

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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New Women and Odd Women

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The New Woman had been around for many years by the time Gissing published his novel about her, entitled *The Odd Women*, in 1893. The term “new woman” was merely one in a whole list of epithets (mainly abusive, and mainly coined by Mrs. Eliza Lynn Linton) which were applied to this phenomenon of the late 19th century, the woman who sought to find for herself a place in society in her own right, where she could function in and be accepted on her own terms, rather than as an appendage to a man. Mrs. Linton, who coined not only the famous phrase “The Girl of the

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Period” in 1868 in the *Saturday Review*, but also the labels “the Shrieking Sisterhood,” “the Girton Girl” (in 1894 in a novel called *The One Too Many*) and “the Wild Women,” referred to the whole feminist movement as the Modern Revolt in 1870, in *Macmillan’s Magazine*. She saw the movement as having two aims, “the one a noble protest against the frivolity and idleness into which they have suffered themselves to sink; the other, a mad rebellion against the natural duties of their sex and those characteristics known in the mass as womanliness.” (1).

The phrase “the New Woman” didn’t really become common until the 1890’s – in fact, the earliest reference that the *OED* gives is to an article by Sarah Grand in the *North American Review* in 1894, where she says that “both the cow-woman and the scum-woman are well within range of

the comprehension of the Bawling Brotherhood, but the new woman is a little above him.” But if the *term* wasn’t in use, the woman herself was well in evidence. In Gissing’s novels generally, the new woman is the one who is forced either by economic necessity or by personal conviction to establish herself as an independent member of society. Gissing was not specifically interested in the political aspects of the suffragette movement or in votes for women or in the legal and social rights of women in society. This surface situation he takes for granted, and is concerned more to show the psychological and social effects of social problems and pressures on individual characters. This means that his new women are presented not as stereotyped representatives of the shrieking sisterhood, but as different individual women with different problems, and with various reactions and solutions to their problems. However attractive or repellent his women may ultimately be to the reader, they are presented so that adequate personal and psychologically valid grounds are there for the reader’s acceptance or rejection of them.

Nowhere does Gissing use the actual phrase the New Woman, but the chief protagonist of the

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novel *The Odd Women*, Rhoda Nunn, is clearly one of the breed:

She was far from presenting any sorrowful image of a person on the way to old-maidhood... At first view the countenance seemed masculine, its expression somewhat aggressive – eyes shrewdly observant and lips consciously impregnable.... Self-confidence, intellectual keenness, a bright humour, frank courage, were traits legible enough.... (2)

Her concern is with those whom she calls “the odd women” or “the ragged regiment,” the large army of surplus unmarried women whose existence was a striking feature of English society in the second half of the 19th century. Gissing’s concern in this novel is not only with the Rhoda Nunn of his time, the militant new women, but with those women who were without a mate or the possibility of a mate, who were “odd” or redundant *without* being “new” or dynamic or revolutionary. The interest of the novel is in this wider problem of the great excess of females over males, and the consequent distress and hardship thus caused.

This problem, also, was not a new one, nor had discussion of it been lacking. As early as 1859 Harriet Martineau had pointed out (3) that there were half a million more women than men in Britain, and that one-third of all women over the age of twenty were self-supporting.

Discussion of the problem was undertaken also by far less radical writers, notably Mrs. Lynn Linton, who by the 1870s had become very conservative in her views about the position of women in society. She used the problem as the starting point for a tirade against working women who “invade the professional provinces of men” and decried the creation of what she calls a third sex, “those odd women-men, those creatures of indeterminate class ... retaining nothing of the one sex but its form.” (4)

A less strident and hysterical article, one which purported more to be a sober scientific study,

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was written by W. R. Greg (5). Its title “Why are women redundant?” gives a direct guide to its contents; it not only states the problem, but attempts to establish reasons for the existence of the problem. Greg’s endeavour is, in his own words, “to bring together all the scattered phenomena which are usually seen only separately and in detail” (6), and he sees as a result that “there is an

enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation, a number which is indicative of an unwholesome social state, and is both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong.” (7) Greg also makes the point (as did Mrs. Linton, and as did most of the social critics who were aware of the problem) that these “odd,” “surplus,” “redundant” women belonged chiefly to the middle and upper classes.

The “women question” in general, and the problem of the surplus single women in society in particular, were thus no new topics for discussion by the late 1880’s. The radical feminist position had been set forward by eminent men like J. S. Mill (*On the Subjection of Women*) in 1869 and Engels (*The Origin of the Family*) in 1884; and the opposite, conservative and generally reactionary view not only by Mrs. Linton and Charlotte M. Yonge but by as powerful a voice as Ruskin’s, in *Of Queens’ Gardens* published in 1865. Gissing’s contribution to the debate, therefore, was not one of the earliest, but it was hailed by most contemporary reviewers as a powerful, if gloomy, statement of the problem. Almost all the reviews, whether applauding or not the literary merit of the novel, are agreed that his story is “all shadow. . . with scarcely a glimpse of brightness” (8); and in the words of another, “bereft of all natural good spirits” (9) and “gloomily pessimistic”; but they all assume that the situation he presents is a common and well-known one, not one of the reviewers charging him with the presentation of a non-problem. As the *Pall Mall Gazette* remarked, “the novel represents the woman question made flesh,” (10) and all in all, the topicality of the novel is never questioned.

One important point to be made is that Gissing was concerned in the novel only with the

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middle-class single working women, and in this respect he shows that he is aware of the realities of the situation. In W. R. Greg’s article, when the author argues for female emigration as a possible solution to the redundancy problem, the point is made forcibly that “the women who are mostly redundant, ‘the involuntary celibates’ in England, are chiefly to be found in the upper and educated sections of society. Among the agricultural and manufacturing population, who earn their daily bread by daily labour, comparatively few women remain long or permanently single. It is those immediately and those far above them – who have a position to maintain and appearance to keep up... that chiefly recruit the ranks of the old maid.”

