

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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Book Review

by Arthur C. Young
Rutgers University

(Editor of *The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz*,
1887-1903. Rutgers University Press, 1961)

The Letters of George Gissing to Gabrielle Fleury. Edited by Pierre Coustillas, New York: The New York Public Library, 1964

When George Gissing returned to England from a stay on the Continent in April 1898, he felt neither refreshed nor invigorated by his excursion, and the problems from which he had fled in vain, he had to assume again. His estranged wife, Edith, was his major worry; he knew that he could never again live with her, and, since she had resisted any kind of settlement of their affairs, he feared the confrontation over her grievances that she demanded. Near emotional collapse, Gissing simply tried to hide from her, asking his friends to help in the concealment by making false statements as to his whereabouts. In addition to this worry, he was distraught about earning enough money for the support of Edith and the younger son, Alfred, in London; for keeping himself in acceptable lodgings; and for the cost involved in having his mother and sisters care for Walter, the older boy, in Wakefield. Loneliness plagued him, and he feared that he might never have a permanent home in England. While staying in Rome during January, he had suggested to his brother, Algernon, that perhaps they might share a house; George would pay the rent in return for the company of his brother and for the housekeeping services of his sister-in-law. The proposition was discussed in various letters sent back and forth, but it came to nothing, and Gissing took lodgings in Dorking, where, mourning his ill health, his isolation, his guilt about his sons, and his hopelessness, he tried to write, convinced that no matter how hard he worked producing books, he still must fail his various dependents and die in the workhouse.

Then on June 23, 1898, he received a letter from a young Frenchwoman, Mlle Gabrielle Fleury, who asked permission to translate his *New Grub Street*. A meeting was arranged for July 6 at H. G. Well’s home in Surrey; the two met under discreet Victorian circumstances, after which they agreed on another visit, this time at Gissing’s home in Dorking. She came to see him on July 26, and after that day’s conversation, he believed himself in love with her. Before Gabrielle returned to France, some letters passed between them each more intimate than that which had preceded; they increased in quantity and intensity when she was again in Paris. In October, Gabrielle came to England, staying with Gissing at Dorking from the eight to the

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fifteenth, by which time they had resolved to seize their fortune and begin a life together as soon as plans could be organized and multitudinous difficulties eased. Here, then, is the background of these letters and the facts behind them which the reader must know if he is to understand

Gissing's state of mind during his epistolary courtship. It is knowledge that is important in accepting the perfervid quality of the letters, which often have a tone of **self-conscious**, literary awareness, and which often seem stumbling and awkward in the choice of loving diminutives and endearments.

Mr. Coustillas prints in this volume ninety-nine letters to Gabrielle, and one to her mother, written between June 23, 1898, and May 1902. The letters, now housed in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, are all that remain, according to the editor, of the "voluminous correspondence exchanged" between George and Gabrielle. There are four different groups of letters: the first covers the period between June 23, 1898, and May 4, 1899, containing the first communication between them and the last note sent to her before Gissing left England to meet her at Rouen; the second group dates from April 1900 when Gissing visited England alone; the third group marks the crisis in their association in 1901 when the couple had come to England together so that Gissing could sit for a portrait requested by *Literature*. After a brief stay, Gabrielle had returned to France. George then had been persuaded by his friends to enter a sanatorium in an attempt to regain his health, and Gabrielle seems to have worried lest he might not return to her. The Paris establishment had involved difficulties over food for Gissing, and had, supposedly, contributed to his illness. This batch of letters, written to convince Gabrielle of an unshakeable attachment and the necessity for health's sake to stay in England, is much different from the first group of almost youthful romantic excesses. In this third period, Gissing's love for Gabrielle is unmistakably genuine, but in them his reason has exerted itself and instead of the high-pitched, self-pitying, and masochistic tone of the earlier letters, there is a convincing aura of assured affection tempered with the cooling effect that the recognition of reality has. The last group, dated between December 1901 and May 1902, was written in France, while Gissing was either recuperating from disease or looking for a healthy spot in which to live, and Gabrielle was tending her mother or visiting relatives. The great tension in their lives had been reduced, and these letters reflect patently the thoughts, domestic and personal, of a man absent from a domestic haven.

