike those of Arthur Morrison and Hubert Crackanthorpe, found an advocate in Hector P. Agosti, who defined it in his article "A Defense of Realism" as an interplay between the action of reality and the reaction of consciousness. Another virtue of the book consists in the author's firm resolve to support Gissing in his difficulties with such publishers as Bentley, Blackwood and Methuen, the latter of whom, in Mrs. Rawlinson's eyes and Gissing's, deliberately under-advertized *The Crown of Life* on account of its anti-war philosophy. Of Methuen's bizarre attitude towards Gissing, embarrassing evidence is already in existence, but the blame Barbara Rawlinson's lays at the publisher's door is a totally justified addition to a fairly long list of complaints which, strangely enough, began several years *before* Gissing for a short time became one of Methuen's authors, and steadily continued for several decades *after* his death. What firm other than Methuen could have suggested that *The Crown of Life* was such a long novel (!) that if it was to be reprinted, it must be in an abridged form? Similarly nobody nowadays is likely to disagree with the condemnation of the way in which, in Gissing's lifetime, his excellent story "A Freak of Nature" was vandalized by Cecil Harmsworth, the inept editor of the *Harmsworth Magazine*. Again it is with a feeling approaching jubilation that we reread the quotation from the *Commonplace Book* about George Smith, with whom his compeer James Payn could have been bracketed.

*A Man of Many Parts* is a major contribution to Gissing studies, wonderfully informative and lucidly generous to its subject. As the title indi-



cates, the book, though mainly concerned with the short stories, also deals with the poetry (available in Bouwe Postmus's precious edition published by the Edwin Mellen Press) and the articles he contributed to newspapers and reviews, rarely mentioned by biographers and difficult of access. Especially useful will be to beginners the bibliography of the short stories, chronologically divided into three phases, 1877, 1879-1884 and 1893-1904, and the substantial bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

One would not be astonished if some copy editor at the publisher's, the last person to have seen the proofs, were responsible for a few surprising typographical accidents, for instance that on p. 155. Fortunately they never affect the meaning. Dozens of passages would be worth quoting that might convey the critic's high esteem of Gissing's work, but one or two will of necessity suffice to give the flavour of the book. For instance on p. 109 we read that "the most marked individual quality that distinguished [Gissing's] work was his ability to create an infinite variety of authentic figures that sprang to life on the pages of his short fiction," while on p. 257 Mrs. Rawlinson prefers to step aside and let her admiration be expressed by Hamilton Fyfe, one of the enthusiastic reviewers of *The House of Cobwebs*: "Every story in it is a little masterpiece. If they were in French, we should have all our superfine critics of literature falling down and worshipping, yet I dare swear there is no collection of character sketches in any language which keeps up a higher level than this." — Pierre Coustillas

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**The H. G. Wells Annual Conference  
Imperial College/Conway Hall  
London, 28-29 September 2007**

Proposals for 20-minute papers, or for panels of 2-3 papers, are invited for this year's H. G. Wells Society Annual conference. The conference will be hosted by both Imperial College, London (on 28 September) and by Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London (on 29 September). The first day of the event will include a plenary lecture by the science fiction writer, Stephen Baxter.

The conference will focus on "Wells, Science and Philosophy." Proposals may centre on either Wells and science or Wells and philosophy exclusively, or might examine the intersection of both science and philosophy in the author's work. Proposals might focus on, but are not limited to: Wells and

evolutionary biology; Wells and Physics; Wells and Darwin/Huxley; Wells and Astronomy; Wells and Plato; Wells and Liberalism.

Proposals of 300 words should be submitted via email attachment, no later than 11 June 2007. Please include a brief biographical note, and send proposals with “Wells, Science and Philosophy” as the subject, to Dr. Steven McLean, at the following address:

stevenmclean\_7@hotmail.com

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### Notes and News

Scholars in quest of Gissing’s sources for *The Town Traveller* will be interested in a book recently remaindered, *The Disappearing Duke: The Improbable Tale of an Eccentric English Family*, by Tom Freeman-Keel and Andrew Crofts (Carol and Graf, 2003). The man concerned was the fifth duke of Portland. Some reviewers of Gissing’s novel established a convincing connection between the story and the mysterious aristocrat.