The trouble seemed to be, as Lee Holcolme points out in her book *Victorian Ladies at Work*, that by the middle of the 19th century for middle-class women to work at all was considered degrading. “My opinion is,” said one lady of the 1850’s, “that if a woman is obliged to work, at once she (although she may be Christian and well bred) loses that peculiar position which the word ‘lady’ conventionally designates”. (11) The education of middle-class women was geared towards their consumer status, and was therefore useless, fitting them for no kind of employment. Mary Frances Cusack, an Irish nun of the Poor Clare order, put her finger on the problem in 1874 when she wrote:

There would be a good deal less destitution and misery in the world, if women of the middle class were brought up to some useful occupation.... But now the middle class society must follow the upper class society, the tradesman or farmer must have his girls educated like those of the peer or city magnate.” (12)

The result of this misplaced educational emphasis, of course, when there is already an excess of women over men, is the creation of a large group of women whom Mrs. Linton calls “not even good, honest, lower-class women,” but who are “neither ladies nor servants, who go out as shop-girls or

nursery governesses, who do not marry early, and who know nothing by which they can make a sufficient income.” (13) It is these middle-class women who are the problem in society, and these women with whom Gissing is concerned. There is no place for working-class girls in Mary Barfoot’s establishment – Miss Barfoot, perhaps the only character in the novel fully approved by the author, firmly rejects a friend’s suggestion that a girl who is of the working classes might be admitted to her school. “In the uneducated classes,” she says, “I have no interest whatever.... I choose my sphere, that’s all. Let those work for the lower classes (I must call them lower, for they are, in every sense), let those work for them who have a call to do so.... I must keep to my own class” (p. 79). This is made as a public statement, and its ethics are in no way questioned by Gissing. Later in the same chapter, in private conversation with Rhoda Nunn, Mary states her conviction that working-class girls are not worth her consideration. “The odious fault of working-class girls,” she says, “in town and country alike, is that they are absorbed in preoccupation with their animal nature. We, thanks to our education and the tone of our society, manage to keep that in the background” (p. 90). This statement, of course, has all kinds of ramifications and implications for attitudes to sex and celibacy in the novel as well as the interest of its class assumptions; but whatever the reason for Mary Barfoot’s rejection of working-class women and their animal natures, the fact that she cares only for the emancipation of her own class shows how aware Gissing was both of the social area of the problem of unmarried women and of the kinds of solution that were being proposed and attempted for it.

In his characters, Gissing covers almost all the types of single middle-class women in hierarchical order. It is possible to distinguish four broad types of unmarried women in the novel; to rank the women in terms of author-approval from (at the bottom) those who never can and never will achieve any kind of personal fulfilment either in the single or the married state (the elder

Madden sisters, Alice and Virginia); through those who use marriage as a mindless and tragic escape from the problem (Monica Madden); to the New Woman struggling but often failing to achieve personal freedom from dependence on men (Rhoda Nunn); to the perfect achievement and detachment of Mary Barfoot. The central narrative emphasis of the novel is in the two middle levels of the hierarchy – those who are seeking escape (Monica Madden and Rhoda Nunn) – but the more static characters of Virginia and Alice Madden and of Mary Barfoot are thematically essential to provide a framework, a point of reference; to show, on the one hand, to what depths of degradation and humiliation single women can sink, and on the other to what kind of perfection they can rise. If we look in detail at these four types of women, we should be able to establish what it is that either condemns them or glorifies them for Gissing, and thus to see exactly what kind of woman Gissing sees as the epitome of the New Woman, and what kind of emancipation he desires for his female characters.

The elder Madden sisters, Alice and Virginia, are from the beginning provided with a triple disadvantage – a useless education, a distressing lack of money, and ineffectual personalities. They had received their education partly at home, and partly at private schools “... instruction suitable to their breeding” (p. 6). Immediately therefore they are doomed, for their father had never considered that they should study with a professional object – “as to training them for any path save those trodden by English ladies of the familiar type, he could not have dreamt of any such thing” (p. 6). As a result of this when he dies at the end of the first chapter he leaves his daughters barely provided for, either professionally or economically. The heavy irony of this incident is typical of

Gissing; Dr. Madden has been reading from “The Lotus Eaters,” and is called away to a patient just as he reads the lines:

Let us alone. Time driveth onward fast,
And in a little while our lips are dumb.

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Let us alone. What is it that will last?
All things are taken from us –

and on his journey he falls and dies. We next see the girls in London, sixteen years later in 1888, and hear of their lives in the intervening time; “Alice obtained a situation as a nursery governess at £16 a year. Virginia was fortunate enough to be accepted as companion by a gentlewoman at Weston-super-Mare; her payment, twelve pounds” (p. 17). At the time of the main events of the novel, Virginia is thrown on her own meagre financial resources, as the lady to whom she has been companion is dead; and Alice, the governess, has been dismissed, as her charges are now old enough to go to school. No other prospects open for them, except one offer to Alice of the post of governess to five children with no salary, and a position as lady-help for Virginia. Both of these, of course, they refuse.

Gissing’s portrait of the economic positions and working conditions of the two sisters is very accurate. Jeanne Peterson gives for the 1880’s the figure of about £25 p.a. as the usual pay for governesses. (14) But by the late 1880’s, when the Madden sisters were working, the number of middle-class women seeking work had swelled (one lady reported having 800 replies to her advertisement of a vacancy for a governess in her household) and this forced salaries ever lower. Alice Madden’s lack of a useful education tells against her here, too – as she complained to her sister, “There is so little choice for people like myself. Certificates, and even degrees, are asked for on every hand. With nothing but references to past employers, what can one expect?” (p. 21)

It is interesting also that Virginia refuses the position of lady’s help – being brought up as a lady made it impossible for her to take on any work verging on the menial.

