

THE GISSING NEWSLETTER

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

– George Gissing’s *Commonplace Book*.

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April, 1965

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In Gissing’s Footsteps, II

By Pierre Coustillas

Once back in France, I decided to go on another pilgrimage which is a “must” for the aspiring French biographer. There had been for some time a standing invitation from Mme Le Mallier to visit the Château du Chasnay, near Nevers, where Gissing is known to have stayed for a few weeks, with Gabrielle Fleury, in the autumn of 1900. He must have been taken with the peaceful charm of this large country house pleasantly situated amid an extensive park abounding in game. All the more, probably, as the household was half English and could in some way make him forget his homesickness for a time. From his room on the top floor at the south-west angle of the Château, he could command a view of the valley of the Loire. It is still furnished as it was in his day, and I carried the repetition of his experiences to the point of sleeping in the four-poster which had been his. Even to-day one cannot forget his bygone presence. To commemorate his visit, his portrait by Mendelssohn has been hung on the wall. It is the very picture he sent to Gabrielle Fleury shortly after they met in 1898. Under it the inscription in his own hand has been erased. The Christian name by which Gabrielle was known to her family – Edith – has been deleted, and the shorter “Mlle” before it expanded to “Mademoiselle” to cover the erasure of the first name. Near the picture a small bookcase contains some of his novels. A few hundred yards from the Château du Chasnay is that of Tazières, formerly the property of Marie Saglio, Gabrielle’s cousin; they stayed there also for a short time in the fall of 1900. To-day only the exterior of the massive house is offered to the Gissing addict, as admission is not easily obtained.

It was agreed with M. and Mme Le Mallier that from Le Chasnay we should drive farther afield to Saint-Honoré-les-Bains and Autun. In the former place we had no great difficulty in

finding the Villa des Roses, a fine, two-floored *maison bourgeoise* now inhabited by a Doctor. In one of her letters to Eduard Bertz, Gabrielle Fleury wrote that the road along which the house was built was bordered with acacias; so it was a pleasant confirmation that the place was the right one when we observed some such trees near the roadway, though the latter had to be widened to suit modern traffic. The Chalet Feuillebois, at Couhard, near Autun, strikes me as the ideal dwelling-place for a Henry Ryecroft. It is far enough from the town to enjoy the peaceful atmosphere so dear to the veteran of letters – an unassuming house with pink walls and a vast prospect from its front windows, nestled among pine trees on a hillside.

There remain enough places connected with Gissing to keep me busy next summer. As I have already been to Wakefield, Manchester, Alderley Edge and Exeter on the one hand, Saint-Jean-de-Luz and Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port on the other, I may, perhaps, if time is short, take a trip to Normandy. But I cannot postpone *sine die* the indispensable trip to Greek and Italian shores, in quest of the “Eumenides Well” and the “Due Leonetti.”

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George Gissing: A Personal Note.

By E. F. Matthiason

My father's acquaintanceship with George Gissing began around 1889-91. My father, born 1866, was then in his early twenties, with Gissing nine years his senior. Their rendezvous a coffee-shop around the corner from 7K, they met casually and parted on (or a little before) Gissing's second marriage, my father himself marrying in August 1891. Both men were of a scholarly bent (my father's father a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, as was his grandfather on the male side), with a like passion for the classics, Greek and Roman. My father was morbidly shy – “withdrawn” in today's slang – and but for this I should have learned more of Gissing from his lips. The newspaper accounts of Gissing's death in 1903 (when I was nine) brought him to tears.

My father gave me to read *The Nether World* before I was fourteen, since which time, in the course of fifty-six years, I must have imbibed every word that fell from the Master's pen.

Born in Exile, in Nelson's sevenpenny reprint, its cover still bearing traces of Flanders mud, I read in 1917, the book being carried in my haversack throughout Third Ypres. *Thyrza*, five years later, I devoured in a prison cell, reading even while I stitched the eternal mailbags; and better than any other of Gissing's I like that novel. Afterwards, adrift on the road, in a shilling-a-night "doss," I came upon *The Odd Women*, reading those fine studies by the light of a naked gas-jet while my companions fought, drank and gambled around me. Now, in retired old age, "studying to be quiet" (as Izaak Walton enjoins), I cherish among a thousand books *Ryecroft* and *Ionian Sea*, both volumes always near at hand.

Here, concluding this brief note, let me say a word about Gissing's dying "visions," the euphoria which had him gasp out: "These resplendent beings – whence do they appear?" Might not he, with Plato, have glimpsed the Real World, relinquishing, *in articulo mortis*, the Cave of Shadows that all his life had defeated him? As a young man (about 1890) he once said to my father, quoting Baudelaire: "Mes humiliations ont été des grâces de Dieu." Morley Roberts was desperately anxious that his friend should be held to have died in the odour, not of sanctity, but of "scientific rationalism" as he himself preached it. But Gissing, at heart a religious man, may have been wiser than that. At least I am so persuaded.

Relative Questions

In the note listed in our last number, ("Gissing: Some Biographical Details.," *Notes and Queries*, June, 1964, Vol. II, No. 6 N.S. 235-236), Gordon S. Haight inquires about the London relatives alluded to in Korg's biography, and mentions three persons named Gissing listed in the Post Office London Directory in 1876 who may have been the relations Gissing knew in London when he returned from America. He also pursues the question of the occupation of Edith Underwood's father, whom Morley Roberts called a bootmaker, but who is described by Dr. Hick as "a plasterer's labourer." He points out that the Directory for 1887 lists the firm of John Underwood and Sons, monumental sculptors, and suggests that Edith's father, H. J. Underwood, was one of the sons.

Book Reviews

by Pierre Coustillas

By the Ionian Sea. With a Biographical Foreword by Frank Swinnerton. John Baker, London, 1963.

