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

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## Margaret Bedford Gissing, *Pendennis*, and the Manchester D  b  cle

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Anyone who takes an interest in the most traumatic event of Gissing’s life, the event that helped distort his personality and cripple that life irrevocably, soon realises that his researches are not going to get very far. Official documents are scant and give little idea of the tumult that must have occurred in Manchester and Wakefield; almost without exception private documents from the period have been destroyed. Jovelike we can foresee the impending catastrophe as we read the four surviving letters of John George Black (*Collected Letters* I, 40-45. Henceforth *Letters* followed by volume and page number), the last of which jocularly records instructors’ enquiries about the absence from lectures of a hitherto exceptionally assiduous student (he was, of course, in Southport with Nell). Chronologically the next surviving letter is the hammer blow of an official missive asking where “the income of the Shakspeare Scholarship up to the date of your expulsion from the College” is to be directed (*Letters* I, 45).

The only Manchester reference to the breaking of the sensational news we have is made by the not always reliable Morley Roberts, who yet surely rings true here:

One day I went into the common room, and standing in front of the fire found a man, a young fellow about my age, called Sarle, with whom I frequently played chess . . . and he said to me: “Have you heard the news?” “What news?” I asked. “Your friend, Henry Maitland [i.e., Gissing], has been stealing those things that we have lost,” said he. And when he said so I very nearly struck him, for it seemed a gross and incredible slander. But unfortunately it was true, and at that very moment Maitland was in gaol. . . . It was a very ghastly business and certainly the first great shock I ever got in my life. I think it was the same for everybody who knew the boy. The whole college was in a most extraordinary ferment, and all the Moorhampton [Manchester] people who took any real interest in the institution. (Bishop 31)

There is no Wakefield equivalent to Roberts’ passage. In his recent biography Paul Delany quotes an “anonymous white-collar criminal” on the

contemporary meaning of imprisonment: “To the man in a good position, it is moral death, accompanied with ruin and disgrace to his family and relatives. The actual punishment to men in my position is not the confinement, the coarse but wholesome food, the discomforts, and work: it is the terrible fall in social position, the stigma that clings to a man not only all his life, but, after his life is ended, to his children.” Delany assumes that Gissing would have left prison “to hide out in his mother’s house; with his pallor and his prison haircut he would want to stay off the streets” (19). We can imagine the grief and pity of some of the Gissings’ neighbours at this shaming of a decent and respectable family; we can imagine too the imperfectly concealed malignant delight of others at the public humiliation of the young man who had so often so outstripped their own sons (and, incidentally, their malicious pleasure at the bringing down of a family that had always kept itself somewhat aloof). If no contemporary record exists of what must have been Mrs. Gissing’s incredulity, anguish, and rage, then we do have evidence of her steady unforgiveness of Nell: a letter of Gissing to Algernon in early 1880, by which time the novelist had been married nearly four months, concludes “Nell wishes to be kindly remembered. How I wish I could say, to Mother, as well as to you,” words the editors gloss with the observation that “Gissing’s mother never became reconciled to his first wife, even helping to keep the relationship a secret from his sisters” (*Letters* I, 241, 242, n. 10). They point out too that Gissing could not invite Margaret to his rooms when she visited London in May and June of 1881: brother and sister had to meet in public places or the Highbury house where she was staying (*Letters* II, xx).

The surviving record reveals more. That there was never any closeness between son and mother has long been known. Delany goes so far as to say that Gissing “conformed to Simenon’s definition of a novelist: ‘a man who never received mother-love’” (16). We see a most unenviable insecurity and defensiveness, doubtless rooted in the Manchester events, in some of Gissing’s references to his mother: “I believe it is Mother’s tendency to think of me as rather unstable & untrustworthy; perhaps not, yet I fear so” (*Letters* III, 90). Gissing thought that she devoted too much time and effort to quotidian, material activities like housework, that she was a “stranger” to him, and that he could not remember ever having received a caress from her (*Letters*, III, 240; II, 264; VII, 285). He could not share, nor even respect, his mother’s and sisters’ piety. “His whole life,” writes Delany, “would be shaped by rebellion against the evangelical Anglicanism of his

mother” (4). But throughout his first painful marriage and, indeed, almost to the end of his life, Gissing continued to send her dutiful greetings, enquiries, and good wishes, usually via his sisters, but occasionally directly.

A mixture of love, guilt, and pity, combined with a sense of seamliness, prevented Gissing from expressing openly—perhaps even acknowledging privately within his own breast—the pain and resentment he felt at his mother’s evident disapproval of the course his life had taken and the presumed personal weaknesses behind that course. However, these emotions revealingly burst forth in one unguarded private comment, a comment that retrospectively illuminates the family wretchedness which followed his public disgrace.

Gissing wrote in the *Commonplace Book*: “I am not in the habit of getting excited over novels that I read, but there is one thing in fiction which always moves me to an excess of rage,—it is, Mrs. Pendennis’s treatment of Fanny Bolton. I am out of myself with hatred & contempt in reading those pages” (30).

“*Out of myself with hatred & contempt.*” The words leap from the page. With the exception of one or two epistolary remarks about his second wife, I know of no comments made by Gissing *in propria persona* that express so painful and naked an emotion.

*Pendennis* (1848-50) is Thackeray’s *Bildungsroman*, a sprawling thousand-page Victorian baggy monster narrating the life of a young man who heads to London and Grub Street. We think of Gissing as a Dickensian but, reluctantly declining to follow his critical study of 1898 with a similar work on Thackeray, he wrote that the latter “appeals to me much more strongly than Dickens” (*Letters* VII, 172). (George Gissing’s *Thackeray: A Critical Study* is a work one very much regrets one will never read.) We know too that Gissing had a copy of *Pendennis*, and that the novel meant much to him. When Algernon sent him it, perhaps as a slightly premature birthday present, in 1883, the elder brother wrote on 11 November, “Very many thanks, indeed, for this magnificent present. I have now Thackeray’s chief books, & rejoice in the possession of them. I have often needed to read a page or two of ‘Pendennis,’ & shall be henceforth better in body & mind, through having it by me” (*Letters* II, 179).

There is indeed much in the novel that Gissing would have found absorbing, chiefly, of course, its depiction of literary London. Pen arrives in the capital in the same coach as Doolan, an Irish journalist whose loose talk makes him “calculate instantly whether he might not make five thousand a

year.” He falls in with the good natured drunkard Shandon, who edits *The Pall Mall Gazette*, sometimes from a debtors’ prison, and with the significantly named critic Bludyer, who sells his review copies, eats and drinks upon what they make, then “call[s] for ink and paper, and proceed[s] to ‘smash’ the author of his dinner and the novel” (*Pendennis* Chaps 28, 36. Henceforth chapter numbers). Pen himself perpetrates a novel, *Walter Lorraine*, which, thanks to the generous intrigues of an experienced friend, is sold to a publisher at a price favourable to the author (“an amateur novelist,” intones the narrator sardonically, “is quite welcome to try [these machinations] upon any two publishers in the trade” [41]).

There is more. Even by his twenty-sixth birthday that ferocious worker George Robert Gissing would have had cause to note, and find helpful, the “Pegasus in harness” passages of *Pendennis*, those paragraphs that describe the unglamorous necessity of a writer’s settling down to steady, daily production: “A literary man has often to work for his bread against time, or against his will, or in spite of his health, or of his indolence, or of his repugnance to the subject on which he is called to exert himself, just like any other daily toiler” (36). Compare Gissing’s equally dogged, “Often & often I am tempted to read a book instead of writing my day’s chapter, & the only thing that helps me is the recollection that only perfect regularity bears results, that what is not done to-day only becomes an extra burden for tomorrow . . . .” (*Letters* II, 336-337). A later paragraph of Thackeray’s novel will have resounded with Gissing: “certainly each man who lives by the pen, and happens to read this, must remember, if he will, his own experiences, and recall many solemn hours of solitude and labour. What a constant care sat at the side of the desk and accompanied him! Fever or sickness [or drunkenness] were lying possibly in the next room: a sick child might be there, with a wife watching over it terrified and in prayer; or grief might be bearing him down, and the cruel mist before the eyes rendering the paper scarce visible as he wrote on it, and the inexorable necessity drove on the pen. What man among us has not had nights and hours like these?” (71). Furthermore, the Gissing who would later find his brothers of the quill indistinguishable from “tradesmen” (*Letters* V, 251, 254) might have had more sympathy with Thackeray than Dickens in the so-called “Dignity of Literature” quarrel (“there are no race of men,” the former had notoriously written at the end of *Pendennis*’s thirty-fourth chapter, “who talk about books, or, perhaps, who read books, so little as literary men”).

But there is more than that. In the year before Algernon's present of the Thackeray volume, Nell had moved out of the conjugal rooms. Gissing eventually paid her to stay away. The plight of Thackeray's Warrington, the generous friend who had negotiated a handsome price for Pen's novel, could not but have struck home to Gissing. George Warrington is the third son of a baronet. Yet to his shame he writes for a living (a sign of Thackeray's upper-middle-class feeling, or affectation, of disdain for other than gentlemanly, unpaid, literary production). However, he can never sign his articles, his very considerable talent notwithstanding, because so to do could attract the attention of his unpresentable and avaricious wife and family. George Warrington is "disabled. I had a fatal hit in early life. I will tell you about it some day" (44). "There was something that can't be mended, and that shattered my whole fortunes early . . . if you want to see a man whose whole life has been wrecked, by an unlucky rock against which he struck as a boy—here he is . . ." (55). Warrington tells the whole sad story in Chapter Fifty-Seven, in reaction to Pen's response to that behavior of his, Pen's, mother which just for once so uncharacteristically enraged the culpable timid and forbearing Gissing.

Warrington tells his listeners that before going to college he fell in love with the daughter of a yeoman. The baronet's son "tied [himself] at the age of nineteen to an illiterate woman older than himself, with no qualities in common between them to make one a companion to the other, no equality, no confidence, and no love speedily." He explains further: "I found, before long, that I was married to a boor. She could not comprehend one subject that interested me. Her dullness palled upon me till I grew to loathe it." He eventually found letters that revealed his wife loved "a person of her own degree."

At my father's death, I paid what debts I had contracted at college, and settled every shilling which remained to me in an annuity, upon—upon those who bore my name, on condition that they should hide themselves away, and not assume it. They have kept that condition, as they would break it, for more money. If I had earned fame or reputation, that woman would have come to claim it: if I had made a name for myself, those who had no right to it would have borne it; and I entered life at twenty, God help me—hopeless and ruined beyond remission. . . . Beware how you marry out of your degree. I was made for a better lot than this, I think: but God has awarded me this one—and so, you see, it is for me to look on, and see others successful and others happy, with a heart that shall be as little bitter as possible. (57)

If there are certain differences between Gissing's situation and Warrington's then the similarities outweigh them. Gissing shackled himself to two

women who had no understanding of or sympathy with his ambitions. He sought recognition as a novelist but dreaded the appearance of first Nell then Edith on his doorstep.

Pen has in the past avoided such a disastrous marriage thanks to the manoeuvring of his worldly uncle Major Pendennis. He has avoided, with difficulty, a second catastrophic union too, and here the Fanny Bolton of the *Commonplace Book* makes her appearance. The Boltons keep the lodge at Shepherd's Inn, which Pen often has occasion to visit. Fanny is very pretty and Pen finds himself attracted with increasing force. However, knowing there can be no legitimate union between them because of the class gulf, he does his best to resist temptation, a task all the more distasteful in that he has never attempted self-control before. In an attempt to forget Fanny, Pen "worked . . . too much; he walked and rode too much; he ate, drank, and smoked too much," and consequently falls ill of a "fever" (51). Fanny hears of the illness and, having fallen in love with Pen, goes to nurse him. The worst possible construction of this action is sent to Pen's devout mother in an anonymous letter. With what is extraordinary frankness for the time, Thackeray has told the reader that Mrs. Pendennis's possessive love for her son has a sexual element : when "women watch over their sons' affections . . . I have no doubt there is a sexual jealousy on the mother's part, and a secret pang" (24). She reacts with hysteria and sets off to London with Laura, the young woman she intends for Pen's wife. When Fanny opens the door to them, "neither showed any the faintest gleam of mercy or sympathy"; the mother's face was "hopelessly cruel and ruthless." She drops Fanny's shawl and bonnet on a table outside his bedroom and "take[s] possession of her son." The "heart-broken little nurse," who justly thinks to herself that she would have died for Pen, "never made her appearance in the quality of nurse at his chambers any more." On "the one or two occasions when [the doctor] alluded to Fanny, the widow's countenance, always soft and gentle, assumed an expression so cruel and inexorable that [he] saw it was in vain to ask her for justice or pity, and he broke off all entreaties . . ." (52).

Thinking that Pen is "dishonest," that is, unchaste, and must be protected from Fanny, Helen Pendennis intercepts innocent letters from the girl addressed to her son, and opens one of them. When he eventually finds out what has been happening, he erupts in rage, shouting that he has been treated like a child and Fanny like a "dog" (56).