It is in such respects that their inherent weak-mindedness acts against them. With capital of £800, they can see no way to live other than that of virtual starvation on the meagre £17 p.a. they receive as income (and it is an almost literal starvation, as they seem to live on boiled rice, bread

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and jam). Rhoda Nunn’s first suggestion to them is that they should use their capital to open a small school, but they are incapable of taking such a step or of making such a decision, and for much of the novel, they vacillate about whether or not they should act on Rhoda’s suggestion. They are saved from absolute poverty, ironically, only by Monica’s pregnancy and suspected adultery – they are in practice employed by her estranged husband to keep a guard on her – and after her death in childbirth, they take on the responsibility of bringing up the motherless child, and there is again talk of the school, but it is only because their brother-in-law’s wealth is there as a security that such a thing becomes imaginable for them.

Financially, socially and emotionally, the Madden sisters are non-achievers. Virginia, indeed, becomes an alcoholic, and her pathetic attempts to retain her gentility while slipping into the railway refreshment rooms for a quick gin-and-water, her rationalization of her weakness in her own mind, and her gradual deterioration and exposure are treated by Gissing with a low-key realism

that is one of the most moving parts of the novel. (There is an implicit Puritanical disapproval shown in such episodes; it is as though Virginia's alcoholism is blamed on her having nothing useful to do, and in the same way, her sister Alice turns to religion – always a bad sign in Gissing – to while away the empty hours.)

The Madden sisters are hopeless failures because they are unable to show any kind of self-reliance. They cannot manage financially; they do not know how to organize their lives; and even sexually, they need the vicarious pleasure which they get in Monica's marriage. Their pathetic obsession with and delight in this marriage is an obvious sublimation of their own emotional and sexual needs. They are spineless creatures, condemned in the terms of the novel but also, in the terms of the novel, to be pitied as victims of their class and circumstance.

Their much younger sister, Monica, is a different case. She marries, without love and without
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due consideration, motivated primarily by a desire to escape the poverty and inevitable ill-health of working in a shop. Again, socially and sociologically Gissing has his facts correct. To be a shop-assistant was considered by middle-class girls to represent a life of supposedly respectable work, according to Lee Holcolme, (15) and even though it was probably an easier task in terms of hours and conditions to work as a servant or in a factory, such jobs could not be considered by a girl of any education or even slight social pretension. But shop conditions were appalling – according to a Select Committee on Shops (Regulation) Bill of 1886 (16), most shop assistants worked an average of 80 hours per week (in the novel, Monica Madden works for 83.5 hours per week), for an average salary between £15 and £40 per annum, out of which money was deducted for board and lodging, as most shop assistants were compelled to “live in.” Health hazards associated with shop work were digestive troubles (girls were allowed to be absent for only 30 minutes for dinner, 20 minutes for tea), anaemia, back complaints and varicose veins. When Monica first meets Rhoda Nunn, Rhoda thinks that she looked like a fever patient just recovering. Monica remarks to Rhoda Nunn:

“We suffer a great deal from that [not being allowed to sit down while on duty]. Some of us get diseases. A girl has just gone to the hospital with varicose veins, and two or three others have the same thing in a less troublesome form. Sometimes, on Saturday night, I lose all feeling in my feet; I have to stamp on the floor to be sure it's still under me.”

“Ah, that Saturday night!”

“Yes, it's bad enough now, but at Christmas! There was a week or more of Saturday nights – going on to one o'clock in the morning. A girl by me was twice carried out fainting, one night after another. They gave her brandy, and she came back again....”

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“Well, no, it was her own wish. Her ‘book of takings’ wasn't very good, poor thing, and if it didn't come up to a certain figure at the end of the week she would lose her place. She lost it after all. They told her she was too weak. After Christmas she was lucky enough to get a place as a lady's maid at twenty-five pounds a year – at Scotcher's she had fifteen. But we heard that she burst a blood-vessel, and now she's in hospital at Brompton” (pp. 51-52).

It is no wonder that Monica marries her elderly suitor, Widdowson, even though she feels no real affection for him. As the report of the Shop Hours Select Committee stated in 1886 (17), “the majority of shop assistants look upon marriage as their one hope of release, and would, as one girl expressed it, ‘marry anybody to get out of the drapery business.’”

Just how much first-hand information about this kind of situation Gissing had is not known. In his *Commonplace Book* he refers to his first years in London after his return from America, years when he lived in picturesque but slummy areas around Tottenham Court Road, as a time of “extraordinary mental growth, of great mental activity. It was there that I acquired my intense perception of the characteristics of poor life in London.” (18)

He also worked for a few months in late 1878 as a clerk in St. John’s Hospital, an institution for the treatment of skin diseases. But this was 13 years before he wrote *The Odd Women*. He makes very few references to the actual composition of the novel in either his diary or his letters, and there is little mention of either direct or indirect social research into the question of working women. In July 1888 he went to a strike meeting of Bryant & May’s match girls (where very few of the girls were themselves present) and heard speeches from Clementina Black and Mrs. Besant, and in October that year, in Paris, he went to a lecture by Louise Michel on “Le Rôle des femmes dans

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l’Humanité.” Jacob Korg suggests that a paper by Clara Collet, delivered at the London Ethical Society in February 1890, “might almost have served as a text for *The Odd Women*.” (19) But this paper, entitled “The Economic Position of Educated Working Women,” could not have been heard by Gissing, for he was in Italy at the time. He did not meet Clara Collet until July 1893, after *The Odd Women* was written, and there is no evidence that he had previously seen a copy of her paper.

Monica Madden cannot be a successful New Woman, because she suffers not only from the same weak and vacillating nature as her sisters, but is also trapped by her emotional and sexual needs. When Monica’s marriage fails to satisfy her with the emotional and sexual fulfilment that perversely she at first thought she could do without, she turns to a young bachelor named Bevis, and expects from him the love and understanding she could not obtain from her husband. The young man, who has seen himself as indulging only in a mild flirtation with a pretty woman, understandably backs off and Monica is left to go back to her husband, although she returns to him only because she discovers herself to be pregnant with his child. She has gained enough self-respect, however, to realize that she cannot live with her husband again, even though she is technically innocent, and so she stays with her sisters (accepting her husband’s financial support) until the child is born. It is important that she dies in childbirth, because the child is the produce of a loveless and unsatisfactory marriage, and Monica is symbolically punished for her misplaced judgment; first in marrying Widdowson without love, and second in bestowing her non-conjugal love on an unworthy man.