In the Introduction of his edition, Mr. Coustillas offers a compact review of Gissing's life and a pleasant impression of Gabrielle's personality, an element that has been heretofore lacking in Gissing scholarship. When Gissing, who at forty had been publishing his problem novels for twenty years, received Gabrielle's request for permission to translate, he was an exhausted, frantically anxious man whose two marriages had collapsed rapidly and painfully, whose sons, living away from him, seemed without prospects, and whose own vivid wish for a decent, middle-class, domestic existence seemed unobtainable. It is no wonder then that this weary, isolated intellectual responded energetically to the sympathetic Gabrielle on their initial meeting, when her beauty, her culture, and her womanliness, nurtured in bourgeois comfort, appeared to him to compose the idealized woman he had pursued in his dreams and in his fiction.

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It is only in these letters to Gabrielle that one sees the sensitivity to and the hunger for love that racked Gissing, who in his other correspondence and in his novels always denied the emotions and exalted the brain. Those letters sent to Gabrielle when the chance of obtaining her appeared hopeless are excellent documents of courage when one remembers the trials oppressing him and forcing him to write, often without pleasure, so that his dependents could eat. The letters show Gissing's personality to be more humanly fallible than any biography or special edition of other correspondence has. His weaknesses are common human ones, and he shows that he was body as well as grey matter. For example, in trying to capture Gabrielle, he suppressed facts about his early life, his jail term, his first marriage, and the forces that sent him to America. In his passion, he offered Gabrielle characterizations of his family that were not totally fair, seeking to accentuate her uniqueness and to encourage her sympathy, as for example,

when he said of his sisters, whose provincialism and “religious formalism” he despised, that “It cannot be helped, and of course I never contest their views or try to disturb their ideals.” At one time or another, although admitted primarily before his marriage to Edith, he did wish to disturb their ideas and open their minds. He was well aware of the hard, penny-pinching lives they had. When he wrote that he and his mother were friends but neither close nor confidential, he did not, naturally, point out that since he was eighteen, he had hardly been a comfort to such a pious, uneducated Victorian as she was. Her forbearance about the recurrent scandals in her eldest son’s life is noteworthy. Because he wanted to convince Gabrielle that living with him would not involve embarrassing situations, he made light of associations with old friends, such as Bertz and Roberts, saying that for the former, he probably would never see him again, and that the latter was usually touring the world.

And having used his ill-health to snag Gabrielle’s tenderest feelings, he abruptly changed tactics when he realized that he had alarmed her about taking on another invalid. Of his physical state, and particularly about his chest, he wrote that “Up to the age of 39, I had *not a trace* of weakness of the lungs.” Mr. Coustillas accurately points out that as early as 1890, Gissing had been nagged by some kind of lung disease. His health had actually been uncertain all through the years of his marriage with Edith, but slightest apprehension on Gabrielle’s part made him suddenly forgetful of his disorders. His objectivity about human nature deserted him when he and Gabrielle, not yet certain of their future relationship, practically vowed to love on even if they could never be together. She had been reading Michelet, and she apparently said that he believed that no woman could be happy alone; Gissing responded with the silly remark that “...most women, before their marriage, are passionless. Of course it is the man who is maddened and tortured by loneliness. “ A man of Gissing’s experience with women could not have honestly believed this Victorian cliché, but he was determined to keep Gabrielle attached to him whether or not he could get a divorce. When she decided to accept Gissing without a legal marriage, his relief is obvious in his letters to her. Since a divorce could not be obtained immediately, the couple had decided that it would never be discussed again, since, having publicly begun life together, Gabrielle would be injured if in later years a suit was brought to court.

In presenting his impression of Gabrielle, Mr. Coustillas has drawn together a good deal of fresh information; however, one must question the validity of depicting her character by using two studies of her handwriting made by personality interpreters in 1887 and 1893. Material of

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this kind can only be looked on as curiosity. More significant certainly is the impression given of Gabrielle by a cousin, Mme Le Mallier, who, as a child and adult, remembered her. I think, too, that Mr. Coustillas, in evaluating the relationship between George and Gabrielle, tends to idealize her; he accepts her dramatic letters written after George’s death uncritically; and the fact that she never did marry, he interprets as being “faithful to his memory to the end of her life.” One ends up by feeling that Gabrielle has no faults in the editor’s eyes, although here and there a note or remark would indicate otherwise. For example, Gabrielle had such pride that when H. G. Wells indicated that it would be unwise for her to visit England when plans were afoot to get a pension for the Gissing boys, she was vastly offended. Yet the truth is that because of her liaison with Gissing, and a certain amount of distortion of the affair by those trying to get funds from the government, the boys came close to getting nothing. She seemed not to comprehend her position in English eyes.