“He breaks the most sacred laws,” thought Helen. “He prefers the creature of his passion to his own mother; and when he is upbraided, he laughs, and glories in his crime. ‘She gave me her all,’ I heard him say it,” argued the poor widow; “and he boasts of it, and laughs, and breaks his mother’s heart.” The emotion, the shame, the grief, the mortification almost killed her. She felt she should die of his unkindness. (56)

Mutual misunderstanding continues and more blows are unwittingly given and received as jealousy, pious horror, and a diseased love on the one hand battle with anger, a sense of injustice, and an outraged feeling of belittlement on the other. Later at dinner Pen sees that his mother appears feeble but “The spectacle of her misery only added, somehow, to the wrath and testiness of the young man. He scarcely returned the kiss which the suffering lady gave him: and the countenance with which he met the appeal of her look was hard and cruel. ‘She persecutes me,’ he thought within himself, ‘and she comes to me with the air of a martyr’” (57). He announces his intention of marrying Fanny: “I will go back to this poor girl whom you turned out of my doors, and ask her to come back and share my home with me. I’ll defy the pride which persecutes her, and the pitiless suspicion which insults her and me” (57). It is at this stage that Warrington tells the story of his early smash, with its lesson about marrying outside one’s “degree.” There follow the most meretricious scenes in the novel as the tensions of Thackeray’s relationship with his own mother combine with his wish not to offend the public. (It is in the “Preface” to this very work that Thackeray’s famous words about the constricting effects of Victorian taste are to be found: “Since the author of *Tom Jones* was buried, no writer of fiction among us has been permitted to depict to his utmost power a MAN.”) Implausibly Mrs. Pendennis blesses Warrington and kisses his hands then weepingly embraces her son. “‘Yes, dearest mother,’ he said, as he held her to him, and with a noble tenderness and emotion embraced and forgave her. ‘I am innocent, and my dear, dear mother has done me a wrong’” [57]. Pen explains how he had fled from and overcome temptation and that “The threat that he would return was uttered in a moment of exasperation, of which he repented” (57). Soon Pen is sobbingly reciting the Lord’s Prayer at his mother’s feet and fifteen minutes later she is found dead in her chair.

A number of points remain to be made. Internal evidence shows that Gissing’s comment was written between September 1887 and December of the following year (Korg 17). However, H  l  ne Coustillas, who has prepared a transcription of the *Commonplace Book* with all the entries in the

order in which Gissing made them, informs me that the entry on the character of Fanny Bolton on p. 11 of the manuscript (Korg 31) occurs just before the well-known quotation from Shakespeare's *Richard II* ("All places that the eye of heaven visits/Are to the wise man ports and happy havens"), which also appears in Gissing's letter to Ellen of 3 July 1888 (*Letters III*, 219). She very plausibly suggests that the entry in the *Commonplace Book* and the letter to Ellen were written about the same time. A notional two months of entries to a page, the apparent rate, therefore gives us a tentative date of early 1888 for Gissing's angry reaction to the behaviour of Mrs. Pendennis on p. 9 of his manuscript. He learnt of Nell's death on 29 February 1888. So his displaced anger at Penn's mother was probably recorded during the most intense period of his grief at Nell's death and the anguished memories that death brought back. I can see no awareness on Gissing's part of even an implicit criticism of his mother, so thoroughly had her son buried within the depths of his heart resentment and anger towards her: we seem simply to be reading a response to a novel, if a strongly expressed one. There is one more comment about Fanny Bolton in the *Commonplace Book* (Korg 35-36). Like the entry on Fanny's character it has its origin in Gissing's long-lived interest in a mesh of inter-related topics: the stupidity and prudery of Englishwomen, the social oppressiveness that helped create these qualities and the artistic strictures that helped maintain them; the apparent greater freedom and generosity of French women, and the greater social and artistic open-mindedness that helped create and preserve these attitudes. The comment on Fanny Bolton's character reads:

The character of Fanny Bolton in "Pendennis," is extremely realistic, to me painfully so. The girl is vulgar; you cannot take any real interest in her. Is not this realism due to a feeling that moral requirements demanded an emphasizing of the distance between Pen & her? Great God, compare her with a grisette of Murger or Musset! Are the latter purely idealistic? I wish it were possible to decide that ever-recurring question. (31)

The last one, written between 3 April 1890 and 7 June of the same year, begins with Gissing's observation that, "With the English character, the 'Vie de Bohème' is impossible. In English girls there is first conscience, & secondly stupidity, keeping them from this ideal." He then quotes a few lines from Murger, recounting an incident in which a poet "qui a si bien chanté l'amour" greets Mimi with "un gracieux sourire." Rodolphe mentions the poet's name and Mimi blushes with pleasure and pride. On Rodolphe predicting that "cette rencontre du poète . . . e[s]t d'un bon



augure et portera bien à notre réconciliation,” she tells him she loves him, and squeezes his hand, “bien qu’ils fussent au milieu de la foule” (35-36). Gissing’s terminal comment: “Reading this, think of Pendennis & Fanny Bolton!”

Pen was not unchaste and did not marry what his uncle calls “a low-born kitchen-girl!” (57). Gissing was and did. Gissing did not as a child lisp “Our Father” for his mother at nine o’clock every night, or if he did it was with a bad grace. There is no evidence that his mother’s feelings for him were tainted by sexual or other possessiveness. Mrs. Gissing did not predecease her son, living on, indeed, ten years after him. But a man does not feel “out of [himself] with hatred & contempt” without cause, and the cause in this case is not far to seek. Certain scenes in *Pendennis* give us the closest insight into certain scenes in Wakefield that we are ever going to have.

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### **Cornwall Mansions: The Rise and Fall of 7K and Its Neighbours**

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The demolition early in 2008 of nos. 7, 9 and 11 Cornwall Mansions, including, of course, 7K, where Gissing lived from December 1884 until January 1891, by far the longest period of residence at one address during his adult life, cannot be allowed to pass without an appropriate obituary.

Cornwall Residences, as they were known until July 1888, entered the world in 1872 when Lord Portman assigned the first of a series of leases to

their builder, Nicholas Fabyan Daw, beginning with leases for plots numbered 1, 2 and 3 in Allsop Place, Marylebone, on 6 December 1872.<sup>1</sup> By this time the buildings on these plots would have been completed and ready for occupancy. No. 3 was recorded by the District Surveyor as a six-storey block, 56 feet in height, under construction, in his returns in March 1872, and he identified No. 4 as “in progress” between July and September 1872, with further blocks, by now called “Cornwall Residences,” “roofed in” by April and December 1874.<sup>2</sup> The deeds for nos. 1-3 include floor plans, confirming the three-room layout—sitting-room, bedroom and kitchen/dining-room, but with the bedroom opening directly out of the latter—described by Gissing in his account of Reardon’s flat in *New Grub Street*.<sup>3</sup> By the time of the house-to-house survey for the 1874 Post Office directory (probably early in 1873), the estate office (no. 1) and blocks nos. 2 and 3 were nearly fully occupied; and by the time of the 1876 directory, blocks 4 and 5 were also almost full. In the 1877 directory (i.e. by mid-1876) the Residences were complete with the addition of block no. 6. In 1879, in time for the 1880 directory, the blocks were renumbered to fit in with the street numbering along the rest of Allsop Place: the office, a triangular, three-storey building at the north end of the range of flats, became no. 11, no. 2 became no. 9, no. 3 became no. 7, no. 4 became no. 5, no. 5 became no. 3, and no. 6, which lay behind the other blocks, became no. 13.<sup>4</sup> So Gissing’s flat, 7K, was at the top of the block originally numbered no. 3, part of the first stage of building completed in 1872.

The Residences were typical, early examples of London flats for the middle classes, organised as separate “houses,” usually four or five storeys plus a basement, with either one or two flats on each floor. Only the most luxurious examples, and then only from the mid-1880s such as Hyde Park Mansions (where Gissing’s acquaintances, the Fennesseys, lived<sup>5</sup>), contained lifts, since the cost of a lift shared among only 5-10 tenants was prohibitive. Externally, a row of such “houses,” each divided from its neighbour by a fireproof party wall that extended above the roof line, looked little different, just a storey or so taller, than Regency or Victorian townhouses. The advocates of flat-living argued that it was better to have separate purpose-built flats, each with its own toilet and kitchen (but not, in the case of Cornwall Residences, its own bath), than multi-storey terraced houses that ended up being subdivided into lodgings and rooms, where unrelated lodgers and sub-tenants were forced to share inadequate sanitary and cooking facilities, the kinds of houses that Gissing had occupied in

Bloomsbury and Camden Town prior to moving to the flats. No wonder Gissing was so enthusiastic that he had a “home” at last when he first moved to the Residences in December 1884.<sup>6</sup>

Until 1900, the directories simply listed names in each “house” with no direct indication of who lived in which flat. However, the census enumerators’ books for 1891 and 1901 did record the letters associated with each flat, and matching these, and the post-1900 directory addresses, with the lists of names in earlier directories indicates that the directory canvassers did usually start at the bottom of each house and work their way up to the roof. Gissing, of course, arrived too late for the 1881 census and departed just prior to the 1891 census. He was even too late for the 1885 directory, which listed Edgar Harrison as occupier, but Gissing is listed as the penultimate entry under no. 7 for the years 1886-1891. He also appears in the Marylebone Ratebooks. Until 1890 the ratebooks simply listed the occupiers of each “house” and provided an overall valuation of the property; but from 1891 each flat was rated separately with a named occupier liable for the rates. 7K, with Gissing still listed as occupier, had a rateable value of £22. Two other flats in no. 7 had equally low valuations, two were valued at £24, one at £25, one at £28, three at £30, while flats G and H were rated as a single unit at £54.<sup>7</sup> These valuations were twice as high as those for Peabody flats or for the Farringdon Road model dwellings that featured in *The Nether World*, but much lower than valuations for the most up-to-date 1880s mansion flats such as Oxford & Cambridge Mansions.

In his letters and diary, Gissing tells us about one or two of his neighbours, notably the popular composer, Procida Bucalossi, who lived at 7J on the floor below, and his namesake, Captain Charles Gissing, R.N., who briefly occupied a flat at the top of no. 5.<sup>8</sup> But there is little or no mention of his nearest neighbour(s), the successive occupants of 7L, whose door faced his, Miss Hand, until 1887, and Miss Emma Easton, from 1888.<sup>9</sup> The 1881 census lists Anne and Mary Hand as unmarried sisters aged 59 and 54, born in Middlesex, but cared for by a resident general servant, a young woman from Somerset. But the 1891 census has no entry for Miss Easton or any other occupier of 7L. More generally, it seems likely that the census, recording only those who were physically present on census night, substantially under-enumerated the population who thought of themselves as normally resident in the flats. We only have to think of Gissing’s own experience, frequently and increasingly absent from his flat on extended stays with family, holidays and continental tours. Some residents would

have treated the Residences as their London pied à terre with first homes in the country; others were commercial travellers or professional entertainers frequently away on tour.

The residents of Cornwall Mansions (as they had become) listed in the 1891 census were a mixture of professional men, tradespeople and independent women, some “living on their own means,” presumably from rents, stocks and shares, and annuities, others closer to the profile of Gissing’s “odd women”: at 3F an “actress,” at 5F a “singer,” at 5H a female “high school teacher,” at 5P a “vocalist,” at 13B the “manageress of millinery business.” Among the men were a hospital secretary, the secretary to an MP, two barristers, two solicitors, a surveyor, two retired army majors, several clerks and a Catholic priest, but also a cabinet salesman, a jeweller, a manufacturing chemist, a wine merchant, an ironmonger and two commercial travellers. Twenty-one of the fifty-one enumerated households included resident servants. Others, like Gissing, would have employed non-resident maids, housekeepers or charladies. By comparison with some high-class blocks which accommodated residents from all over the world, Cornwall Mansions’ inmates seem to have been less well travelled. Nevertheless, their birthplaces included Jamaica, Tasmania, France, Italy and Germany. Ten years earlier (and almost nobody was resident in both 1881 and 1891), birthplaces included Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Canada, Bombay and the East Indies and there were 25 living-in servants shared among 56 households.

All of this implies a pretty unexceptional building and quite ordinary residents, AND YET ... What, if anything, might Gissing, or Mrs Gaussen, who was supposedly instrumental in finding the flat, have known about Cornwall Residences in advance of his moving in? Despite the Residences’ claim—often repeated in later years—to be among the first middle-class flats in London, the 1879 edition of *Dickens’ Dictionary of London* failed to mention it under the entry for “Flats”: “At present almost the only separate étages to be found in London are those in the much-talked-of Queen Anne’s mansions, a good number of sets in Victoria-street, a few in Cromwell-road ... and a single set in George-street, Edgware-road.” By the time of the 1885 edition, however, the original list had been boosted by “seven houses near Clarence Gate, Regent’s park, known as Cornwall Residences, [and] the new buildings known as Oxford Mansions.” Gissing was aware of and used *Dickens’ Dictionary* on at least one occasion (see his letter to Ellen of 3 July 1885, from which we might surmise that he had

the dictionary to hand), so it is at least possible that he knew of the entry on “Flats.”