As a fictional creation, Monica is perhaps the best thing in the book, for the ambiguity of her character – is she potentially a recruit for the ranks of the New Woman, or is she merely a selfish minx who wants the security of marriage without accepting any responsibilities except those of her own pleasure? – means that she is a realistic example of a young woman who is torn between

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comfort and independence, who learns through experience and not through precept, and whose progress towards self-knowledge and self-fulfilment is by no means consistent and steady. But from the point of being a New Woman, she won’t do, because she is too dependent on men for the

fulfilment of all her needs. She has to die – she has come part of the way to emancipation, but her dependence on others is too strong, and there is no place for her now in Gissing's world.

Rhoda Nunn, the other main female character, is the obvious example of the New Woman, independent of men in every sense. Even though she has to work for her living, significantly she works for Mary Barfoot, not for a man, and she supports herself by preaching the precepts she practises. All reviewers of the novel, from the date of its publication until recent times, have seized upon it as a presentation of the woman question through the person of Rhoda Nunn. Throughout the novel, the contrast is made between Rhoda as a radical and a revolutionary, and Mary Barfoot as a more moderate, concerned humanist whose generous heart can make allowance for human frailty and forgive it. Mary Barfoot at one point accuses Rhoda of having hardened her heart with theory, and says that "to work for women one must keep one's womanhood" (p. 195). This warning is the more pointed as a man soon comes into Rhoda's life – Everard Barfoot.

Rhoda's relationship with him is developed in a very subtle way. It is not just a crude sexual awakening that dictates her response, but something that is in keeping with her role as a dedicated theoretical revolutionary – a cold-blooded attempt to try him to the point of proposing marriage, to test not only his emotional involvement, but her own power to renounce everything for the good of the cause, so that nobody can condemn her pride in her celibacy being merely the virtue of necessity. Her zeal and asceticism in the feminist cause demand an emotional triumph over her lover; she cannot see herself as a true leader and example until she has discarded all emotional ties. Rhoda's

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final defeat lies not in her eventual failure to find happiness with Everard, but in falling a victim to her own emotions – her sexual involvement with him, her increasing jealousy about his supposed attraction to Monica Madden, and her very real emotional and sexual suffering after he has refused to clear his name of suspicion and has deliberately left her without an answer to her accusations. Because she has yielded to the needs of her own sexual nature, she fails to be a perfect New Woman in her own terms, for early in the novel she makes clear her belief that the feminist movement needs to go through a period of celibacy and asceticism before it can be successful. But at the same time she is highly attracted to Everard Barfoot – after his proposal, "he read in her eyes and on her lips a profound agitation" (p. 266); when he asks her to touch his fingers, her lips quiver. At Seascale, where she meets him on her holiday, she returns his kiss with passion, "she loved with passion, allowing herself to indulge the luxurious emotion as never yet" (p. 385).

Her real time of trial comes when she has effectually refused Everard's proposal of a free union, and returns to her old room in London with the question of the nature of the relationship still undecided. There, she regards her bedroom with strong emotions: "Her first sensation when she looked upon the white bed was one of disgust" (p. 407) and she "did not see how she could continue to use the room." (The fact that it is a white bed is often stressed – Gissing's colour symbolism, although crude, is quite effective). Is this because, her sexual passions having finally been aroused, she cannot bear to contemplate the thought of chastity and virginity which that bed implied? On that first night back, she is tormented with sexual passion – "she shed bitter tears; and not only wept, but agonized in mute frenzy, the passions of her flesh torturing her until she thought of death as a refuge" (p. 409).

In one sense only has Rhoda triumphed when she finally rejects Everard at the end of the novel

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– from a feminist point of view, she has regained her independence from "the man who had so

disturbed and sullied the swift, pure stream of her life” (p. 408). From now on, she would still be “the same proud and independent woman, responsible only to herself, fulfilling the nobler laws of her existence” (p. 420).

If Rhoda represents the problems faced by the New Woman who is seeking to free herself of all chains, then Mary Barfoot is the symbol of the perfect achiever. Dramatically, she is not of central importance, as she is a static character in the plot, but both in her conversations and by the kind of person she is, she represents the ultimate pinnacle of independent womanhood. The life model for Mary Barfoot is probably Jessie Boucherett who, inspired by Harriet Martineau in 1859, came to London and founded the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, whose object was to develop and extend “the hitherto restricted field of female labour by the establishment of industrial schools and workshops where girls may be taught those trades and occupations which are at present exclusively monopolized by men.” (20) Jessie Boucherett also organized classes which provided young girls with a “solid English education” and the older ones with training in clerical work. (21) This is very close to Rhoda Nunn’s explanation of Mary Barfoot’s establishment.

She has private means – not large, but sufficient to allow of her combining benevolence with business. She makes it her object to train young girls for work in offices, teaching them the things that I learnt in Bristol and typewriting as well. Some pay for their lessons, and some get them for nothing. (p. 33)

Mary Barfoot not only trains girls to be professionally and economically independent, but gives them in herself a model of what they can attain. She is Gissing’s ideal emancipated woman, of “mental and moral stamina” (p. 75); dedicated without fanaticism (p. 88); warm and compassionate

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(p. 196); having known both financial and emotional hardship, and having overcome both. But there are implications about Mary Barfoot’s perfection which are important for an understanding of Gissing’s view of what is necessary for freedom.