Another book recently remaindered, Anthony Petyt informs us, *The War and Uncle Walter: The Diary of an Eccentric*, by Walter Musto (Doubleday, 2003) is also of marginal interest to readers of Gissing. Uncle Walter, an elderly civil servant, started his diary in January 1939 and stopped keeping it in 1945, just after the return of peace. In the entry for 9 April 1940 he mentions that he has been reading *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. He quotes Gissing quoting Samuel Johnson in section V of Spring. On 30 July 1941 Walter Musto quotes from a letter championing the cause of the unskilled labourer, sent to the *Daily Telegraph* by Morley Roberts. So the words of two old friends came together in a most unlikely place.

Fred Nesta, who is working currently on the history of Gissing’s books, has found two curious entries on little known websites. One concerns a Persian translation of *New Grub Street*, *Māriyān va Jāspir*, published in Tehran in 1998, the other a copy of the *Iliad of Homer*, Books I-VI, in Greek (Oxford and London: James Parker and Co., 1867), said to be Gissing’s copy. In her Recollections of him Gabrielle Fleury refers to his reading Homer on Sundays.

A copy of the first American edition of *Sleeping Fires* has been discovered by Bouwe Postmus. It is signed by John Northern Hilliard with his hitherto unknown bookplate.

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## Recent Publications

### Volumes

George Gissing, *Selected Essays of Gissing* [Extracts from *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*], Changsha (Hunan): Hunan Art and Literature Press, July 2000. Translation by Zheng Yitang and Zhang Ruoheng. 336 pages. Brown, yellow and white covers.

George Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Publishing House, May 2005 [no. 5,001-10,000]. Translated by Li Jian. 217 pages. Pictorial cover.

### Articles, reviews, etc.

Michele Russo, "Gissing e l'Italia," *Traduttologia*, Anno 1 (nuova serie), Fascicolo 2, January 2006, pp. 156-59. Review of the Interlink Books edition of *By the Ionian Sea*, edited by P. Coustillas.

Romano Pasaventi, "La 'maledizione' di Gissing: che ne è stato di Kroton?" *La Provincia KR*, 28 July 2006, page unknown. Article on Gissing in Cotrone/Crotone, with photographs of the Piazza Vittoria and Gissing in 1901.

Maria Teresa Chialant, "[Reviews]," *Cuadernos de Literatura Inglesa y Norteamericana* (Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina), Vol. 9, nos. 1-2, May-November 2006, pp. 89-95. Review of three books recently published, *George Gissing, the Working Woman, and Urban Culture* (Emma Liggins), *George Gissing: Voices of the Unclassed* (Martin Ryle and Jenny Bourne Taylor, eds.), and *Gissing and the City* (John Spiers, ed.).

Wulfhard Stahl, "Fast ein deutscher Dickens: Eduard Bertz – Ein Memento zum 75. Todestag des Potsdamer Schriftstellers," *Potsdamer Neues*

*Nachrichten*, Vol. 56, no. 287, 9 December 2006, p. 31. A commemoration of Eduard Bertz, 75 years after his death, with a photograph of him.

Colin Lovelace, "Killed by beeftea," *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 December 2006, p. 17. Letter to the editor apropos of the speed of mail at the time of Gissing's death.

Anon., "Biblioteca comunale," *La Radice* (Badolato CZ), 31 December 2006, p. 19. Review of Daniele Cristofaro's *George Gissing : Il viaggio desiderato* and Francesco Badolato's *George Gissing, romanziere del tardo periodo vittoriano*.

Dennis Shrubbsall, ed., *The Unpublished Letters of W. H. Hudson, the First Literary Environmentalist*, 2 vols., Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006. Although these two volumes include no newly discovered letter from Hudson to Gissing, they contain a number of allusions to the Gissing brothers and other correspondents of their circle which are of biographical interest.

Umberto Franzè, *Amare Crotona: Immagini della città dal 1860 al 1960*, Livorno: Media Print, 2006. An album on Crotona containing 309 illustrations, many of which are of Gissing interest, but the photograph said to be of Gissing is a fake. The tablet commemorating his stay in the town appears on p. 36.

Mary Hammond, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006. Contains a short section on Gissing, pp. 23-27.

Paul Giles, *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. 150-70 are devoted to Gissing.