A more surprising reference appears in “Stage Notes” in the *Academy* (30 July 1881), where the reviewer of a new comedy, “Flats,” at the Criterion Theatre, explained that “*Flats* does not deal, as might be supposed, with the fortunes of persons of especially limited intelligence, but with the conditions of life in those many-peopled abodes known as Queen Anne’s Mansions or as Cornwall Residences.” Queen Anne’s Mansions was justly famous as London’s first high-rise block of flats, rising at this time eleven storeys above St James’s Park, thereby allowing top-floor residents the opportunity to look down into the Queen’s private gardens, and attracting criticism as a veritable Tower of Babel.<sup>10</sup> For Cornwall Residences to be mentioned in the same breath suggests a fame (or notoriety) hitherto undisclosed. “Flats” was a farce by the journalist-playwright George R. Sims (otherwise famous for *How the Poor Live* and, subsequently, for several volumes of *Living London*), but Sims based his play on the French farce, “*Les Locataires de Monsieur Blondeau*” by Henri Chivot, first performed at the Palais Royal in June 1879 and quickly thereafter translated as “*Mr Blondeau’s Lodgers: Vaudeville, In Five Floors.*” The translation retained the setting of a Parisian apartment house, five floors occupied by a series of stock characters, from the hairdresser at street level, through Mr Blondeau himself, who has “made an honest fortune in the fabrication of buttonholes” and has now decided that he wants to be his own landlord, to the woman of dubious repute (Madame de Ste Amaranthe) on the second floor (think of Mrs Widdowson in *The Odd Women* and you won’t go far wrong!), the fussy solicitor on the third floor, the renowned Italian tenor on the fourth floor (not a million miles from Signor Buca-losi?) and a dressmaker’s workroom on the fifth floor. Each act of the farce ascends up the building (hence “in five floors”) and becomes increasingly manic and nonsensical, a comic equivalent of Zola’s *Pot-Bouille* (1882). I have not (yet) tracked down Sims’ version, but presumably he reworked the Parisian setting and characters into something closer to a block of London mansion flats. In fact, the full title of Sims’ farce was “*Flats, in Four Stories.*” The play ran from July until at least September 1881, including a performance at Bertram and Roberts’s Great Annual Day and Night Fete at the Crystal Palace on 4 October 1881, one of those spectacular events, including massed bands, minstrel singers, “other eminent vocalists,” circus, “clown cricketers,” conjuror, “all the Great Foun-

tains” and, of course, a “Grand Firework Display,” that Gissing parodied in “Io Saturnalia!” in *The Nether World*.<sup>11</sup>

That life in Cornwall Residences might be similarly bohemian is also implied by a more notorious source, *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain, or the Recollections of a Mary-Ann*, an anonymously authored piece of pornography, published in 1881 by William Lazenby. The conceit underlying this work is that a Mr Cambon, who lives “in the Cornwall Mansions [sic], close to Baker Street Station,” picks up Jack Saul, a young male prostitute, whom he invites back to his “chambers” for “a cigar and a chat.” Once replete on a dinner of steak and oyster sauce washed down by two bottles of “extra sec” champagne, Cambon invites Saul to recount his life story, featuring a succession of sexual adventures, in graphic detail, thankfully over less than a thousand and one nights.<sup>12</sup> Matt Cook notes not only that a “real” Jack Saul featured in the Cleveland Street scandal of 1889-90, but also that a “pornographer friend” of Lazenby was William Simpson Potter, who really did live in 4 Cornwall Residences from about 1877 until his death in 1879.<sup>13</sup> The British Library catalogue lists Potter as the “compiler” of another “anonymous” piece of erotica, *The Romance of Lust* (1873-1876) and as author of the more conventional *A Letter from the East* (1877) and *Letters from India during HRH the Prince of Wales’ Visit in 1875-6* (1876).

We can also track references to Cornwall Residences/Mansions in online newspapers and magazines such as *The Times Digital Archive* and *19<sup>th</sup>-Century British Library Newspapers* (which includes, for example, *Daily News*, the *Pall Mall Gazette* and *The Era*). Most references reveal the mundanity of life in the buildings, including attempts by tenants to sublet their apartments (as Gissing was to try, half-heartedly, on several occasions): five furnished rooms in no. 3 were on offer at two guineas a week in September 1879; eight rooms in no. 5 at three guineas per week in August and September 1882; and four rooms and a kitchen at 13J, to be let unfurnished, and described as “Small Bijou Flat,” were advertised at £70 per annum in June 1883.<sup>14</sup> This matches the rent of Gissing’s own three rooms—£40 per annum—very closely. In June 1884, “A Good General Servant” was wanted at 13E, for “a gentleman’s small family. Plain cooking required. Age 20. Wages from £16, all found”: much more than either the Reardons can have paid their maid-servant, “recently emancipated from the Board school” for working six and a half hours each day, or than Gissing paid Mrs King (2/6 per week, later increased to 5/-, for two hours daily).<sup>15</sup>

Some tenants offered their services for sale. Charles Byrne (13F from 1891 to 1900) was described in 1891, when he was 44, as “living on his own means.” He was the inventor of “Byrne’s sliding seat,” commended in *Cycling* (24 November 1894). It was “pretty well-known, particularly to frequenters of the roads South of the Thames.”<sup>16</sup> We can imagine H. G. Wells or one of his creations taking advantage of it. Miss Lisle, one of two middle-aged sisters who shared a flat in no. 5 from 1876 until 1891, offered elocution classes for private and public reading and speaking; Mademoiselles MacColla and Lecaille, were, respectively “Teacher of Languages” and “Teacher of French” in no. 7 between 1877 and 1883; at 7C in 1886, German and French lessons were offered “by Hanoverian lady, married. 2s. full hour. ... Evenings for gentlemen”; and at 7K, G. Gissing, Esq. advertised on 7 July 1885 for “A Holiday or Permanent Engagement, for an Experienced Tutor, whose pupils have passed well in scholarship examinations’.<sup>17</sup> This was when Walter Grahame, whom Gissing had taken on the previous year, anticipating ten hours per week at 5/- per hour, had “gone away ... a month earlier than was expected,” provoking “rather a serious state of things” (presumably, with regard to Gissing’s finances).<sup>18</sup>

Several tenants were professional actresses or musicians. At 5H, Margaret Wild (aged 28 in 1891) was promoting her own piano recital at Prince’s Hall at 3 o’clock on Monday 4 May 1891: “Stalls 5s. Balcony 3s. Admission 1s.” Prince’s Hall, on Piccadilly, was where Alma Rolfe gave her “First Violin Recital,” also a 3 o’clock engagement.<sup>19</sup> Edward Henry Harvey (resident at no. 13, 1883-86) advertised in September 1883 for “Living CURIOSITIES of Every Description. Dwarfs, Giants, Etc.” More conventionally, between 1890 and 1892, *The Era* regularly carried advertisements soliciting theatrical engagements from Miss Ida Sala (5B), Miss Muriel Wylford (3F, “actress” aged 25 in the 1891 census), Miss Effie Clements (5F, “singer,” 26, in 1891), and for Miss Cissie Grahame’s company, managed from no. 5 by Gifford Stacey. Lastly, Miss Kate Tyndall, whose latest success was “How London Lives” at the Royal Princess’s Theatre, lived from 1897 at 5L with her husband, Albert Gilmer, described in the 1901 census as “theatrical manager.”<sup>20</sup> It would require more systematic and comparative research to determine whether this cluster of theatricals was statistically significant, but first impressions suggest that Cornwall Mansions had more than their fair share of “artistes.”

Births, marriages and deaths featured from time to time in *The Times*, most poignantly in the case of Philip Frank Heal, whose birth was an-

nounced in December 1877 to Alice Heal and her barrister husband, followed less than five months later by the announcement of his death.<sup>21</sup> The Heals were still resident in no. 5 in 1881, by which time they had a one year-old daughter. At least two bankrupts lived in the building (Henry Slade, stockbroker, previously of Bryanstone Square, had clearly accepted the necessity of trading down to a flat in no. 5; Charles Winch, solicitor, 46, and living in 9A in 1891, saw his Sterry's Mountain Colliery Co. collapse in 1894 and promptly moved out). Gissing reported on the suicide of his successor at 7K, a City solicitor. Four years later the Mansions claimed another victim when Sidney Tower, at 3D, another professional singer, was found dead at home by his wife, also a singer. He had poisoned himself with carbolic acid after a lengthy depression.<sup>22</sup>

But the most substantial news item featuring Cornwall Residences in the years prior to Gissing's arrival was the extraordinary case of the Rev. Philip Melancthon Holden, who lived at no. 2 (i.e. no. 9 in the revised numbering) in 1874-75. Early in June 1874, at around midnight one Friday evening, Holden was disturbed first by a gentleman knocking on his door asking him to step outside and then, when he refused, by another gentleman throwing stones at his window, one of which struck Holden's wife on the head, and others of which broke several panes of glass. A policeman arrested the assailant, but not before he had struck Holden with violent blows to his face and threatened to break his head. It transpired that Holden was the rector of Upminster in Essex, but had been suspended by his Bishop two years previously for "misconduct." The assailant said that he and Holden had been "bad friends" for 18 months, and that he had attacked him on several previous occasions, on one occasion "cut[ting] off a portion of his beard" and on another striking him in the face outside his club. The case was reported at length in *The Times*, *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* and the *Pall Mall Gazette* and reprinted a couple of days later in *The Belfast News Letter*.<sup>23</sup> Gissing could have done worse than to include some of these clippings in his own scrapbook!

By comparison, the gas explosion that occurred shortly after Gissing moved in was a less exciting story, though still not lacking in tragi-comedy. *The Times* noted merely that an explosion occurred on the ground floor of 9, Cornwall Residences, "and its force shattered the back and front rooms and their contents. A Mr and Mrs Walters, who were in the house at the time, were burnt on the face and hands."<sup>24</sup> The *Marylebone Mercury* provided further details:



Last Sunday evening, about twenty minutes before twelve o'clock, an explosion of gas occurred ... in the front room on the ground floor ... It appears that Mr Walters, smelling an escape of gas, immediately proceeded with a lighted taper [!] to discover from where the escape came, and upon entering the passage on the ground floor, an explosion occurred, followed by fire. ... In the result the two rooms on the ground floor and their contents suffered severely, and the rooms on the upper floors also suffered by the explosion, nearly all the windows being broken.<sup>25</sup>

Gissing's account to Algernon played up the drama, perhaps with a little exaggeration? Where the *Mercury* reported "an engine was soon in attendance," Gissing had "five or six fire engines." There was no prior smell, simply two innocent people who "had come home late, &, on entering their front room with a candle, were blown up."<sup>26</sup> But the assumption that "dynamite was at work" was not so far-fetched, given the Fenian bomb campaign through most of the 1880s, directed at public buildings and the underground railway: following bombs at Paddington, Victoria, Charing Cross, Ludgate Hill and, closest of all in time if not in space, between Gower Street and King's Cross Stations, why not Baker Street?<sup>27</sup> Moreover, a handful of long-standing residents would have remembered the massive explosion in the early hours of 2 October 1874, when a barge laden with gunpowder exploded as it passed under a bridge on the Regent's Canal on the north side of Regent's Park, barely three-quarters of a mile north of Cornwall Residences. Windows were blown out up to a mile from the site of the explosion.<sup>28</sup> Frederick Williamson, who was a schoolboy living in 2 Cornwall Residences, reminisced more than sixty years later:

On looking out, we saw numbers of people running round the bend towards the Marylebone Road. They were expecting that the last set of flats in Alsop Place [i.e. no. 5, later no. 3, which were still under construction in 1874] had collapsed! I remember their appearance in front. It certainly looked as if the mortar had been much spared in the construction.<sup>29</sup>

The implication that the flats were not quite as solid, or as desirable, as first intended, is a constant reprise in their history. Morley Roberts labelled them "respectable but very dismal." Gissing's flat, in particular, "was a place of extraordinary gloom, and its back windows overlooked the roaring steam engines of the Metropolitan Railway."<sup>30</sup> Gissing acknowledged that "the fumes of Baker Street Station must be poisonous,"<sup>31</sup> though it must be emphasised that, as usual, Roberts was guilty of some artistic licence. Gissing's block was separated from the station by both a courtyard and the bulk of no. 13, which really did back on to the railway tracks. James Gaussen remembered the "dimly lit stone staircases" which made him

confuse the building with “Artisans’ Flats,” which they definitely were not. Charles Booth’s researcher, revising the famous poverty map in December 1898, described Cornwall Mansions as “a block of gloomy flats.” Sydney Perks, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century in a guide to managing flats, noted that “the rooms are large and lofty ... but no attempt was made to build a good hall.”<sup>32</sup> And when the Metropolitan Railway planned the expansion of Baker Street Station in 1911, anticipating the demolition of no. 13, the company secretary told his Board that “the flats are quite out of date—none of them having a bath—I do not think it is worth while retaining them.”<sup>33</sup>

By this time, the railway company owned both freehold and leasehold interests in Cornwall Mansions, the former acquired from Lord Portman under the Metropolitan Railway Act of 1902, and the latter, for the sum of £43,000 (also including property fronting on Marylebone Road), from the executors of Nicholas Fabyan Daw in 1905. In 1902 the company had grandiose plans for the redevelopment of Baker Street Station to include six platforms on the north side of the station (in place of the three then existing and by comparison with the four that eventually were built and which still exist today). These plans would have necessitated the demolition of all the buildings lying between the station and Allsop Place. But irrespective of this plan, under the terms of the 1902 Act the company was obliged to improve and widen the entrance to Allsop Place from Marylebone Road, which would require the demolition of nos. 3 and 5 Cornwall Mansions as well as the Buffalo’s Head public house on the south-west corner of Marylebone Road and Allsop Place, just across from Madame Tussaud’s.<sup>34</sup>

Within months of acquiring the Mansions, the railway company was served with Dangerous Structure Notices by the London County Council. Careful readers of Gissing’s diary may recall that he had been reprimanded by John Lane, the manager of Cornwall Residences, for not cleaning his windows, “as the appearance was disreputable.”<sup>35</sup> But now the dangers of window-cleaning were exposed when Arthur Church, a 23 year-old electrical engineer who had taken up window-cleaning because he had been unemployed for so long, fell 55 feet 4 inches to his death when the sill on which he was standing while cleaning the windows of 7L (i.e. the next windows along from Gissing’s) snapped off. Miss Russell, the housekeeper of 7L, said that she told Church not to stand outside the window as it was not safe: there had been a crack in the sill, which had been repaired with cement. George Turner, the estate porter (paid £1-2-6 per week + a three-

room suite rent- and fuel-free) claimed to have no knowledge of the broken sill; but the LCC found that the sills “had been constructed in a dangerous manner.” The company calculated it would cost £35 to cut away the dangerous sills (all 233 of them) but admitted that leaving them rough would give ‘rather an unsightly appearance’. The company surveyor recommended removing and repairing the sills at an additional cost of £42-6-0, but the Board, no doubt hoping that they would be demolishing the whole estate before long, “resolved that no steps be taken in the matter at present.”<sup>36</sup>

Photo 1: Rear View of Nos. 3 and 5 Cornwall Mansions, photographed by Bedford Lemere & Co, 27 March 1915 (City of Westminster Archives Centre)

Meanwhile, they had embarked in buying out the existing tenants’ remaining interests (where they held leases with several years still outstanding), replacing the leases with monthly lets which would make it easy to remove tenants once the go-ahead for redevelopment was given. But

plans for the expansion of the station were postponed, the company started making new lets for periods of six months, a year and even two years, and when revised plans for the layout of tracks in the station were approved in 1910, they did not involve demolishing any of Cornwall Mansions. There was, however, an acute need for more office accommodation for the railway's staff and it was in this context that in April 1911 it was proposed to demolish no. 13 to make way for an elegant Head Office. Within six months another change in plans led to an about-turn in attitudes to no. 13—now it was a valuable source of rental income to the company, bringing in a net revenue of £500 per annum. The new Head Office was relocated so that it partly spanned the railway tracks and the previous decision to demolish was rescinded.