In the first place, she is financially independent, and this is very important. No woman in Gissing’s novels can be emotionally emancipated unless she is also financially secure. Mary can only pursue her work as a trainer of women for occupations other than nursing and teaching because she has a substantial income of her own – which she inherited ironically enough from her cousin Everard’s father, who disinherited Everard for his supposed immorality. But as well as being financially independent, Mary is also free of that other need that ties women to men – the need for sexual fulfilment. She has not always been sexless, having cherished in her youth an unconfessed and unrequited passion for her cousin Everard, but she has passed beyond this, without becoming warped, and has, in Gissing’s phrase, “conquered her desires.” Although she is jealous of Everard’s attachment to Rhoda, she manages to overcome this too, in the course of the novel. From an authorial comment that “she had been able to outlive those fervours of instinct which often make the middle life of an unwedded woman one long repining” (p. 311), it would seem that she is perhaps past the menopause, but certainly in Gissing’s terms she is now “above” sexual passion in a way that Rhoda is not. She has successfully conquered her own sexuality, and is therefore free to achieve perfection.

The theme of sexual renunciation is a vital one in the novel, especially in the light of an early comment by Rhoda (but one that she made before she became herself involved in a sexually arousing relationship).

“I am seriously convinced,” she says, “that before the female sex can be raised from its low level there will have to be a widespread revolt against sexual

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instinct. Christianity couldn't spread over the world without help of the ascetic ideal, and this great movement for woman's emancipation must also have its ascetics.” (p. 90)

There is a close correlation between feminist achievement and Christian renunciation and denial, which is explicit as well as implicit. Rhoda Nunn is deliberately so named, for when she first meets Everard, Gissing says that she “seemed to have endeavoured to liken herself to the suggestion of her name by the excessive plainness with which she had arranged her hair” (p. 117). She dresses usually in black, but when she first begins to show interest in Everard, she wears a red silk blouse, and reverts to her nun-like costume only after they have rejected each other.

Mary Barfoot (another Christian pun perhaps) is more of a saint than Rhoda, and has passed beyond all such needs. She is the feminist counterpart of the Christian ascetic, and there can be no earthly partner for her (as there cannot be for Rhoda at the end of the novel). She can find no other partner than an ideal. The path of the idealist is one of renunciation of all kinds of dependence, but especially sexual dependence, and this is all that Gissing could see for the New Woman in his fiction. It is a little different from his comment to Eduard Bertz in June 1893, soon after the novel was published:

I am driven frantic by the crass imbecility of the typical woman. That type must disappear, or at all events become altogether subordinate. And I believe that the only way of effecting this is to go through a period of what many people will call sexual anarchy. Nothing good will perish; we can trust the forces of nature, which tend to conservation.... (22)

But no matter what Gissing's theoretical convictions may be, in this novel sexual emancipation

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means *not* freedom for women to behave with sexual licence, but for them to be freed of their dependence on men for sexual fulfilment.

In this novel then, Gissing's preoccupation is not so much with the New Woman as a sociological phenomenon, or a type, but with the personal problems that such women have in achieving their aims. Because the novel (like any novel) needs a narrative interest, the extreme types of single women – those who can never achieve and those who have reached the Nirvana of feminist perfection – who are thematically so important, have to be subordinated to characters whose struggles towards freedom and achievement can be presented dramatically and thus provide a focus for the action of the novel. The result of this is that there is an imbalance between the didactic and dramatic thrusts of the novel.

Another disappointment of the novel is that Gissing is able to work out the struggles of his two central characters only through a very conventional nineteenth-century ideal of developing love relationships, and Rhoda can only become a fully emancipated New Woman by rejecting all sexual desires. Gissing's concern in the novel is progressive, in the best sense of the word, but he really hasn't come any further than a novelist like George Eliot in this respect, because he can see no

possible solution to the problem common in so many Victorian novels – the problem of how to find a worthwhile life for women which will allow them to enjoy a satisfactory marriage as well as personal independence. But it seems that it just isn't possible for Gissing to let his women have it both ways.

1 - E. Lynn Linton, "The Modern Revolt," *Macmillan's Magazine*, XXIII (Nov. 1870-April 1871), p. 142.

2 - *The Odd Women* (London, Nelson, n.d.), p. 30. All subsequent references are to this edition.

3 - Harriet Martineau, "Female Industry," *Edinburgh Review*, CCXXII (April, 1859), pp. 292 ff.

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4 - E. Lynn Linton, "Woman's Place in Nature and Society," *Belgravia*, XXIX (May 1816), p. 352.

5 - W. R. Greg, *Literary and Social Judgments* (London: Bungay, 1869), pp. 280- 316.

6 - *Ibid.*, p. 282.

7 - *Ibid.*, p. 282.

8 - George Cotterell, "New Novels," *Academy*, XLIII (24 June 1893), p. 542.

9 - "The Library," *Queen*, XCIII (3 June 1893), p. 941.

10 - "Reviews: *The Odd Women*," *Pall Mall Gazette* (29 May 1893), p. 4.

11 - Quoted in Lee Holcolme, *Victorian Ladies at Work* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973), p. 4.

12 - M. F. Cusack, *Woman's Work in Modern Society* (Kenmare Publications, 1874), p. 109.

13 - E. Lynn Linton, *Macmillan's Magazine*, p. 148.

14 - M. Jeanne Peterson, "The Victorian Governess" in Martha Vicinus (ed.), *Suffer and be still* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 1972), p. 6.

15 - Lee Holcolme, p. 107.

16 - Cited in Lee Holcolme, pp. 109-110.

17 - Lee Holcolme, p. 117.

18 - Jacob Korg (ed.), *George Gissing's Commonplace Book* (New York: New York Public Library, 1962), pp. 22-23.

19 - Jacob Korg, *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 192.

20 - Duncan Crow, *The Victorian Woman* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), p. 159.

21 - Lee Holcolme, p. 16.

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22 - Arthur C. Young (ed.), *The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz* (London: Constable, 1961), p. 171.

Gissing in the San Francisco Press

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The following two reviews appeared in San Francisco newspapers in early 1896 and 1898. The first, an unsigned review of *The Unclassed*, is found in *The San Francisco Call* of Sunday, 31 May 1896. It deals with the second edition of the book which had appeared under the imprint of Lawrence & Bullen in London in November 1895 and under that of R. F. Fenno in America in May 1896. The review furthers the critical stance that Gissing did not pamper his readers; Gissing approached his subjects with the seriousness of a man presenting life as it existed, at all levels, in Victorian England. As others did at the time, (1) the reviewer is quick to note both Gissing's ability as an author and his work's straightforwardness.