The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft. Foreword by Cecil Chisholm. London, Dent; New York, Dutton. Everyman's Library, 1964.

These two books which, with *New Grub Street*, are the only ones by Gissing English publishers care to keep in print, have exactly the same characteristics: the text is reliable, pleasantly printed, and the volume nicely got up, but in each case the introduction is inadequate

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and testifies to the publishers' laziness. They are apparently ignorant of the new biographical material brought to light in the last ten years and are content to reprint old-fashioned forewords, teeming with factual errors. Frank Swinnerton relied heavily on his book, half a century old; so he repeated for instance, that it was the second edition of *Demos*, with its alleged proceeds of £50, which enabled Gissing to go to Italy, whereas in fact he sold the entire copyright for £100 and consequently could expect nothing from the second edition. Swinnerton is too ready to believe the Harrisons, *père et fils*, who probably talked each other into believing that they had known Gissing during the whole of his literary career whereas close associations between them lasted only about four years. Similarly, Wells was acquainted with Gissing from 1896 onward, but in spite of that, his testimony should be carefully sifted, since it is, in matters of chronology especially, about as unreliable as that of Morley Roberts. No wonder then we should read that "in this year (1890), his first wife having died, he remarried again with unfortunate results," or that "we know very little of his definite actions between 1891 and 1897."

Cecil Chisholm, however, causes these errors to pale into insignificance. Not only does he follow uncritically the habitual "authorities" (Seccombe for example) but he adds mistakes of his own, confuses dates (*Liza of Lambeth* and *Of Human Bondage*), misquotes Gissing (*Ryecroft* is "much more an aspiration than a memory," not "an inspiration"!), repeats approvingly the legend set afloat by T. P. O'Connor that the book owed its popularity to a series of front page articles published in his magazine; has Gissing go to Jena as Austin Harrison imagined; even writes that *Ryecroft* is a novel! As for the critical opinions, they will at times move Gissing's admirers to protest: *Liza of Lambeth*, that interesting but superficial novel by Somerset Maugham, is said to better "all Gissing's earnest novels of working class life." Again, we hear that "apart from the single and brilliantly achieved picture of a woman who drinks secretly in *The Odd Women*, Gissing risked and therefore achieved nothing heroic in the development of the novel." This shows a singular ignorance of both the average novelistic production of the period and the short of reception most of his novels until the mid-nineties got at the hands of conservative critics in England as well as in America. Though he was anything

but a revolutionist in methods of story-telling, Gissing certainly did risk and did lose much by refusing to curry favour with readers of the circulation libraries. His pessimism and disregard of the current taste for happy endings he was constantly reproached with, and had to pay for in the coin of the realm.

Uncharitable as it may seem, I wonder whether the reader of these two books, unless he can readily correct the editor's mistakes, would not be happily inspired in skipping the forewords.

Notes on Reprints

by Jacob Korg.

Gissing's "The Foolish Virgin," a short story originally published in *The Yellow Book* in January, 1896, has been reprinted in *The Yellow Book: Quintessence of the Nineties*, edited by Stanley Weintraub (Doubleday, Anchor, 1964. Paper, \$1.45.) This volume consists of representative selections from the periodical, which the editor in his introduction, terms "a bridge between late Victorianism and the twentieth Century."

Two earlier volumes of selections from *The Yellow Book* have appeared, and it is interesting to note that though the editors' choices vary widely, Gissing's story holds a place in all three of these anthologies. The earlier collections are:

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The Yellow Book, A Selection, ed. Cedric Ellsworth Smith, Hartford, Connecticut, 1928.

The Yellow Book: A Selection, compiled by Norman Denny, The Bodley Head, London and Viking Press, New York, 1950.

The Riverside Press edition of *New Grub Street*, published by Houghton Mifflin in 1962, with an excellent introduction by Irving Howe, is, of course, immensely welcome. It has enabled a number of us who teach the English novel to represent Gissing in our courses for the first time. Unfortunately, this otherwise attractive edition is marred by an unusually large number of typographical errors, some of them diabolically plausible. For those who may be interested, a collation with the Modern Library edition of 1926 follows. (I am indebted for some of these to my student, Mrs. Pauline Grabill.)

p.12: stories; ML stones

18: nervous action; ML: a nervous action

19: the tone of his paragraphs have; ML: the tone of his paragraphs has

21: bookteaching; ML: book-teaching
30: a playing business; ML: a paying business
44: oen side; ML: one side
112: would have taken ill; ML: taken it ill
121: only bcause; ML: only because
143: had need of being unfinished; ML: had need of being finished
215: this must be for causalties; ML: this must be for casualties
221: irresistable desire; ML: irresistible desire
282: he reiled upon; ML: he relied upon
285: shapless boots; ML: shapeless boots
308: daugher; ML: daughter
329: the equiivalent; ML: the equivalent
330: I was conscicous; I was conscious
331: a fit of gloomiest brooding; ML: a fit of the gloomiest brooding
360: you shall got to Mudie's; ML: you shall go to Mudie's
367: how it begun; ML: how it began
401: "Mr Bailey, Grover," ML: "Mr. Bailey, Grocer."
422: modern typs; ML: modern types

Announcements

C. C. Kohler, Bookseller, Pathways, Westhumble, Dorking, Surrey, has kindly consented to distribute the *Newsletter* to British readers. Mr. Kohler specializes in books on Gissing, and will be happy to send his recent list of forty-six Gissing items to anyone who may want one. It includes a first edition of *The Unclassed*, as well as a number of scarce copies.

Our readers are reminded that contributions to the *Newsletter* are always welcome. Also, anyone who wishes to receive it regularly free of charge is invited to write to Mr. Korg at the Department of English, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98105.

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