Yet the Metropolitan Railway still hankered after a grand statement to rival the terminal buildings of mainline railway companies. The Metropolitan and District Railways (and especially what now constitutes the Circle Line) had been built as cut-and-cover lines, with frequent ventilation shafts and cuttings rather than tunnels wherever possible to allow smoke and steam to escape. But electrification in 1905 had opened up the possibility of building over the tracks, especially in stations. In 1913 the Metropolitan entered into an agreement with the Strand Hotel Company to erect a 710-bedroom hotel over Baker Street Station. Mindful of their still unfulfilled obligations under the 1902 Act, this plan revived the need to demolish nos. 3 and 5 Cornwall Mansions. The Great War was already several months old when contracts were signed for the erection of the hotel, to be completed in twenty-seven months from March 1915. The contractor (Mr—later Sir—James Carmichael) promptly set to work by demolishing the two southernmost blocks of Cornwall Mansions. When Frederick Williamson wrote his letter of reminiscences to the St Marylebone Borough Council treasurer in 1937, anticipating that the remaining “Residences” would “soon disappear,” he suggested that “perhaps it might be useful to get them photographed.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, that had already happened in 1915 when the pre-eminent London photographers, Bedford Lemere & Co., had first photographed no. 5 and (a unique view) the rear courtyard of nos. 3 and 5, on 27 March 1915, and then returned a fortnight later to photograph the by now partially demolished flats.<sup>38</sup> As luck would have it, none of the photographs extends quite far enough north to include 7K. The illustration of the rear courtyard shows one edge of no. 7 on the left-hand margin, but

the windows reflecting light on the top floor are those of 7L (photo 1) (We can be sure that this was the arrangement because, in 1932, when the meti-

Photo 2: No. 5 Cornwall Mansions, looking towards no. 7, photographed by Bedford Lemere & Co, 27 March 1915 (City of Westminster Archives Centre)

culous accountants of the Metropolitan Railway recorded an expenditure of £3 for repairs in 7L, they attributed the problem to a structural defect caused because the flat now adjoined Chiltern Court, the block that was eventually built on the site of nos. 3 and 5<sup>39</sup>). And in the illustration looking north around the bend of Allsop Place, the entrance to no. 7 is obscured by a horse and cart, and the windows of 7K are blotted out by an overhang on the building on the right-hand margin (photo 2)! Nevertheless, these photographs are a wonderful evocation of the respectable drabness that was Cornwall Mansions.

To return to my chronology, the Great War was not all over within a few months and soon all building work on frivolities such as new hotels was suspended. In October 1917 the surviving Mansions even suffered the indirect effects of an air-raid: a claim on the Metropolitan's insurers yielded a payment of £1 for damage to the Mansions! In the aftermath of war, in very different economic conditions, there was no prospect of reviving the hotel scheme, and the railway company was left with some foundations and little else. Another abortive scheme—for a 5,000-seat cinema—came and went in the early 1920s and it was not until 1926 that a new plan, for Chiltern Court, a block of 180 flats, was unveiled. Among the first tenants in Chiltern Court were H.G. Wells and Arnold Bennett. It is a sobering thought that when Wells moved in to flats 47 and 113 (+ maid's room no. 1) in May 1930, taking a 21-year lease at £900 per annum, to be followed by Bennett a month later, taking flats 26 and 97 (+ maid's room no. 5), also on a 21-year lease (little of which Bennett was to live to enjoy) at £1175 per annum, Gissing's bath-less and maid-less flat around the corner was still letting at no more than £100 per annum.<sup>40</sup>

Having completed their great building enterprise, the Metropolitan Railway returned to the contemplation of Cornwall Mansions:

The flats, which are reputed to be the first erected in London, are old-fashioned and out-of-date and a substantial sum will very shortly be required to be expended in structural and internal repairs. As an alternative to this the Architect has prepared drawings, which will be produced, showing a scheme for the Board's consideration for the modernisation of the Building and the provision of a small type of single-roomed and two-roomed flats for which there is undoubtedly a great demand.<sup>41</sup>

The report noted that the Mansions currently produced a net rental of £2100 per annum but that, after conversion, net rents would amount to £4900. A return of 7 per cent could be anticipated by way of increased net rents on an expenditure of just under £40,000. Cautious as ever, the Board sanctioned the conversion of a single flat (9D) into two small flats, increasing the rent for 9D from £100 to a total of £185 for the two new flats. The Architect re-presented the scheme, now limiting the improvements to nos. 7, 9 and 11, the three blocks facing Allsop Place, leaving the rear block, no. 13, "to be dealt with later," evidently anticipating the ramshackle appropriation of no. 13 as railway offices and workshops, which leaves it today as the only part of Cornwall Mansions still surviving.

## Epilogue

In July 2004, planning permission was granted for the demolition of nos. 7, 9 and 11, and their replacement by a seven-storey residential block, still referred to by the architects, Neale & Norden, as “Cornwall Mansions.” The justification for the scheme is that 27 units of residential accommodation will be replaced by 36 (including 4 family units), and no residents’ parking will be replaced by twelve underground parking spaces, accessed by a car lift, roughly where no. 11 was situated. Given the effective gentrification—replacing relatively poor tenants with owner-occupiers able to afford central London prices—twelve parking spaces strikes me as inadequate unless the new householders all prove to be ultra-green. Nobody paid any attention to the building’s history and, in truth, it would have been hard to justify the continued conservation of a pretty run-down and, in most people’s eyes, nondescript block of Victorian flats.<sup>42</sup>

Photo 3: Cornwall Mansions in process of demolition, 13 February 2008  
(author’s photograph)

The gradual demolition of the flats early in 2008 provided an opportunity to see a cross-section of their interiors though, as ever, 7K proved elusive, as I arrived just too late to photograph the top floor of no. 7! What you can see (Photo 3) are the remains of the ground, first, second and third floors, including Bucalossi's flat.

One of the virtues of Cornwall Mansions was its roof, and the views from Hampstead and Highgate in the north to a hint of the Crystal Palace far to the south on which Gissing elaborated in *New Grub Street*.<sup>43</sup> He was not exaggerating. As the steelwork for Chiltern Court rose ever higher during 1928, the Metropolitan Railway secretary excitedly reported that:

the prospect from the different flats can be seen and the Board will be interested to know that from the fifth floor upwards a good view is obtainable of the Crystal Palace and the whole of London that lies between, from the flats at the back which face north, from the fourth floor and upwards a good view is obtained of Regents Park and the height of Hampstead and Highgate.<sup>44</sup>

What he meant, of course, was that in an era of electric lifts, these high flats could command higher rentals because of the views: a far cry from the solitude and marginality that Gissing alternately loved and hated in 7K.

### Cornwall Mansions, R. I. P.

<sup>1</sup> London Metropolitan Archives (LMA): Middlesex Deeds Registry 1872/23/495-498.

<sup>2</sup> LMA: District Surveyor's Returns, MBW 1626, 1634.

<sup>3</sup> *New Grub Street*, chapters 4 and 10.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this article I have drawn on the annually revised *London Post Office Directories*, 1874-1915. A few volumes are available online at <http://www.historicaldirectories.org/hd/b1.asp>.

<sup>5</sup> For Gissing's visit to the Fennesseys, see P. Coustillas (ed.), *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist* (Hassocks, 1978), pp. 169-70. For Hyde Park Mansions, see *The Builder* XLIX (17 Oct. 1885), p. 532.

<sup>6</sup> On attitudes to flats see J. N. Tarn, "French flats for the English in nineteenth-century London" in A. Sutcliffe (ed.), *Multi-Storey Living* (London, 1974), pp. 19-40; D. J. Olsen, *The Growth of Victorian London* (London, 1979), pp. 114-20. For Gissing's reactions, see R. Dennis, "Buildings, Residences, and Mansions: George Gissing's 'prejudice against flats'" in J. Spiers (ed.), *Gissing and the City* (Basingstoke, 2006), pp. 41-62.

<sup>7</sup> City of Westminster Archive Centre (WAC): St Marylebone Rate Books, Ward 4, 1875-1920.

<sup>8</sup> P. F. Mattheisen, A. C. Young and P. Coustillas (eds.), *The Collected Letters of George Gissing* (Athens OH, 1990-96), Volume 2, pp. 278, 290, 344; *Diary*, p. 232.

<sup>9</sup> Coustillas (*Diary*, p. 28) identifies a Miss Hand whom Gissing visited on 16 May 1888 as "a friend of the Gaussens'." If this is the same Miss Hand as Gissing's neighbour, it



provides one hint of how Gissing, through Mrs Gaussen, came to occupy 7K in the first place.

<sup>10</sup> R. Dennis, "'Babylonian flats' in Victorian and Edwardian London," *London Journal* 33 (3) (2008).

<sup>11</sup> "Flats, in Four Stories" was advertised frequently in *The Times* through the summer of 1881, e.g. 25 July, p. 8; 24 Aug., p. 8; 10 Sep., p. 8; for the Crystal Palace extravaganza, see *The Times*, 30 Sep. 1881, p. 1; *The Nether World*, chapter XII.

<sup>12</sup> *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain*, 2 vols. (London, 1881), pp. 10-12.

<sup>13</sup> M. Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> *The Times*, 12 Sep. 1879, p. 3; 21 Aug. 1882, p. 10; 19 Sep. 1882, p. 14; 11 June 1883, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> *The Times*, 11 June 1884, p. 3; *New Grub Street*, chapter 4; *Collected Letters*, Volume 2, pp. 292, 358; Volume 3, p. 213.

<sup>16</sup> *Cycling*, 24 Nov. 1894, p. 304.

<sup>17</sup> *The Times*, 22 Jan. 1875, p. 15; 22 Sep. 1886, p. 14; 7 July 1885, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> *Collected Letters*, Volume 2, pp. 218, 313-4.

<sup>19</sup> *The Times*, 1 May 1891, p. 1; *The Whirlpool*, Part the Second, Chapter XIV.

<sup>20</sup> *The Era*, 15 Sep. 1883; 5 July 1890; 20-27 Sep. 1890; 6 June-8 Aug. 1891; 24 Oct.-12 Dec. 1891; 7 May-6 Aug. 1892; 29 Apr.-27 May 1899.

<sup>21</sup> *The Times*, 20 Dec. 1877, p. 1; 9 May 1878, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Liverpool Mercury*, 30 Oct. 1876; *Western Mail*, 21 Nov. 1894; *The Times*, 30 Nov. 1894, p. 2; *Diary*, p. 314; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 18 July 1897.

<sup>23</sup> *The Times*, 8 June 1874, p. 13; also in *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 7 June 1874; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 8 June 1874; *The Belfast News Letter*, 10 June 1874.

<sup>24</sup> *The Times*, 24 Feb. 1885, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> *Marylebone Mercury*, 28 Feb. 1885.

<sup>26</sup> *Collected Letters*, Volume 2, p. 294.

<sup>27</sup> J. White, *London in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 2007), pp. 137-8; S. Inwood, *City of Cities: The Birth of Modern London* (London, 2005), pp. 391-2. On 2 Jan. 1885 there had been an explosion on the Metropolitan Railway in the tunnel between Gower Street (now Euston Square) and King's Cross: *The Times*, 3 Jan. 1885, p. 5; 5 Jan. 1885, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> *The Times*, 3 Oct. 1874, p. 9; 5 Oct. 1874, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> WAC: D Misc 53, Letter from Frederick Williamson to St Marylebone Borough Council Treasurer's Department, 9 June 1937.

<sup>30</sup> Morley Roberts, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* (London, 1958; orig. 1912), pp. 44, 60.

<sup>31</sup> *Collected Letters*, Volume 3, p. 189.

<sup>32</sup> A. Curtis, "Gissing and the Gaussens: Some Unpublished Documents," *Gissing Newsletter*, Oct. 1976), p. 4; Charles Booth Police Notebooks, B358, pp. 98-99 (online at <http://booth.lse.ac.uk/notebooks/b358/jpg/99.html>); S. Perks, *Residential Flats of All Classes* (London, 1905), p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> LMA: Acc 1297/MET 1/26: Minutes, 27 Apr 1911.

<sup>34</sup> This and the following paragraphs are based on the Metropolitan Railway Board Minutes; Minutes of the Parliamentary & Law & Lands Committee; Reports by the General

Manager to the Board; and Appendices to Board Minutes, variously covering the period, 1902-1933, all classified in the LMA under Acc 1297/ MET 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Diary*, p. 21; see also *Collected Letters*, Volume 3, p. 180.

<sup>36</sup> *Marylebone Mercury*, 24 Feb. 1906, p. 5; LMA: Acc 1297/MET 1/24, Minutes, 22 Mar. 1906.

<sup>37</sup> WAC: D Misc 53.

<sup>38</sup> WAC: T 138 Allsop Place 5-7, photographs dated 27 Mar. and 13 Apr. 1915.

<sup>39</sup> LMA: Acc 1297/MET 1/45, Appendix No. 14, 22 Sep. 1932.

<sup>40</sup> LMA: Acc 1297/MET 1/43, Appendix No. 12, 22 May 1930, 26 June 1930.

<sup>41</sup> LMA: Acc 1297/MET 1/45, Appendix No. 14, 23 June 1932.

<sup>42</sup> City of Westminster Planning Applications, Ref: 04/02732/FULL; for the architects' impression of the new "Cornwall Mansions" see

[http://www.nealeandnorden.co.uk/sheet\\_1.htm](http://www.nealeandnorden.co.uk/sheet_1.htm) .

<sup>43</sup> *New Grub Street*, chapter 4; see also A. C. Gissing, "London Homes and Haunts of George Gissing," *Gissing Journal* Apr. 1994), pp. 9-12.