The Unclassed

"Well worth the reading is this new novel by that clever English author, George Gissing. The hero is a literary man who undergoes a world of experience in love affairs and narrowly escapes the snare of a siren, but is preserved by a providential turn to make happy the long-misrepresented heroine. There are many characters in the book, and the interest is well sustained. Here is one of the interesting paragraphs concerning a subject on which nearly everybody at one time or another has philosophized. The hero is the speaker:

What is a fellow to do to get money?... Make me a millionaire and I will

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purchase the passionate devotion of any free-hearted woman the world contains.
(Chapter VII)

While the reader may take exception to the hero's utterances sometimes, yet there is no getting around the fact that he talks eloquently, and the further fact that he often hits upon cold truth."

The second review appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on Sunday, 6th March 1898, nearly a year after the publication of *The Whirlpool* in England. The review reflects the general

opinion of contemporary critics (2): while the book has its shortcomings, it was one of Gissing's more important and distinctive novels. The review was untitled; it was written by George Hamlin Fitch. (3)

"One of the remarkable books of the season is 'The Whirlpool,' by George Gissing, which is brought out in an American edition by the Frederick A. Stokes Company, and is for sale by William Doxey. (4) It is not a new story, having been written more than ten years ago, but it is stronger than *In the Year of Jubilee*, or, indeed, than any other of Gissing's novels that we have yet seen. As a story it has the grave defect of too much detail and of the introduction of several figures in which the reader refuses to take any interest; but as a sketch of certain phases of London society it is full of power, and as a picture of the dangers to women of bohemian life it is as strong as it is bitter. What gives the book permanent value is the extraordinary vitality and truth to nature of the four leading characters, Harvey Rolfe and his wife, Alma, and Hugh Carnaby and his wife, Sibyl. The novelist has made these four figures serve as the concrete basis for a deeply interesting drama of married life, with two women of the period as the moving forces. How women dominate the lives of men and how easily their whims or their selfishness may spoil fine careers is shown here in the most vivid way.

Rolfe and Carnaby are men easily understood. Both are honest, truthful, intensely masculine characters, who only show weakness when brought into relations with women. Rolfe is bookish, and, having inherited a competence, he proceeds to lay out his life in a way that few would adopt in

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this country (5). The man of leisure with us is a rare character, who usually finds existence more endurable in the Old World. Carnaby, on the other hand, was meant by nature for a soldier, but as a civilian he would have gained fame as an explorer or as a developer of new countries, had not his foolish fondness for his wife prevented him from following out his career. Mrs. Carnaby is a finished type of the cold-blooded coquette, absolutely selfish, and destitute of any real affection for any living being except herself. Yet such is her power of simulation that she actually imposes upon her close associates and gains the reputation of a lovable woman, with no thought save for the improvement of her husband's fortunes.

The sketch of Alma Frothingham, who marries Rolfe, is the best thing Gissing has yet done. She is a woman consumed with ambition to excel. Endowed with some musical skill she makes a speciality of the violin. Her father being a promoter of mining companies, she has all the advantages of wealth until a crash comes in his affairs and he commits suicide to escape the shame of exposure. Then Alma tries to study for the professional stage. Deep down in her nature is a great craving for praise, no matter from what source, and to this she largely owes her many troubles. For the fulfilment of the simplest duty she expects recognition. After an offer of marriage from a music-hall composer, a coarse, vulgar fellow, but with undoubted genius for producing songs to catch the public ear, and another offer to live as the mistress of a wealthy young aristocrat, Alma returns to London and accepts Rolfe. He had always admired her, and she has a strong affection for him, though he never professed to understand her music.

The experience of these two in the intimate association of married life is a masterpiece of analysis and description. The woman, who is left absolutely free by her husband to follow her own tastes, rebels against the cares of a household. She neglects her little boy in a way that would have

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brought stern reproof from the husband had the offender been any other than the woman whom he loves so unselfishly. Almost imperceptibly he becomes father and mother to the helpless little fellow, whose weakness appeals so strongly to him. In his description of this brooding love of the father, so rare in fiction and so common in real life since many women have come to scorn the burdens of motherhood, Mr. Gissing has done a great piece of work. That parental love, which is often as strong in the man as in the woman, is pictured here in the tremulous fear of the father for the future of his boy, in his study to save the little lad from his own errors, in his foreboding of that awakening of sex which encompasses the child with danger of irretrievable disaster. Brought into relief against this tender, sheltering love of the father is the wife's careless avoidance of all the personal responsibilities and cares of the mother. With her the flattering words of associates, who encourage her to study for a professional career, outweigh all the demands of home and helpless childhood. Her little boy is intrusted to servants as a matter of course, and she gives herself to that life of excitement in London which is vividly illustrated in the whirlpool that drags all who come within its influence down into a dark vortex from which there is no escape in this world. To trace the story of her deterioration and of her almost incredible follies would consume too much space. Let it suffice that her experiences point one moral – the lack of wisdom in the woman who permits her children to become alienated from her by her own failure in affection and care.

Equally true and equally fundamental is the inability of Rolfe, a thoroughly masculine man, to understand the motives and the reasoning of his wife. Perhaps the best example of this is the wife's fierce jealousy when she learns that her husband has been contributing to the support of two children, left in the care of a kindergarten teacher. Rolfe, before his marriage, found these children, helpless and deserted by their father, whom he had known well. So he engaged to support them. Yet

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out of suspicions and half truths the wife built up a figment of wrongs to herself which had a large share in carrying her to the brink of the whirlpool of moral ruin. In a dozen ways Rolfe finds that after years of intimacy he cannot understand the woman whose welfare he has so near at heart and whose happiness is one of his strongest desires. It is the old, old story of the differences in mind and nature between man and woman, differences which no one can make clear, but which serve to cause most of the miseries of married life.