There are a few things in the Introduction which one might quibble about. One obvious typographical slip is unfortunate because of Gissing’s erratic romances; Walter Leonard, the eldest son, is said to have been born in December 1890. The parents were not married until February 1891 and this slip recalls the rumors that had circulated in London before and after his death that the children were illegitimate.

The establishing of a text for these letters cost Mr. Coustillas some painstaking work, for Gabrielle, exercising her rights, cut out sections she thought indiscreet, cancelled some parts with ink, and rewrote words and phrases here and there. Mr. Coustillas has tried to recover as much as he could of the blotted lines. Since I have had only xerox copies of the letters at hand, I cannot vouch for the restorations. I have, however, checked the printed text with my copies in examining the original, non-obscure writing. I regret to say that in the letters I correlated there are numerous errors in transcription.

This volume does add information to what is known about Gissing's mind and his life; the letters should intrigue the scholars and students who have felt the novelist had little romance in him. What an interesting thing it would be, now that this correspondence has been published, if the letters written to Nell Harrison while Gissing was in America should turn up.

Gissing Autograph Material in the Collection of Earl Daniels
(Continued from the June number)

by Earl Daniels
Colgate University
Hamilton, New York

(m) To Grant Richards, 7 Sept. 1898. from 9 Wentworth Terrace/ Wakefield. An item in the negotiations between Richards and GG about publishing his novels. GG will let Richards have the first offer on the new book. "You suggested an immediate payment of £25 to legalize this grant of option. If you are still of the same mind, so be it."

Signed, George Gissing. The Wakefield address is probably a blind to keep EU from discovering GG's true address. He was living at Dorking at the time. The novel referred to is *The Crown of Life*.

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(n) To "Dear Sirs" 19 June 1901, from Spade House | Sandgate. Returning "the 'Town Traveller' agreement." Can Methuen use Dickens Prefaces "otherwise than for the Rochester edition?"

Signed, George Gissing. Probably sent to GG's literary agent, W. M. Colles.

(o) To Miss Orme, 1 April 1902. from Villa Souvenir | Arcachon. GG supplies French terms from pharmaceutical articles which Miss Orme has asked him about—"on the best authority—that of our Pharmacien, a very intelligent man." "In a day or two I shall receive 'The Story of Teresa,' and will let you know how it strikes me." "Capital, the news of the little boy."

Signed, George Gissing. This letter may be to Eliza Orme, or to her sister, who was in charge of Alfred Gissing, when he was living with a farmer's family at Mabe. I incline to think the sister is the one addressed. The tone sounds too formal for a letter to a friend GG has known since 1894.

(p) To R. Farquharson Sharp, 7 Mar. 1903, from Villa Lannes. | Ciboure. | St. Jean de Luz. Gissing supplies autobiographical notes. In the sentence about his experience at Owens College, GG writes "'finished' my studies at Owens College..." The quotation marks around *finished* are interesting.

Signed, George Gissing.

(q) To George Meredith, 2 Aug. 1903, from Ispourc. | St. Jean Pied de Port. | Basses Pyrénées. | France. His walk this morning reminded him of the English countryside – “the little spleenwort in the stone wall, the foxgloves & bracken, with meadowsweet & loosestrife by the riverside, all remind me of home.” “There glimmers before me the hope of a visit to England next summer....” GG has been reading *Don Quixote*. “Books, books! The impossibility of getting books is my great trouble in this nomadic exile.”

Signed, George Gissing.

II Letters of Gissing’s relatives, friends, and others.

- (a) George Whale to Clement Shorter, 9 Sept 1890. Merely a note accepting an invitation from Shorter.
- (b) Algernon to “Dear Tom,” 25 April 1894. He is sending him some autographs. “There is G.’s in an envelope from William Black, & another from W. H. Hudson, the naturalist, in their own writing.”
- (c) Algernon to William Robbins. 8 March 1909. Contains nothing of importance.
- (d) Algernon to Enid, his daughter, 25 Aug. 1910.
- (e) Alfred C. Gissing to B. C. Ashe, 24 June 1929. “I am glad that my volume of Selections has interested you. The original intention of it was to give the public a clear idea of the development of my father’s intellect and character, which is best done, when possible, in his own words.”
“With regard to a collected edition of all the works, I am afraid that will not be possible yet.”
- (f) By far the most interesting letter in this group is that of Louise De K. Kenny to George C. Williamson, 8 Feb 1904. She writes from Dublin. She has read every page of Gissing she could lay her hands on. “We have a saying in my country, speaking to anyone who has done a good deed—‘Twill be before you’—meaning in God’s heaven. How many kindnesses must have gone before such a man that he himself had forgotten the half of doubtless, but were

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not forgotten there or by the recipients. I who write these words owe him a kindness done me but a very short time before death so sadly took him in the fullness of life.”