<sup>44</sup> LMA: Acc 1297/MET 1/41, Appendix No. 10, 27 Sep. 1928.

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## St Ruth: George Gissing's Drill-Sergeant in War and Peace

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George Gissing belongs to a notable group of writers such as Rainer-Maria Rilke,<sup>1</sup> Hermann Hesse<sup>2</sup> and Robert Musil,<sup>3</sup> who have voiced their hatred of disciplinarians or military-style exercise in their writings. Admittedly he neither suffered the physical humiliation, nor the trauma, which his continental counterparts endured as boy cadets (Musil and Rilke) and monastic schoolboy (Hesse). Neither did he undergo military service like his friend, Eduard Bertz, who recalling his experience once told him that "had it lasted but a month or two longer, he must have sought release in suicide."<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the memory of his torment during the so-called voluntary drill at Lindow Grove School from January 1871 to September 1872, when he was in his early teens, oppressed Gissing for the rest of his life.<sup>5</sup> The famous passage from *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, which Gissing wrote in 1900, in the guise of his eponymous alter ego, relates as follows his dread of that Thursday afternoon ritual:

At school we used to be "drilled" in the playground once a week; I have but to think of it, even after forty years, and there comes back upon me that tremor of passionate misery which, at the time, often made me ill. The senseless routine of

mechanic exercise was in itself all but unendurable to me; I hated the standing in line, the thrusting-out of arms and legs at a signal, the thud of feet stamping in constrained unison. The loss of individuality seemed to me sheer disgrace. And when, as often happened, the drill-sergeant rebuked me for some inefficiency as I stood in line, when he addressed me as “Number Seven!” I burned with shame and rage. I was no longer a human being; I had become part of a machine, and my name was “Number Seven.” It used to astonish me when I had a neighbour who went through the drill with amusement, with zealous energy; I would gaze at the boy, and ask myself how it was possible that he and I should feel so differently. To be sure, nearly all my schoolfellows either enjoyed the thing, or at all events went through it with indifference; they made friends with the sergeant, and some were proud of walking with him “out of bounds.” Left, right! Left, right! For my own part, I think I have never hated man as I hated that broad-shouldered, hard-visaged, brassy-voiced fellow. Every word he spoke to me, I felt as an insult. Seeing him in the distance, I have turned and fled, to escape the necessity of saluting, and, still more, a quiver of the nerves which affected me so painfully. If ever a man did me harm, it was he; harm physical and moral. In all seriousness I believe that something of the nervous instability from which I have suffered since boyhood is traceable to those accursed hours of drill, and I am very sure that I can date from the same wretched moments a fierceness of personal pride which has been one of my most troublesome characteristics. The disposition, of course, was there; it should have been modified, not exacerbated.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, the description here is of St Ruth, Gissing’s drill-sergeant at Alderley Edge. In an earlier reminiscence, solicited by James Wood, his former headmaster, for the Lindow Grove school magazine (the *Dinglewood Magazine*) in 1897, Gissing is constrainedly tactful in recalling “creeping out of sight when there was risk of my being (very properly) sent away into the open air, and bidden exercise my muscles.”<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, a diary he kept for eight consecutive days in 1870 tells us that he was also drilled at Back Lane School, for on 17 September, he writes that a “Sergeant came and we had a drill in the midst of drizzling rain.”<sup>8</sup> Though a reproach is implied, he never again referred to the incident in his mature writings.

*The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* apart, Gissing’s fiction provides just two fleeting, though derogatory allusions to a “drill-sergeant,” in “The Pessimist of Plato Road”<sup>9</sup> and “A Profitable Weakness.”<sup>10</sup> While he never based a character on St Ruth in his novels, surely he had him in mind when composing the following description of John Yule in *New Grub Street*:

At fifty-four John Yule retired from active business; he came back to the scenes of his early life, and began to take an important part in the municipal affairs of Wattleborough. He was then a remarkably robust man, fond of out-of-door exercise;

he made it one of his chief efforts to encourage the local Volunteer movement, the cricket and football clubs, public sports of every kind, showing no sympathy whatever with those persons who wished to establish free libraries, lectures, and the like. At his own expense he built for the Volunteers a handsome drill-shed; he founded a public gymnasium; and finally he allowed it to be rumoured that he was going to present the town with a park. But by presuming too far upon the bodily vigour which prompted these activities, he passed of a sudden into the state of a confirmed invalid. On an autumn expedition in the Hebrides, he slept one night under the open sky, with the result that he had an all but fatal attack of rheumatic fever. After that, though the direction of his interests was unchanged, he could no longer set the example to Wattleborough youth of muscular manliness.<sup>11</sup>

At every turn Gissing's critique of Yule's philistinism and "muscular manliness" cocks a vengeful snook at his former drill-master (whose activities, as we shall see, he may have known more about than we imagine). Elsewhere, though several of his fictional works possess autobiographical elements, he avoided recreating the scenes of his youth at Alderley Edge. Obviously he neither wished to offend James Wood, nor to cast a cloud over what in all other respects was a happy and significant phase of his boyhood. Further anti-imperialistic passages appear in *Isabel Clarendon*, in *The Whirlpool*, and particularly in *The Crown of Life*, but discussion of these lies beyond the scope of this essay.

Many boys experience bullying in their youths, and usually with the passing of time their ordeal recedes from memory like a bad dream. This was not so with Gissing. From the day he met him to the day, almost thirty years later, when he unburdened himself of his hatred of military exercise in his writings, he nurtured an excessive loathing for St Ruth. What was it about the man that could inspire such powerful feelings of animosity over so long a period of time? After all, according to Gissing's own words, the drill-sergeant was a much respected, if not popular figure in and around the school. Evidently, as Pierre Coustillas reminds us in *George Gissing at Alderley Edge*, Gissing "had arrived at Lindow Grove at one of the worst possible moments—that of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870—when England was the prey of her periodic frights of her continental neighbours."<sup>12</sup> With coverage of this war in the newspapers, it is understandable that many of Gissing's schoolfellows, doubtless not a few avid readers of boys' own stories, would have sought and enjoyed the company of an authentic war hero. Certainly, after reading *An Author at Grass*, the serialised forerunner of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, an anonymous soldier and Lin-

dow Grove old boy thought highly enough of St Ruth to pen the following barbed defence of him for the *Dinglewood Magazine*:

My dear Mr. Editor, the only excuse I have for adding a few words to the above fiercely realistic description [the anonymous writer had transcribed the extract from Spring XIX after the introductory paragraph to his letter to “Dear Sir”] is that my loathing for the weekly drill was no less strong than that of George Gissing. I remember how I used to think that the rolling-stone of Sisyphus or the wheel of Ixion would have been but an agreeable pastime in comparison with the torture of the Thursday drill.

Still I would fain raise my voice in defence of the “hard-visaged, brassy-voiced” St-Ruth, against the violent strictures of our famous school-fellow. But alas! I am reminded at every step that “the pen is mightier than the sword.” Who that is but an inferior officer in the British Army would venture to enter the lists against George Gissing? My courage fails me as it never failed me on the kopjes or in the trenches of South Africa. So I shoot my bolt and run. However terrible St-Ruth was to us as school-boys I have often thought since I left school that of all the sergeants I have seen – and they have been in some variety – I have never once come across one whom I could regard as a “gentleman,” as, in the light of my subsequent experience, I consider Mr. St-Ruth to have been a gentleman. I do not remember him to have ever used an oath, and I do not remember him to have ever “clatted.” And to say that he received constantly the greatest provocation is only to say that we were boys.

Perhaps in the matter of rigid discipline he may have deteriorated in his latter years – for I was but a nipper in the Lower School what time George Gissing headed the sixth form, and I remember him but as a name, whilst to him my own name would probably convey no association whatever. We used to read in Caesar that the best warriors were those who *a cultu atque humanitate Provinciae largissime [longissime] absunt* so that perhaps propinquity to the culture and refinement of Lindow Grove School tended to the effeminating of Mr St-Ruth’s mind.<sup>13</sup>

As this counterblast from Aldershot, that most military of towns, exemplifies and Gissing himself points out, some boys will submit to physical exercise “with indifference,”<sup>14</sup> whereas others positively revel in the rigorous flexing of arms and legs. Gissing belonged to neither camp. Nor, in his defence, did he hate St Ruth as a person, but as a type of the military machinery that he represented and embodied in the severity of his “fear-some eye,”<sup>15</sup> his intimidating bulk, and his haranguing voice. What the highly sensitive Gissing truly detested was enforced military-style exercise combined with loss of individuality. Drilling was in fact a weekly convention at most schools from mid-Victorian times to the end of the Second World War. Nevertheless, for succeeding generations of Gissing admirers, his damning description of St Ruth has become like an image carved in stone. So much is this true that Pierre Coustillas felt justified, and who

could blame him, in calling St Ruth “a wolf in sheep’s clothing”<sup>16</sup> and comparing him to another old boy, the jingoistic Lieutenant Hatherley Jones. After all, what does Gissing’s description conjure up, if not the image of a brutish, bullying, bald, bullet-headed figure with “no more brains than a rabbit.”<sup>17</sup>

Yet, knowing nothing about this utterly forgotten man, except his last name, and Gissing’s description, is it fair to leave it at that and so regard him for all time as the paragon of mindless discipline? Might it not be useful to find out who St Ruth was? And further discover what heroic deeds this so-called “old hero of Crimea,”<sup>18</sup> as the old boy called him, actually performed in the Crimean War? Intent upon answering these questions, I recently set about investigating St Ruth’s life. As a result I have gathered sufficient material to present an overview of his military career and his peacetime activities. What follows, therefore, whilst correcting several factual errors, will provide a richer, more informed context to the passage in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*.

The man Gissing knew as his drill-sergeant was born as Walter Howard St Ruth in Tipperary, Ireland, in 1830. His father, Walter Sr, was a crofter and (according to his great-great-grandson) descended from General Charles Chalmont, the Marquis of St Ruth, whose death whilst commanding the Irish against Williamite forces at the Battle of Aughrim in 1691 led to defeat being snatched from the jaws of victory. Walter’s childhood years were spent on his parents’ farm. Later he acquired employment as a servant. After five or six years of such work, he enlisted in the British army at Cork. What decided him to do this? Was he running away from trouble of some kind? Official records reveal that he joined up for long service, which then meant a minimum of twenty-one years, as a foot soldier on 9 February 1849 (service number 3100) with the 53<sup>rd</sup> Shropshire Regiment (Infantry), then based at Chatham in Kent.<sup>19</sup>

One wonders whether St Ruth knew what he was letting himself in for, because in those days the common soldier led a miserable existence. According to contemporary statistics sixty per cent of the lower army ranks were comprised of illiterate, dispossessed Irishmen and destitute youths from the rookeries of industrial towns or deprived rural areas, who were as dirty, debauched, dishonest, and rough and ready as they came. Many of St Ruth’s comrades would have been dragooned into military service. Many officers, moreover, treated their inferiors with outrageous harshness, while

the strictest discipline was the order of the day. The following excerpt from a history of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Cheshire Regiment (which he would eventually join) gives an idea of the conditions under which St Ruth served:

Life in the ranks in 1849 was pretty hard going ... Flogging was still allowed, but was on its way out ... Tea, coffee and cocoa were practically unknown to the troops. Breakfast and supper consisted of half a pound of bread and half a pint of beer. The meat ration was usually boiled beef, soup and potatoes cooked in their jackets. Occasionally the meat was sent to a bakehouse to give a much needed change. The soldier's pay was a shilling a day from which deductions for groceries, hair cutting, washing and barrack room damages left him five pence at most. Good conduct pay was introduced in 1860 at varying rates ...

Barracks were generally so insanitary that the average death rate in barracks was nearly three times that of the civilian population. They were bare and comfortless and washing arrangements were primitive. Rooms were lit by candles, and sparsely. It sounds a hard life, but it was in some small degree mitigated by the military tidiness and cleanliness which prevailed.

Soldiers' wives no longer lived in the barrack rooms with the men. Instead, whole barrack rooms were allotted to married families. The beds were separated by blankets hung from above. The women all cooked on the fireplace in the room. Washing and sanitary arrangements were the same as those used by the men. Drying clothes hung down the central passage between the beds and there might well be a dozen or more children chasing about the room ... The introduction of short service had the effect of changing the type of man in the ranks. In place of the older man who would wish and expect to be married, we had a majority of young men who could well wait to the end of their seven years Colour service before settling down ... When regiments moved by road families could be carried without much bother. Room could always be found on a wagon for a woman and child and a few "sticks" ... Voyages were made in wooden sailing ships long after the steamship was in use, which were generally dirty and in any case were manned with polyglot crews, the sweepings of the ports and who were generally disease carriers. The food on board was salt pork, biscuits and lime juice.

The fact is the People and Parliament had no use for the soldier in peace time.<sup>20</sup>

Bad as barrack-room conditions were during Walter's army service, there was much worse to contend with in battle. In those far-off days when military strategists were a scarcity, the infantryman or so-called foot soldier was at the mercy of aristocratic commanders who in some instances regarded an engagement with the enemy like a cricket match and their soldiers as cannon fodder to be sacrificed at will and often for little or no gain. Arrogant, incompetent, and hapless officers were ubiquitous in an age when a battle could be lost because two feuding aristocrats transferred their enmities to the battlefield, as happened with the charge of the light brigade at Balaclava. Lastly, it is noteworthy that General Sir John Lysaght Penne-

father, the commander-in-chief of the Cheshire Regiment during St Ruth's last two years of service, professed to have no strategy at all when going into battle, except to charge straight at the enemy lines, and hope for the best!

Walter joined his regiment on 28 February 1849 at Fort Clarence in Chatham. In October he was sent to Newcastle-under-Lyme, where he remained until embarking for India in July of the following year. He arrived in Karachi (now Pakistan) on 10 October 1850. In mid-February 1851 his regiment set out on a 699 mile march to Rawalpindi (now Pakistan) on the Northwest Frontier of India—railway lines were then few and far between. Averaging 10 to 12 miles a day with full packs on their backs in blistering heat, St Ruth's battalion reached the garrison on 21 April at the beginning of the monsoon season. On 1 November he transferred to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Cheshire Foot Regiment then under General Sir Charles Napier's supreme leadership and mainly composed of Irishmen from Tipperary known as the "Fighting Tipperaries."