The finest female character in the book is Mary Abbott, the woman who never appreciated the hard work and frequent illness of her husband, a reporter on a London morning paper, until death came by accident in the night. Her misery and remorse worked a revolution in character and she is one of the persons that one feels the better for knowing. The book is full of vigorous bits of description and in nearly every chapter may be found comment on life and character that shows the philosopher under the novelist. The man grasps into the thick of human life, and he compels the reader to follow him and to share in his interest. Listen to this view of Kipling, written when the 'Barrack-room Ballads' (6) were fresh:

'Here's the strong man made articulate,' cried Rolfe at length. (...) He knows it; the man is a great artist; he smiles at the voice of his genius.' (Part III, Ch. XIII).

And if one wishes to read a finished bit of tragedy, let him turn to the scene in which Mrs. Rolfe is confronted by the Carnabys. It has heartache and tears in every line, yet not a line is over-strained. There is not a single loud note, not a shout or a scream; yet we feel the cold breath of the wind of destiny as it goes by these tragic figures, bearing into the past – that irrevocable past beyond the grasp of human hand – the hopes of happiness of the actors in this drama.”

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- 1 - See P. Coustillas and C. Partridge's *Gissing: The Critical Heritage* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 75-78. See also *Literary News*, 17, no. 17 (1896), p. 223 for extracts from thirteen reviews dealing with *The Unclassed*.
- 2 - *Gissing: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 276-315.
- 3 - Mr. Fitch was Literary Editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle* from 1880 until his death in 1915.
- 4 - William Doxey was a noted and respected bookseller in San Francisco. See Robert E. Cowan's *Booksellers of early San Francisco* (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1953), pp. 51-59.
- 5 - Mr. Fitch sprinkles moral judgments throughout his review. A further example of this practice is found in his comments on the burdens of motherhood.
- 6 - Collected poems by Kipling published in 1892.

"Noel Ainslie" Identified

Pierre Coustillas

In the December 1967 number of the *Gissing Newsletter* I raised a problem, at once bibliographical and biographical, which had puzzled me for some years and which I tried to solve in part. The article was entitled "On the Authorship of 'Some Recollections of George Gissing' (*Gentleman's Magazine*, February (Not January) 1906," and I showed in it that the writer of these recollections could not be Arthur Henry Bullen, the editor of the journal – which had just been revived by Alfred Harmsworth – as W. H. Hudson suggested when he read the article fresh from the press. I established that the anonymous writer was undoubtedly Noel Ainslie, author of three novels – *An Erring Pilgrimage* (1896) and *Among Thorns* (1898) published by Lawrence & Bullen, and *The Salvation Seekers* (1901), which appeared under the imprint of Methuen & Co., after the

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dissolution of the Lawrence & Bullen partnership. The link between the article in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (and indeed an anonymous review of *The House of Cobwebs*, also by the same pen, printed in the June number), and Noel Ainslie, I went on to show, is a letter signed Noel Ainslie in the *Daily Chronicle* for December 31, 1903 in which the writer, a young novelist, claims to have known Gissing and to have been told the contents of *By the Ionian Sea* before the volume achieved publication. I concluded my enquiry by noting that it was in the summer of 1898, when Gissing, just back from his third Italian journey, frequently visited Bullen at Holmwood, that Ainslie – obviously a friend of Bullen's – and Gissing became acquainted and held long conversations in the Surrey lanes. To finish with, I requested information about Noel Ainslie, as no person of that name appears in Gissing's papers and the name is not listed either in *Who's Who* at the turn of the century or indeed to be found in any reference book.

For some ten years I pondered over the conundrum and occasionally came across reviews of the three novels by Noel Ainslie. Once, in a column headed "Novels of the Day," (*Standard*, June 14, 1901, p. 4), I found Gissing's name in the same column as a notice of *The Salvation Seekers*. Another time, in the *Weekly Sun* (April 24, 1898, p.2), I was struck by a remark to the effect that the author of *Among Thorns* was said to be "a promising young writer, and we are inclined to think a lady." Research at St. Catherine's House in London indirectly confirmed that, since no person named Noel Ainslie was born in the British Isles in the 1870's and 1880's, Noel Ainslie was a pseudonym. As several women are mentioned in Gissing's diary for the summer of 1898, any of them was a good candidate and I thought for a time that Mrs. Rosalind Williams (later Dobbs) – a sister of Beatrice Webb, the Fabian – might well be the enigmatic Noel Ainslie, since in an unpublished paper on Gissing she relates memories strangely similar to those of Noel Ainslie. But Mrs. Williams's daughter Kitty Muggeridge, did not throw any light on the question when I applied

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to her, even though she was very helpful in other ways.

What eventually put me on the right track was *Frank Sidgwick's Diary and Other Material relating to A. H. Bullen, and the Shakespeare Head Press* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975). This book contains an essay by Paul Morgan on Bullen and the Shakespeare Head Press in which it is said that at the time he founded the Press, "Bullen did not move his family to Stratford. Instead he lived with two ladies, Edith and Alys Lister, called his cousins, but the relationship is obscure." Paul Morgan described Edith Lister, in a way which I thought most promising, as "a writer who published verse under the pseudonym of B. M. Martin and magazine stories and articles under a variety of names. Alys seems to have been the Martha of the pair. Edith acted as secretary of the Press and was the fierce champion of Bullen for the rest of her life; she died in 1938." After reading this, I wrote to Mr. Morgan about the archives of the Shakespeare Head Press in the Shakespeare Centre at Stratford-upon-Avon, and heard in due course from its director, Dr. Levi Fox, that Edith Lister was indeed the author of the two pieces on Gissing in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, as the Centre holds her manuscript and galley and page proofs of the piece which appeared in no. 2102 (1906), that is "Some Recollections of George Gissing."

There only remains to add that Gissing's diary for September 28, 1898 reads – no longer enigmatically: "Had Bullen and the Miss Listers to dinner." To the best of my knowledge this is the only time the sisters appear in Gissing's papers.