“And do you know that there is in my country a tradition as old in the land as Christianity, that upon whoso is called out of the world within the twelve days of Christmastide a special blessing rests; that those are chosen souls, and ’tis the happiest augury of their future state.... Requiem aeternun dona eis, Domine. Et lux perpetua luceat eis. He loved the sunshine, and I hope in God is now enjoying the glory that is brighter than the sun. For me, I am a Catholic as well as Irish and you know what the Mass means to us. So have had a Mass said for the eternal rest of his soul by a very worthy-hearted priest who understands human souls.”

She asks Williamson to forward an enclosed letter of sympathy for Gissing’s widow.

III. Gissing manuscripts

- (a) “By the Kerb”
- (b) “The Pessimist of Plato Road”

Where Gissing Lived. I.
by Arthur Lansdowne

No 76 Burton Road, Brixton, London, S.W.9 (once the home of George Gissing)

In newsletter No. 1. Monsieur Coustillas wrote that whilst in London he was unable to visit the above address, so I went there today to see what kind of house it is.

Burton Road is situated about three miles south of the centre of London and runs west-east from the very busy Brixton Road towards Camberwell, in a densely populated district.

When entering Burton Road from Brixton Road it would appear to have been built up in about the eighteen-eighties as a fairly good middle-class residential street and to have slowly deteriorated over the years. There are a few trees planted along the pavement edge and all the houses have a small front garden, most of which are neglected but a few are still tended and contain pleasant splashes of colour with tulips, daffodils, wallflowers and other spring flowers.

As one proceeds the houses become less seedy but No. 76, however, is not very prepossessing in appearance.

It is one of a group of similarly-built houses, with a tiny neglected garden in front. There is a basement floor a little below the street level, which is reached by a few stone steps. A half-a-dozen steps lead up from the street to a front door which badly needs a coat of paint. To the right of this door and on the same level is a three-part bay-window belonging to the front room of the ground floor and above are two more floors, each having two windows overlooking the street.

The house, built of brick, partially stuccoed, is similar to thousands of others to be found in the inner suburbs of London and remarkable only for their uniform dullness. It is in a state of neglect and the varied, shabby curtains hung in the windows of the four floors probably indicate that it is inhabited by four families.

There is a small, rectangular stone plaque fixed to the facade, bearing the inscription "Stafford House." This, however, is of no special significance, as it is quite frequent in England

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to see, in addition to the number, a fancy name given to a house. It is merely a mild form of snobbery or status symbol.

A few yards distant from No. 76 are two unusual religious meeting-houses or chapels. One, according to the outside notice-board, belongs to the "Brixton Christadelphian Ecclesia" and a plaque in the wall shows 1889 as the date of construction. The other, which bears no date, but obviously of the same period, is named "Michael Church, Society of the General Church of the New Jerusalem." Both these sects are little known in England and are, no doubt, two of the many which came into being during the 19th Century.

Apart from the foregoing, the immediate vicinity of No. 76 Burton Road, is quite featureless.

30th April, 1965.

George Gissing: Poet of Fatigue or Fortitude? Part II

by James A. Rogers

George Gissing was not wanting in spirit and purpose. At times, he may have thought so. But his struggle in life belied any self-doubt to which he momentarily succumbed. When Gissing died, he went in full protestation. The relationship with Gabrielle Fleury, shown by

recent scholarship to have none of the “bitter taste” ascribed to it by Mr. Howe, was a prize Gissing sought—and won. It would have been a great loss had he missed it. It was a tragedy that he possessed it for so brief a span.

From the Gissing-Gabrielle letters emerges a picture of a man who, whatever his prejudices, had considerable depth of feeling. His attitudes on sex and love were wonderfully fresh and unspoiled. They resist, rather they put to shame, a popular conception of the author as a querulous neurotic. Gissing was a rare man, a rare emotional being.