If, upon arrival at Rawalpindi, Private St Ruth had imagined he would soon be in the thick of battle, he was greatly mistaken. For over two years he took part in everyday garrison duties. It was not until late 1853 that he had his first significant encounter with the enemy. This came about when Colonel Mackeson, the British High Commissioner in Peshawar, was assassinated by a religious fanatic on 10 September. This savage act incited a wave of revolt among the Jowaki Afridis tribes in the hills of the Northwest Frontier of India. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Cheshire Regiment immediately received orders to march to Peshawar and bring about an end to the uprising. The regiment left Rawalpindi on 22 September under Colonel Sam Boileau's command and arrived on 7 October in Peshawar, where they encamped. Towards the end of November an expeditionary force of 438 men with St Ruth among its numbers was sent to Bizidkhal (now Behzadkhal in Afghanistan) before engaging with the Afridis. Bernard Rigby gives an account of the battle that followed:

Just before dawn on the 29<sup>th</sup> Nov. they left camp and entered the hills, after some four miles, by a narrow and difficult defile.

[The 1<sup>st</sup> battalion of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Cheshire regiment] had by 10 a.m. established itself, without opposition, on the summits of the hills commanding the Bori Valley ... Numerous villages are scattered through a long line of valley, each village having defensive towers, built of brick, towering above the houses ... As the force pushed onwards it became apparent that the towers were manned with matchlock men



[Indians carrying muskets] ... On the first shot being fired by a nine-pounder, the matchlock men abandoned the towers and the village against which the shot had been directed, and like monkeys, flew to the hill at the back; so that on the approach of the infantry, they could defend their village in masterly style, by pouring down a heavy fire on their assailants ... the 22<sup>nd</sup> had orders to proceed to the extreme end of the valley, out of range of enemy fire from the villages as he passed along, and endeavour to burn certain villages ... the enemy were too warmly engaged ... but were hourly increasing in number. The men of the regiment, having completed the task of burning the villages allotted to them, lay down and waited for further orders. When these orders arrived ... the regiment fell in in what is described as quarter-column, near the end of a burning village. Two companies had hardly got into position when a heavy fire was opened upon them from the village ... the village was then rushed at the point of the bayonet.

It was late in the evening when the 22<sup>nd</sup> rejoined the main body of the force. The men had had no food or water all day, and a retreat ... was imperative ... though the men were so tired they could hardly crawl. The enemy, numbering some thousands, followed the retreating column, keeping up a constant fire, but as the group got clear of the villages the fire and pursuit slackened, and the base camp was reached just before dawn.<sup>21</sup>

Over the next ten months St Ruth took part in further skirmishes against Mohmand rebel hill chiefs, the last resulting in the destruction of two villages, Sab and Sadin. This campaign brought the “troubles” to an end. However, the regiment’s heroic actions were completely overlooked by the military at home. As Rigby explains, “it was not until 1869 that the Indian Medal with a clasp for the Northwest Frontier was granted to all survivors of the soldiers engaged in these operations.”<sup>22</sup> Thus St Ruth was no “hero of Crimea,” but of India.

The 22<sup>nd</sup> Cheshire Regiment journeyed by stages to Peshawar and to Jhelum before Christmas 1854, and, after a stopover at Multan, arrived at Karachi on 9 February 1855. Finally, on the 23 March, St Ruth’s battalion embarked for England on the transport *Vernon*. On the four-month voyage home twelve men died of fever. The ship arrived off Gravesend on 27 July. The same day, on the new C/O, Colonel William Wellesley’s recommendation, St Ruth was promoted to corporal. The next day the regiment took train to Bristol, for many the first ever railway journey. Next, following a brief tour of Plymouth, the unit was deployed at Windsor on ceremonial duties. In November 1855, St Ruth experienced the highlight of his military career, when his regiment paraded before Queen Victoria to celebrate the Prince of Wales’ Natal Day. At year’s end one supposes that

he looked with pride upon his six years of service, his courage under fire, and his recent promotion.

Actually he spent Christmas and New Year in a hospital bed. And upon leaving hospital, now newly stationed at Portsmouth, St Ruth fell into disgrace with the army. On 15 January 1856 he suddenly went absent without leave. Conceivably he had become disillusioned with army life, and no longer desired to see out the remaining fourteen years of his service. Since obtaining an early discharge was almost impossible then (most NCOs like St Ruth had insufficient capital to purchase an honourable discharge), desertion would have seemed the only way out. The military authorities took a week to track him down, and he was made to pay a heavy price for decamping. On 22 January he was placed under arrest, deprived of all pay, and spent the next month awaiting trial in the guardroom. He was subsequently sentenced to six weeks' imprisonment and stripped of his rank. The dishonoured St Ruth entered the military prison at Gosport on 19 February and remained there until 31 March. After his release, he was detained in the guardroom until 9 April, before being permitted to rejoin his battalion in the barrack room.

Over the next eighteen months he buckled down to army life again. He was next based at Chichester, where he spent another week in hospital, then at the army depot at Aldershot. Such was his rehabilitation in the eyes of his military seniors that he regained the rank of corporal on 17 July 1857. Early in 1858 St Ruth made further progress on deployment with his unit in Sheffield, Aberdare, and Cardiff to halt the civil unrest caused by fear of unemployment. On 20 March, owing to exemplary conduct in carrying out an unpopular duty, St Ruth was raised to the rank of sergeant. However, his was an up and down career and disaster followed hard upon this latest boon. Just six weeks later, he once again fell into ignominy. On 10 May—official records give no reason—he was placed under arrest at the Manchester barracks, where he was then based. Clearly, he had committed a serious offence. Gissing gives us a clue as to what this might have been in some notes he recorded under the rubric “the Army” in his invaluable *Scrapbook*, where he writes:

“Pay-days (1<sup>st</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 22<sup>nd</sup> of month) always riotous time ... Men charged with breaking out of barracks, drunkenness, or selling kit (common thing when money runs short), etc. Drunkenness always punished with fines from 2/6 to 10/-. Non-commiss<sup>d</sup> officer reduced to ranks.”<sup>23</sup>

Either St Ruth had made a second attempt to desert or got drunk whilst on duty, because he was subsequently demoted two ranks and had his pay stopped. Upon release from the guardroom or prison (the muster does not specify which), he was allowed to rejoin his unit at Salford Barracks in Oldfield Road.

Six months later, on 15 December 1858, Walter married Margaret Knowles, the daughter of a publican ten years his junior, at the Catholic Irish Church in Manchester. Early in 1859 married life was interrupted by an expedition to Coventry to restore order after disturbances at local collieries. On 4 August the battalion with wives and children in tow voyaged to Dublin from Manchester on the troopship *Himalaya*. In 1860, a daughter, Bertha, was born there. Then, in recognition of good service, St Ruth regained his corporal stripes. Soon after, once General Pennefather resumed command, the regiment received orders to ship for Malta. In June 1860, after seventeen days at sea on the *Magaera*, St Ruth and his confrères arrived at the Isola Gate Barracks in Floriana. Within two days the garrison commander, Major General Horne, harshly submitted the regiment to full inspection. Over the next year, St Ruth's battalion underwent ceremonial inspections in front of among others the Prince of Wales, the Crown Prince of Prussia, and the Empress of Austria.

In February 1861 Corporal St Ruth sought an early discharge from the army (probably because of some physical disability, the regiment's archivist believes). A month later, he returned to England to a transitional post at the Parkhurst depot on the Isle of Wight while awaiting the outcome of his application. At the time his wife and daughter were living in her parents' home at Stockport. On 8 June 1861 St Ruth finally received his official discharge from the army after twelve and a half years active service. His military career was not at an end, though; for over the next two decades he carried out reservist duties with the Cheshire 5<sup>th</sup> Volunteer Battalion at Chester.

During the 1860s, when England was constantly alert to the threat of Prussian militarism, it would have been easy for an ex-army sergeant to gain employment. As it happens, St Ruth found himself a niche in the school system as a physical education instructor in various schools in the Greater Manchester area. Around this time he became interested in the modern theory of physical exercise expounded by Archibald Maclaren,<sup>24</sup> a professor of gymnastics at Oxford University, who disseminated the idea

that physical activity was an antidote to stress and fatigue. He may have first heard of him in 1861, when the government commissioned Maclaren to introduce a new system of physical training to the army. In course of time St Ruth developed into a committed and enthusiastic exponent of Maclaren's theory. Drilling represented just a small part of this gymnastic programme. Additionally, St Ruth used climbing ropes, dumb-bells, vaulting horses, horizontal bars, and climbing walls in his gym lessons. Gissing will also have been subjected to these other forms of exercise, as a contemporary pamphlet reveals that the school facilities at Lindow Grove School included a gymnasium.

Throughout the 1860s and into the 1890s, as numerous advertisements in the classified columns of the Lancashire and Cheshire press reveal, St Ruth offered his services to the Greater Manchester (and later the Wirral) community as a teacher of gymnastics and callisthenics, and, whether qualified or not, treated spinal and chest deformities at his surgery in Barton Road, Stockport, and was employed as the English agent for the Bordeaux wine company, L. Rastier & Co. During the 1870s he also ran his own wine and spirits shop at 51 Barton Arcade, Deansgate, which opened in 1871 only a mile from Owens College.

If he appears to have been a driven and resourceful man, it is no wonder, as he had a large family to support. In 1862 his wife gave birth to their first son, Walter Jr at Stalybridge, where they had set up house. Two more boys followed, Leith in 1865 and William in 1866. Significantly both were born in Wilmslow, which enables us to establish 1865 as the year in which St Ruth probably entered employment as drill-master at the newly opened Lindow Grove School in Alderley Edge (now the site of *The Merlin Pub Hotel*). In 1868 another daughter, Mary, was born, but she died three years later. Further additions to the family arrived as follows: Frank in 1872, Howard in 1874 (he died within the year), and Margaret in 1875.

On 4 October 1869 St Ruth returned to the parade ground of the Cheshire Regiment at Chester to receive his India General Service Medal for his part in the 1853 expedition against the Boree Afridis. 1871, the year Gissing experienced his first taste of the Thursday drill, finds the family dwelling in Lindow Cottage at Wilmslow. One suspects that St Ruth was employed by James Wood until about 1880—the following year he was living at 28 New York Street in Chorlton upon Medlock. Towards the end of 1880, as two notices in the *London Gazette*<sup>25</sup> disclose, he underwent

bankruptcy proceedings. Several meetings with his creditors took place either side of Christmas at the Falstaff Hotel in Manchester. A year later, on 18 November 1881, he was dealt a further blow, when his wife died of cirrhosis of the liver at the age of forty-two. As the daughter of a publican and wife of a wine seller, it is scarcely surprising that her death was due to excessive alcohol consumption and poor quality of life. Doubtless St Ruth was also fond of a tippie.

After 1882 St Ruth seems to have withdrawn from business life (in earlier Manchester directories he appears under wine and spirit seller and professor of gymnastics). Going bankrupt and becoming a widower must have inevitably knocked his confidence. Left with three children still of school age, he would have had little taste for further risky ventures. Nevertheless he still ran his own gymnasium in Oxford Road and performed as a gymnast at exhibition halls. Meanwhile he depended heavily upon the help of his eldest daughter, Bertha, who was just then launching herself upon a career as a singer and actress. Though still living at home, Leith was employed as a mechanical engineer and William as a clerk. In 1884 the family moved *en masse* to Liverpool. By 1891 both Leith and William had married, the former sharing his home at 27 Aspen Grove in Toxteth Park, with his sisters, Bertha and Margaret. St Ruth was boarding nearby at 71 Northbrook Street. He must have still had a fine physique because he continued to perform exhibition gymnastics into his sixties. At the turn of the century he was lodging at a temperance hotel in the same area, possibly in an attempt to cure himself of alcoholism.

Undoubtedly the last two decades had taken their toll on St Ruth, and with no pension to fall back on, the approach of old age will have brought with it much anxiety about the future. In his waning years he depended on his children's support to avoid the indignity of entering the local workhouse. After 1900 the family established itself on the other side of the River Mersey in the Tranmere area of Birkenhead. St Ruth died of senile decay on 14 March 1912 aged 81 at 7 Ethel Road, Poulton-cum-Seacombe (a town since absorbed by Wallasey) with Leith at his side. He left no will. On 16 March he received a 4<sup>th</sup> class (pauper's) burial on unmarked ground in the Roman Catholic section of Wallasey Rake Lane Cemetery. Today this plot of ground is covered by coarse grass and there is only one distinguishable gravestone, not his however. Proud as he would have been, St Ruth was fortunate not to have lived long enough to see three of his grandsons

go off to fight in the First World War. Two came back with the Victory Medal, one an invalid, and the third didn't return at all. After the war some members of the family emigrated to Australia. St Ruth's descendants can be found there today, though remnants of the family still live in Birkenhead.