Obituary

Mr. Giichi Kamo, author of "Gissing and I" in *Gissing East and West*, a booklet published by the Enitharmon Press, died on 7 November 1977 at the age of 78. He was Professor at the Tokyo

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Institute of Technology and Dean of the Commercial College of Otaru. The field of his research was very extensive; it covered the history of science, technology, etc. Among his works are *The Secret of Mona Lisa: A Study in Leonardo da Vinci*, *The Cultural History of Cattle*, *The Cultural History of Tobacco*. His interest in Gissing started very early and he collected nearly all the works of Gissing available when it was very difficult (almost hopeless here in Japan) to obtain them. He

was a subscriber to the *Gissing Newsletter* for a long time, if not from the very start, and it is reported he left some unpublished papers about the Master. – Shigeru Koike.

Notes and News

Wulfhard Heinrichs, of Hanover, sends some welcome news about Gissing studies in Germany. After listing the old theses by Schaefer, Rotter, Stadler and some others he mentions more recent work like Paul Goetsch's *Die Romankonzeption in England 1880-1890*, a Heidelberg thesis which appeared in 1967. Gissing's novels are discussed at length in the second part which deals with the relation between art and reality in the artistic perception and novelistic practice of leading writers during the years 1880-1910. A new book of great interest is Werner G. Urlaub's *Der spätviktorianische Sozialroman von 1880-1890* (see "Recent Publications"). The pages devoted to Gissing include a short biography; a survey of his social novels; of his social, political, artistic and philosophical opinions; the people in the slums; the "noble" work and the "displaced intellectuals"; Demos and the failure of socialism; the dualism of individual development and altruism – Gissing's individualistic social philosophy.

An older study which seems to have been overlooked outside Germany is Helmut Kreuzer's *Die Bohème: Analyse und Dokumentation der intellektuellen Subkultur vom 19. Jahrhundert bis zur*

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Gegenwart (Stuttgart, 1968), in which Gissing appears ten times.

The Harvester Press had a gigantic advertisement in the *TLS* for March 17, and some Gissing news were given: *The Emancipated* was listed as published; *Denzil Quarrier*, *The Crown of Life* and *The Odd Women* as coming shortly. The last two titles will be issued in hardcover as well as in paperback form. The diary is virtually ready.

Recent Publications

Volumes

Human Odds and Ends, New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1977; \$26.00. This edition, bound in black cloth with silver titling, is a facsimile reprint of the first edition published by Lawrence & Bullen in the autumn of 1897. It is part of a series entitled "The Decadent Consciousness: A Hidden Archive of Late Victorian Literature," edited by Ian Fletcher and John Stokes. The series includes 42 titles, published in 36 volumes. In the present volume, despite the publishers' statement, no editorial material whatever is offered.

The Whirlpool, edited with an introduction and notes by Patrick Parrinder. The Harvester Press, 1977, pp. XXII + 467; £6.50. Black cloth with gilt titling. The editorial material includes a bibliographical note on the publishing history of the book and a secondary bibliography. Like the three preceding titles in the series, this volume is issued in an attractive dust-jacket.

La Nouvelle Bohème (New Grub Street), translated by Suzanne Calbris and Pierre Coustillas, with an introduction on the theme of literary bohemia by Pierre Coustillas. Publications de l'Université

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de Lille III, 1978, pp. xiv + 455; 48 francs. Stiff pictorial wrappers. This volume can be obtained from the publishers at the following address: SP. 18, 59650 - Villeneuve d'Ascq, France.

The Odd Women, New York: Norton, 1977 and 1978. The fifth and sixth printings of this paperback first issued in 1971 have appeared in close succession. The sixth printing has a five-page introduction by Marcia Rose Fox.

Articles, reviews, etc.

- Jenni Calder, *The Victorian Home*, London: Batsford, 1977. Contains several references to Gissing.
- L. N., "Lo Studioso Jacob Korg a Firenze," *Lombardia Notte*, June-July 1977, p. 5. On the lecture Korg gave on Gissing at the British Institute in Florence.
- Anon., "Short Notices," *Review of English Studies*, November, 1977, p. 518. Review of Adrian Poole's *Gissing in Context*.
- Alicia C. Percival, *The English Association Handbook of Societies and Collections*, London: The English Association, 1977. Entries no. 25 and no. 260 are of Gissing interest.
- Werner G. Urlaub, *Der spätviktorianische Sozialroman von 1880-1890*, Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1977. This book on the late Victorian social novel deals with Walter Besant, Margaret Harkness, Constance Hewell and Gissing (pp. 159-235).
- Francis Noel Lees, "A George Gissing Centenary," *Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society: Memoirs and Proceedings 1976-77* (vol. 119), pp. 50-65. The address of the institution is 36 George Street, Manchester. This paper also appeared in the July 1977 issue of the *Newsletter*.

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- A. O. J. Cockshut, *Man and Woman: A Study of Love and the Novel 1740-1940*, London: Collins, 1977. Gissing is quoted several times; his work is discussed on pp.131-35.
- Norman Shrapnel, "Gissing and Now," *The Guardian*, January 19, 1978. A review of the new edition of *The Whirlpool*.
- Adrian Poole, "The Hack as Husband," *Times Literary Supplement*, February 24, 1978, p. 223. Review of Michael Collie's biography of Gissing.
- Richard Purdy and Michael Millgate (eds.), *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, vol. 1,

1840-1892, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978. Contains three letters from Hardy to Gissing dated July 1, 1886; July 24, 1887; and June 24, 1889. For Gissing's side of the correspondence see *English Literature in Transition*, 1966, vol. IX, no. 4.

- William Plomer, *Electric Delights*, Selected and Introduced by Rupert Hart-Davis, London: Jonathan Cape, 1978. This is a volume of uncollected essays and verse by the late William Plomer. The introduction to the Home and Van Thal edition of *A Life's Morning* (1947) is reprinted on pp. 66-86.
- Pierre Coustillas, Jean-Pierre Petit and Jean Raimond, *Le roman anglais au XIXème siècle*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1978. This volume contains a twelve-page essay on *Born in Exile* and a number of significant allusions to Gissing's work.