Language applied to him such as “a thinning out of blood,” a description Mr. Howe reserves for Gissing’s temperament and achievement, does dishonor to the author’s striving and his art. It implies a moral and artistic flabbiness that is non-existent. Gissing’s novels do not represent a pattern of defeat. Running through his work is an assertion of man’s dignity, subtle, often strong, even in situations of apparent failure. Particularly is this true of his novels of the middle class, *Isabel Clarendon*, *The Odd Women*, *The Whirpool*, and others, where Gissing is unassailable as a spokesman and artist.

What has Mr. Howe been reading of the author? He mentions *Demos* and without enthusiasm. We agree to the obvious about this novel. It is an attack on the working class. We have more to say. The central character, Richard Mutimer, suffers from gross stereotype. Yet Mutimer has his credible side, swept as he is by a need for intimacy and communication. Love is a pervasive influence in the book. And Gissing is not altogether unwarranted in questioning Mutimer’s “crude energy.” Fame can still be the spur. Style and perception are not absent from this, perhaps, least commendable of Gissing’s major novels.

In any event, it is important to bring criteria to bear on Gissing, not merely social bias. Most writers of the Transition in England are censurable in one way or another in their portrayal

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of working people. The dilemma is not a Gissing dilemma. If it were so, we would not have in literature a vulgarity like *A Mummer’s Wife* or an absurdity like *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*. It is indefensible to charge Gissing sharply with a shortcoming that is very much shared by his colleagues—including Wells.

Mr. Howe quotes Henry Ryecroft’s diatribe on the masses and expresses his disapproval. Fine! We express ours. Let us state, in addition that the hermit’s tuned thoughts do not constitute the passion of Gissing. Nor, as ruminations in essay form, do they give us that special avenue to truth offered by the novel form. They do not provide us with an opportunity to weigh a character through another character’s eyes or to see him at a remove. *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* supplies no contest. The hero, if you will, is a twilight figure in a fixed spot.

Contrariwise, Will Warburton in the novel of that name acts as do all Gissing’s protagonists—he functions. And Will in his story trades isolation in life for sober betterment. His story is as much a product of the author’s late period as that of the celebrated Henry. The same can be said of Piers Otway in *The Crown of Life*, an attack on jingoism and war. Men in Gissing are as men often are, creatures of fragility and strength, fighting desperately for survival and more. Women are often admirable. Such characters do not give up easily or at all. When they do, our moral surety is shaken.

New Grub Street is the one novel which Mr. Howe undertakes to explore in his essay. Here he comes to grips with his subject and here he displays insight. He indicates how Gissing with skill prevents his febrile middle-class hero, Edwin Reardon, from courting the reader’s distaste. Mr. Howe finds Reardon impressive, Biffen, too, though both men are unstable and both men are passive and die. This respect for character and structure is a concession from the critic. He allows that Gissing can perform well with materials. *New Grub Street*, in his estimation, stands high.

The work, standing high in the opinion of all, draws pointedly from Schopenhauer, it is to be noted. The argument has been put forth convincingly in recent scholarship. This

expanding of the book's dimensions should damn it, if didactic optimism were to be our guide. The novel exudes a particular climate of despair, for which Gissing aimed and in the depiction of which he grandly succeeded. It is a climate that serves art and serves truth.

In appraisal of its lethal spread, where blood thins out to a trickle, could Mr. Howe have afforded to take the position that "crude energy" should have seized Reardon and Biffen and wrested them from torpor? Mr. Howe could not with justification have proceeded in such a manner. He would have relaxed his firm hold on the novel.

The task in relation to Gissing generally, it seems to us, is to examine his novels as responsible undertakings, not to approach them with rigid notions about art or humanity. If we look keenly at Gissing, we can be rewarded. Men and women in his work are good and dignified, and yes, courageous. We seldom encounter the like in the novel of our present day.

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Recent Publications.

Anderson, R. F. – *Dalhousie Review*, Spring, 1964, pp.103-4. Review of Korg's *George Gissing*.

Anonymous – "Gissing Family," *Blackmansbury*, Vol. 1. December, 1964. p.51. – "Mrs Gissing II," *Times Literary Supplement*, August 5, 1965, p.680. Review of *The Letters of George Gissing to Gabrielle Fleury*.

Harris, Wendell V. – "An Approach to Gissing's Short Stories," *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. II, No. 2.(Winter, 1965) pp.137-144.

Seymour, William Kean. – "A Victorian Realist," *Contemporary Review*, June 1964, pp. 333-334. Review of Korg's *George Gissing*.

Readers are reminded that contributions to the *Gissing Newsletter* are always welcome. Manuscripts should be sent to Mr. Korg, Department of English, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington 98105.

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