In the retelling of obscure lives, one wishes that the individual could speak to one in his own words. Would it not be fascinating to know what St Ruth thought of Gissing or what his views were on physical education? Would he have recognised himself as the drill-sergeant Gissing immortalised in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*? Sadly, the letters and private papers of lesser mortals rarely survive or are lost through ignorance, and such people scarcely ever wrote for the press. Most unexpectedly, therefore, St Ruth is an exception in this respect. For, on two occasions, he saw fit to write to the *Manchester Guardian*, to air his views on, of all matters, physical education. The first letter to the editor on "Physical Education in Government or Rate Aided Schools," which I cite in full, appeared on 29 June 1871 (just months after Gissing first met St Ruth) and a year after the Elementary Education Act enabled all children to be schooled from age five to thirteen:

Sir,—According to the returns of the Recruiting Department in the United Kingdom for 1869 there were 17,749 young men enlisted for the army; but 375 in every 1,000, or more than one third, were rejected by the doctors as physically unfit for the service. Among the causes of rejection a marked increase was observed in the proportion of muscular tenuity, or deficient muscular development, weak chests, and general debility, which, taken collectively, are said to hold the second place in point of frequency as causes of rejection. Artisans, shopmen, and clerks show the highest ratio of rejections from these causes, while labourers, husbandmen, and servants are comparatively free. There are many agencies at work in producing this result. The infant in the country is generally well nursed, which constitutes the first part of its physical training and frequently decides its future health. Once able to walk it gambols in life-giving oxygen; then comes a little school; after which a life of healthy labour secures a fair muscular development; and the man, though not very flexible and rather heavy in his movements, according to his employment, is the finest specimen of the peasant in the world, in whom Nature in her own old-fashioned way has been allowed to work her will. For the sake of suffering humanity it is to be regretted that the usages of town life give an entirely different result, which is obviously the fault of our imperfect physical education. We are to a very great extent responsible for the physique and vitality of the generation which is to succeed us; but are we not criminally slow in realising our responsibility and like good patriots doing our duty for duty's sake? Motion is the great law of the universe, is the first instinct of animal life, and when it ceases life ceases. When the life forces run low the natural and most effectual method of invigorating those forces is found in motion, but

the popular education of children is a lamentable violation of this law. The young child indulges in uncontrollable activity, but the school system tries to crush this instinct. The teacher who keeps pupils sitting several hours a day studying all the time is not working by the same light as the one who makes them run up and down stairs after every lesson, and in the meantime renews the atmosphere in the room by opening doors and windows. Every child during its school life should have systematised exercise, if not in the open air, in a room so ventilated that oxygen is found in abundance, the governing principle being pure air and velocity rather than weight in the exercises employed, the object being the highest possible standard of vitality attainable by strengthening the heart and lungs and enlarging the cavity of the chest. The efforts made to this end will remove the old worn-out material from the system and facilitate its replacement with the new, and the body will be strong according to the newness of the atoms of which it is composed. They will facilitate growth, lubricate the joints, and make the child supple, giving it grace, ease, poise, accuracy and rapidity of muscular action, and a general diffusion of muscular vigour. Supply this all-important want of the children of the working-classes during their school-going life and a great national benefit will be secured; fewer rejections for debility will be heard of in the Recruiting Department; healthy faces and vigorous frames will be the rule in our manufacturing towns—now they are the exception. That all this is easy of attainment there is no doubt in my mind. The officers and non-commissioned officers who give instruction in gymnastics to our soldiers, that the latter may be made vigorous and equal to the demands of their arduous profession, have been taught in the first instance by Mr. Maclaren, of Oxford, and carry out his splendid arrangement of exercises for the army. Why cannot this principle be applied to our school system? Under the new Education Act it would be an easy matter. The “code” now in force allows two hours weekly of “drilling;” but I find that “crammers” cannot afford the time, and when brought to argue the point tell you “the little urchins are already as active as squirrels.” Yes, in the activity of the street, but veritable infants in the gymnasium. A short time would suffice to train a large number of pupil teachers and get many of the schools in full play. For economy’s sake they might meet for instruction in one of their own schoolrooms once or twice a week. The expense would not be more than a guinea each learner, a sum that all school managers would do well to spend on the children. The school boards would, I presume, defray the expense incurred by the schools under their control. — I am, &c.

W.H. St. Ruth.

Lindow Cottage, Wilmslow, June 23, 1871.<sup>26</sup>

On 12 January 1874 another letter by St Ruth appeared in the *Manchester Guardian* on the front page, this time on “The Higher Education of Girls in Manchester”:

Sir,—If the present movement in favour of the higher education of girls results in any benefit to the rising generation of women, those committed to the scheme may be considered as deserving well of their country, and all persons interested will have much reason to be thankful. But it should not be forgotten that good teaching

power is not the only condition of success in our schools. We are too much in the habit of concentrating and bringing to bear all our energy on the minds of children to the total neglect of their bodies, thus beginning their education at the wrong end, and ignoring the fact that the body is prior in the order of development. A high state of health in the pupil is quite as necessary as a high order of talent in the teacher. "Mens sana in corpore sano" is an oft-quoted but much-neglected aphorism, especially in the case of girls. Boys thrust conventionalism aside, and learn to become what Englishmen ought to be; while their sisters study propriety at the apron-strings of parents or teachers, and become bundles of shattered nerves, aches, and pains, a trouble to themselves, and too often a burden to those interested in them. In a word, our girls are physically useless, and but ill calculated to fulfil efficiently the noble duties of woman. So accustomed are we to see and admit their helplessness that it passes unchallenged. Were our boys treated in the same way it would be waste of time to guess at the result. An education which does not cultivate physical as well as mental and moral strength must be a failure.

To hope for a reformation in our time such as would make woman all she ought to be is, I am aware, out of the question. But much may be done for the rising and future generations of Englishwomen by imparting proper instruction in physiology in its relation to the laws of health, and treating girls at school in such a way as will prevent them being the victims of the ignorance and culpable indifference which now surround them. An extensive experience among schoolgirls justifies me in making the above remarks, and I am sure their truth will be accepted by the majority of experienced teachers, to whose minds the remedy will be self-suggestive. The teaching power in the middle-class schools of Manchester may or may not be defective, but Professor Wilkinson and others may saddle them with more than they are really responsible for. When may we expect to hear of a school established for the express purpose of educating the body and mind in harmony with each other, to secure the highest efficiency and well-being of mankind, physical and moral? The experiment is worthy the attention of a committee of ladies and gentlemen pledged to promote the higher education of women. – I am, &c.

W.H. St. Ruth.

Manchester, January 8, 1874<sup>27</sup>

From these letters it is impossible to square St Ruth with Gissing's description of him. They are well written, well formulated, and eloquent at times, which is saying something coming as they do from an unschooled man, of lowly origin, and lowly rank in the army, where illiteracy was widespread. In these letters St Ruth is a man with a mission, and there is much sense in what he writes about the need of children to find a balance between studying and physical activity. Certainly, much that he says on this subject, when one thinks of the problem of obesity among children in our modern society, would meet with the approval of present-day educators and health advisers. While opposing drilling and gymnastics, Gissing, who loved walking and thought nothing of a twenty-mile hike across country, would have acknowl-



edged the benefits of robust outdoor activities. Equally, he would have welcomed St Ruth's enlightened views on women's capabilities.

Besides these two pieces, St Ruth also published a 30-page tract (with woodcut illustrations) in 1872 entitled *Physical Education and the Development of Children, in Theory and Practice*.<sup>28</sup> It is listed in Sampson Low's *English Catalogue of Books* in 1876 and also in *Steiger's Educational Directory for 1878* priced at 6d, alongside works by Maclaren, Henry Maudsley, and Herbert Spencer. This work was aimed at "schools and families"<sup>29</sup> and is a well thought out and determined call for individuals and

educational institutions to take up regular exercise. Prefacing his essay, St Ruth explains disarmingly, “The author is actuated by a desire to benefit the rising generation, which must be his excuse for appearing in print.”<sup>30</sup> While the lecturing tone predominates, he also injects an occasional wry remark. For example, in criticising excessive forms of exercise, he writes, “Most people are now familiar with the boasts of our big muscle men, who think nothing of 100lb. dumb-bells. We have seen some such men wrestling with a blacksmith’s anvil, but confess ourselves unable to appreciate their wisdom.”<sup>31</sup> He then asserts that his system “adopts the doctrine of light exercises instead of heavy exhausting movements ... and cultivation of free posture, dash, precision, and presence of mind.”<sup>32</sup> He goes on to tell us that the following headmasters and headmistresses in Manchester, have permitted him to introduce this system into their schools, “Dr. Adams, Victoria Park School; Miss Anderson, Ladies’ College, Victoria Park; Mrs. Allison Elmswood, Stretford; Mrs. Gloyn, Acomb House, Greenheys; Miss Hunter, Ladies’ College, Cheetham; John Kendall, Esq., B.A., Chorlton High School; Miss Pilcher, Cavendish Place, All Saints; Dr. Somerville, Hawthorn Hall School, Wilmslow; Mrs. Thackray, Parkdale, Prestwich; Miss Wedge, Chetwynd Bank, Prestwich; James Wood, Esq., The College, Wilmslow; Miss Woodcock, Old Trafford; Mrs. Elton, Fern Lea, Fallowfield; Mrs. Barber, Castlemere House, Rochdale.”<sup>33</sup> Incidentally, what St Ruth has to say about drilling comes as a revelation. He argues,

Experience forbids us to recommend military drill for children. It is inadequate to their wants, and the time devoted to it might be employed to secure real benefit. This drill imparts a stiff artificial style of walking, called by its admirers “a military bearing,” but the easy, graceful bearing of the officer, who has a minimum of drills, is not imparted by the drill sergeant.<sup>34</sup>

If St Ruth practised what he preached, then the afternoon drill at Lindow Grove School was more akin to what is commonly called “PE” or “Physical Education” than to military exercise. His summary would seem to confirm this assumption. “In concluding this brochure,” he writes, “we would like to say a few words on our favourite subject ... It is our firm conviction, after a lengthened experience that gymnastics, to be well and efficiently taught, *must* be done as a regular school lesson *in school hours*.”<sup>35</sup> Although I have failed to trace further bibliographical references to him, most likely he published other works on education.

So what does this brief life history tell us about St Ruth? That he was a self-taught, worldly individual of peasant Irish blood and Catholic religion, who had felt the heat of battle, seen the inside of a prison cell, and experienced the woes of infant deaths, bankruptcy and early widowerhood. He was a husband, father, and teacher, and also a bully, a hero, and a gentleman to some. In 1871, when Gissing encountered him, he was in his early forties and in the prime of life. His experience of war lay seventeen years back, and he was presently applying Maclaren's educational theory in his school work. Having been moulded by the army and knowing little else but the rude conditions and the sober philosophy of the military machine, he had launched himself into the world of education and remarkably, it must be said, transformed himself from a common soldier into a minor educational theorist and published author. For this reason St Ruth can scarcely be blamed for seeing himself as a role model deserving of respect in the school playground. To sum up, then, according to what we now know of him, he was not the brainless, bullying, berating drill-sergeant we imagine

him to have been, but a committed teacher seeking to inspire in his pupils a love for physical exercise for the good of their health and the health of future generations. That his system was flawed is as much attributable to the times he lived in as it may have been to any failings in his method of instruction. And that he was “hard-visaged”<sup>36</sup> and had a military bearing is less owing to any innate inhumanity than to the army environment that formed his face.

Revisiting Gissing’s view of the man, one has to take into account that he first experienced the drill shortly after he was struck the cruellest and most crushing blow of his life: the sudden loss of the father he idealised. Upon arriving at Lindow Grove School soon after this unhappy event, he was not only at his most vulnerable, but also scarcely in the mood to be ordered around like an automaton. He was also burdened by the need to succeed in the classroom. Accordingly, he arranged his day, like the monks of old, to allow for eighteen hours of study to the detriment of his physical well-being. Solitary as he was in his determination to cram all he could and so best prepare himself for the examinations to come, and solitary as he was in any case, he naturally came to regard any outward duties, like the Thursday drill, as a hated encroachment upon his valuable time and a form of chafing discipline. And it was of all people “crammers”<sup>37</sup> who, because they “cannot afford the time,”<sup>38</sup> St Ruth could least abide and perhaps for this reason he gave Gissing a hard time. A bully or disciplinarian will haunt the imagination of a sensitive person for the rest of his life. For what to the boy was a tormenting and intimidating experience became like an oppressive memory to the grown man. Only a confrontation with the bugbear of his youth would have enabled Gissing to overcome his hatred of the man and to forgive and forget. What he saw and perceived of St Ruth was not the whole man, but just one aspect of him, and that the least likeable to a scholarly and sensitive boy, whose hatred of all things military, already strongly influenced by his late father’s pacifism, was (as his 1870 diary confirms) being fed upon news of the Franco-Prussian conflict. Consequently, the boy Gissing cannot be blamed for resenting the drill instruction he received at Lindow Grove School. However, had the mature Gissing known the drill-sergeant’s full history, and realised that he had not been senselessly putting him through his paces, but had been attempting to counterbalance the education of the mind with that of the body, he must surely have revised his view and tempered his criticism of the man.

It is worth reminding ourselves, finally, that nine months before beginning work on *An Author at Grass*, in a letter to his son, Walter, Gissing wrote: “War is a horrible thing which ought to be left to savages—a thing to be ashamed of and not to glory in.”<sup>39</sup> Plainly, the man who thought that would never have regarded an ex-soldier with anything but contempt. Hence, if there is a fault in the depiction of the drill scene, forgivable and understandable as it is, it is that Gissing allowed his passionate hatred of warmongers and disgust at the ongoing Boer War to colour his retrospective view of St Ruth. Yet, poles apart as they were in their beliefs and pursuits, the drill-sergeant and the writer had more in common than they could ever have imagined. One would like to think, therefore, that had Gissing met St Ruth again in 1900, he would have stretched out his hand to him and, like the schoolboy he once was, said, “Pax!” and then gone serenely on his way.

<sup>1</sup> See Rainer Maria Rilke (1899), “Die Turnstunde” in *Deutschsprachige Erzähler: Von Hauptmann bis Kafka* (Leipzig: Dieterich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1982), pp. 192-199. The story appears in English translation as “The Gym Class” in *Great Stories by Kafka and Rilke: A Dual-Language Book* (New York: Dover Publications, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> See Hermann Hesse (1930), *Narziss und Goldmund* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1994). The novel appears in English translation as *Narcissus and Goldmund* (London: Peter Owen Ltd, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> See Robert Musil (1906), *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 2002). The novel appears in English translation as *The Confusions of Young Torless* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> George Gissing (1903), *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> One suspects that after entering Owens College in October 1872, though still based at Alderley Edge until 1875, Gissing was no longer expected to take part in the weekly drill.

<sup>6</sup> *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>7</sup> George Gissing (1897), “The Old School” in *George Gissing at Alderley Edge*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (London: Enitharmon Press, 1969), p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Algernon and Ellen Gissing, eds., *Letters of George Gissing to Members of His Family* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin & Company, 1927), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> George Gissing (1894), “The Pessimist of Plato Road” in *A Victim of Circumstances* (London: Constable & Co. Ltd, 1927), p. 174.

<sup>10</sup> George Gissing (1895), “A Profitable Weakness” in *Human Odds and Ends* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd, 1911), p. 231.

<sup>11</sup> George Gissing (1891), *New Grub Street* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2008), p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Coustillas, ed., *George Gissing at Alderley Edge* (London: Enitharmon Press, 1969), p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>14</sup> *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, p. 57.

<sup>15</sup> *George Gissing at Alderley Edge*, p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> All the information relating to St Ruth's military career I acquired from research undertaken at the Cheshire Military Museum in Chester and the National Archives at Kew Gardens.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Crookenden, *Twenty-Second Footsteps, 1849-1914* (Chester: Chester Regiment, 1956), p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard Rigby, *Ever Glorious: The Story of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Cheshire Regiment* (Chester: W. H. Evans & Son, 1982), pp. 216-217.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>23</sup> Bouwe Postmus, ed., *George Gissing's Scrapbook* (Amsterdam: Twizle Press, 2007), pp. 145-147.

<sup>24</sup> Archibald Maclaren (1819-1884), fencing master, gymnastic instructor, and physical education theorist, and founder of Summer Field School, Oxford, who was employed by the government in 1861 to put his system into practice at the major army depots. His books, which are still in print today, *Training in Theory and Practice* (1866) and *A System of Physical Education* (1869) offered a template for fitness instructors throughout the British Isles in the late-Victorian era. He had many literary friends, including William Morris, whom he trained at Oxford University.

<sup>25</sup> Two bankruptcy notices appeared in the *London Gazette*, one on 3 December 1880, p. 6585, and the other on 21 December 1880, p. 6889.

<sup>26</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 29 June 1871, p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 January 1874, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> W. H. St Ruth, *The Physical Education and Development of Children, in Theory and Practice* (Manchester: John Heywood, 1872). Both the Bodleian Library and the Library of the Royal Surgeons of England hold copies of the tract.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>36</sup> *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, p. 56.

<sup>37</sup> *The Physical Education and Development of Children, in Theory and Practice*, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas, eds., *The Collected Letters of George Gissing, Volume Seven, 1897-1899* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1995), p. 419.

## Notes and News

With regret we have to announce the death of Dennis Shrubbsall, who is known to subscribers of this journal as a W. H. Hudson scholar. A retired army officer, he published at least eight books on Hudson, the last four of which, which appeared in quick succession in the last three years, are not likely to be superseded in the foreseeable future. They should be placed on the same shelf as *Men, Books and Birds* which Morley Roberts published shortly after Hudson's death, and *Landscapes and Literati*, a collection of letters containing most of what remains of Hudson's correspondence with the Gissing brothers. Dennis Shrubbsall had left the West Country for Australia in 2001 so as to be closer to his descendants. He was born in 1918 and died last August, aged 90.

Fresh evidence of the vitality of Gissing's name and works in the intellectual world is attested by the frequency of casual references to them in contemporary literature. For instance, there have been many allusions to *New Grub Street* as preludes to comment on or in the wake of Elise Blackwell's *Grub*, an American updating of Gissing's image of the publishing world at the end of the nineteenth century. A very different writer, Nuala O'Faolain, mentions him in her autobiography, and the context is not an exalting one. She alludes to phases of her youth when she would visit some old gentleman in his study or some elderly lady—obscure academics—to show them her dissertation, people who had eventually become authorities on Matthew Arnold, Kipling, Gissing or some other literary figure. Catherine Eisner, who wrote to us about a year ago about a novel she was engaged on, tells us that the book, *Sister Morphine*, published by Salt Publishing last July and supplied by Gardners Books, contains a pastiche of "A Daughter of the Lodge." The relationship between the two women in her novel, she writes, owes much to Gissing's short story which she regards "as the most perfect nineteenth-century miniature in depicting on a small canvas these tensions that arose from the assertion of class privilege by the few in the face of the advance of women's education for the many."

Hazel Bell, the writer and indexer, offers two short passages from a novel by Anthony Powell (who is known to have reviewed one or two volumes of Gissing letters in the 1960s), *O, How the Wheel Becomes It!*

Shadbold reads a novel and "detected faint echoes of H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, even at times George Gissing." Discussing it later with a friend, they have this dialogue:

“You would agree attempts at realism in the manner of Bennett?”  
“Bennett-and-water.”  
“But touches of Wells.”  
“The Gissing-end of Wells.”  
... “Toward the end of the book these influences tail off.”  
“What was left of Wells, I wonder, when the Gissing had to stop?”

Powell belonged to a generation which passed simplistic judgments on Gissing and whose opinions were based on faded recollections of a very few novels. He was doubtless one of those English writers and critics (hundreds of them, Orwell being a brilliant and eloquent exception) who would have their readers believe that a good novel should be coated with humour. In a way he was a successor of Frank Swinnerton, whose reputation as a critic now is what it deserved to be right from the start.

What books did Algernon Gissing read? Next to nothing on the subject is known but Cyril Wyatt tells us from Australia that he has discovered a curious book, *The Coquet-Dale Fishing Songs*, edited by a North Country Angler (William Blackwood and Son, 1852), a volume in green publisher's cloth, on the half-title of which can be read an ownership inscription dated 1885. Algernon was still unmarried at the time and his share of the inheritance from Aunt Emily had not yet been entirely spent.

Fred Nesta, University Librarian at Lignan University, Hong Kong, has come across information about the reworking of *The Odd Women* in a two-act play by the Canadian author Linda Griffiths which was presented at Wilma Theater, Philadelphia last winter. The title, “Age of Arousal,” certainly does not suggest as close and faithful an adaptation as that we still have in mind by Michael Meyer (1992). What the press wrote of the play is enough to suggest that Gissing, could he have been in the audience who attended the *première*, would not have approved of this travesty of his novel. The article by Howard Shapiro about the play in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* is entitled “Meaty subject of suffragism suffers in the telling.”

Good news has come from Italy. An admirer of Gissing, Signor Vincenzo Pepe, who lives near the beautiful town of Salerno and has published several Victorian writers in translation, tells us that he has translated a selection of Gissing short stories to be brought out by Marlin, a publisher of Cava de' Tirreni, next spring. The stories are “Lou and Liz,” “The Day of



Silence,” “Fleet-Footed Hester,” “In Honour Bound,” “The Fate of Humphrey Snell,” “A Freak of Nature,” “A Poor Gentleman,” “Humplebee,” “The Scrupulous Father” and “Christopherson.” Signor Pepe has also translated *Will Warburton*, which, he hopes, will be brought out by the same publisher. He has other Gissing projects, notably a selection of Gissing’s writings on books and reading, which would include the sections on the subject in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*.

At the International Conference on “Artistry and Industry: Representations of Creative Labour in Literature and the Visual Arts c. 1830-1900” held at the University of Exeter (18-20 July) and organized by the Centre for Victorian Studies, University of Exeter in collaboration with the Department of History of Art, University of Bristol, Kathleen Slauch-Sanford, of the University of Delaware, read a paper on “George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, and the Problem of Literary Genius.”

Last but not least the legend under the photograph of Constance Ash and her brother on p. 13 of our last number was accidentally omitted by the printers. It should have read: “Constance Ash and her brother Alfred Ellis c. 1875.”

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## Recent Publications

### Volumes

George Gissing, *The Nether World*, ed. Stephen Gill, Oxford University Press [2008]. Seventh impression in the Oxford World’s Classics, £8.99.

George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, ed. John Goode, Oxford University Press [2008]. Tenth impression in the Oxford World’s Classics, £9.99.

George Gissing, *The Odd Women*, ed. Patricia Ingham, Oxford University Press [2008]. Sixth impression in the Oxford World’s Classics, £8.99.

George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, ed. Bernard Bergonzi, Penguin Classics [2008]. Mistakenly said to be the 28<sup>th</sup> impression in the series. £11.99.

Neither the introduction nor the bibliography have been updated since 1968. Only the price has been.

George Gissing, *The Odd Women*, intr. by Elaine Showalter. Penguin Classics [2008]. Fifteenth impression in the series. £10.99.

George Gissing, *Charles Dickens, a Critical Study*, London: Nonsuch Publishing. 2007. £15.99. Pictorial paperback. Can be currently obtained from Bibliophile Books, a firm which, like Postscript, has specialised in remainders. Said to contain "Dickens-Land" by J. A. Nicklin and a dictionary of Dickens's characters in his novels. 320 pp with woodcut illustrations. This information, supplied by the Bibliophile Books website clearly indicates that the volume is a reprint of the Gresham Publishing Company 1912 edition.

#### Articles, reviews, etc.

Richard Higgins, "Feeling like a Clerk in H. G. Wells," *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 50, no. 3, Spring 2008, pp. 459-73. Gissing is mentioned on pp. 460 and 473. A review of Christine DeVine's *Class in Turn-of-the-Century Novels* by Susan Zlotnick will be found on pp. 491-93.

D. J. Taylor, "Fitzrovian Fragments," *Guardian*, 28 June 2008, p. 6 of Review Section. Gissing's diary mentioned in a review of Julian Maclaren-Ross's *Selected Letters* (Black Spring Press).

Wulfhard Stahl, "Besprechungen," *Anglia*, Band 126, Heft 1, 2008, pp. 174-75. Review of Gissing's Scrapbook.

Joseph Bristow, "New Bodies," *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 July 2008, p. 10. Review of Ruth Livesey's *Socialism, Sex and the Culture of Aestheticism in Britain 1880-1914* with the henceforth almost compulsory allusion to Gissing and sexual anarchy.

Dennis Shrubbsall, *The Private Reflections and Opinions of W. H. Hudson (1841-1922), the First Literary Environmentalist*, Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008. Gissing appears on pp. 28, 34 and 48, his brother on pp. 15, 53 and 136.

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### Tailpiece: Malwida von Meysenbug

Malwida von Meysenbug (1816-1903), a German exile in whom Gissing was interested in the 1890s, is described as a person worthy of the admiration of English intellectuals in volumes IV and V of his *Collected Letters*. We do not know exactly how he discovered her work nor when he read her *Memoiren einer Idealistin* (1876) for the first time, but his diary records his reading the book for the second time on his return from Greece and Italy in early March 1890. One of her brothers having been warned in 1851 of the government's displeasure at her "revolutionary opinions," she left for England in 1852, when she was offered a post as governess to an exiled German family, and she was soon in touch in London with many other political refugees. Gissing's enthusiasm about her can be read in his letter to Bertz of 20 March 1890. His second immersion in the book was, he says, still more satisfactory than the first: "I admire the woman greatly; she is a noble and pathetic figure. Above all, how strictly just she is! I am impressed by numerous points in which she resists—or does not even feel—a temptation to exaggerate. How I should like to have known her!"

In her remarkable study of *Little Germany: Exile and Asylum in Victorian England* (O.U.P., 1986), in which ten pages are devoted to this exceptional woman, Rosemary Ashton wrote:

"Malwida von Meysenbug was unique among the political exiles in being a spinster. Not being rich, she had to make a living in England. The only course open to her was governessing, which she had in any case already contemplated in Germany after her father, a retainer of the Prince of Hessen-Kassel whom the latter ennobled in 1825, had died in 1847. Her family background—pious, titled, arch-conservative—made it all the more remarkable a feat for her to become a political rebel. Like Weerth, Freiligrath, and Althaus, she was brought up largely in Detmold, though her family travelled a lot in Prince Wilhelm's retinue. She rebelled, as they almost all did, first in spiritual matters. As she recorded in her long account of her life [...] she read Feuerbach in 1848 with a group of young local democrats:

Until now, Feuerbach's work had been absolutely forbidden me. My mother saw in him the expression of complete atheism, and I too had been somewhat timid in approaching the free thinkers.... [but] Feuerbach, it seemed to me, called everything by its real name for the first time; he destroyed forever the idea of any other revelation than that made by great minds and great hearts." [...]

[Besides teaching and writing, Malwida von Meysenbug also went in for social work, ran a workers' educational club for poor Germans in White Chapel, joined workers' processions and meetings, campaigned for the improvement of the position of married women and for English female education.]

“No doubt Malwida would have continued to work in such circles, keeping herself by teaching and writing—she translated Herzen's memoirs into German in 1859 and contributed articles on Russian literature to German periodicals—if Herzen had not asked her, to her great joy, to come back and look after Olga. She saw it as her duty and her passion to ‘save’ the child, and was to devote the rest of her long life to Olga. She took both Herzen girls with her to Italy in 1861, and lived there until she died, aged 86, in 1903. During her years in Italy she befriended Wagner, Nietzsche, and Liszt's ex-mistress, Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein. [...] She never lost her firm faith in a kind of spiritual humanism and religious unbelief. On her death, she was cremated, and, at her own wish, no burial service was said.

Malwida was a remarkable woman. In her long life she fell under the spell of a succession of interesting men: Theodor Althaus, Julius Fröbel, Kinkel, Herzen, and Mazzini. She broke free from the religious, political, and social restrictions of a small German town. In England she earned her living by teaching. Even the fact that she lived (platonically) with Herzen was unconventional. She took holidays alone in south-east coastal resorts (as did George Eliot in the years immediately before her unorthodox liaison with Lewes). In a way she was the type of the German governess—plain, earnest, given to flights of sentiment and abstract rhetoric—but she was also shrewd, observant, independent, and resourceful. Her relationship with England and the English was not emotionally close, but it was one of mutual respect and recognition. She admired British institutions and criticized British prejudice. And she managed to survive, largely by her own efforts, on “this stormy sea of life called London.”