

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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George Gissing and Clevedon

Sidney Blackmore
Summertown, Oxford

It was to Clevedon in Somerset, a small village on the coast of the Bristol Channel, that Coleridge took Sara Fricker for their honeymoon after their marriage at St. Mary Redcliffe, Bristol in October 1795. In the nineteenth century Clevedon developed from a small fishing and agricultural village into a popular holiday and residential town. Grey villas were built on the hills which overlooked the channel and newspapers and guidebooks praised the health-giving air. A newspaper article persuaded Gissing to visit Clevedon and he later used the town as the setting for one of his novels.

From Exeter he wrote to his brother in June 1891. “We had decided to go to Ilfracombe, but I have altered this plan. An article I lately read in the *Daily Graphic* has decided me to try Clevedon in Somerset, which is said to be perfect from a health restoring point of view...I want to find some country place where it would be possible to take a small house for a year or so, some few months hence.”

It is possible to follow Gissing’s stay in Clevedon through the entries in his diary which is now in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. On Monday 6th July 1891 on a day that was “bright, but high wind,” Gissing and his wife “Travelled to Clevedon and there found lodgings. Mrs. Elston’s Stonington Villas, (84) Old Church Road. Cost 16/6 a week.”

On the following day Gissing visited Coleridge’s Cottage and the Old Church, where Henry Hallam, the historian and his son, Arthur, the subject of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, are buried. On the third day “Tried to make a beginning at work but failed. Have rigged up a desk in the bedroom.” For the next few days Gissing struggled to finish his story *Godwin Peak*. To relax he walked to Lady Bay or Dial Hill. On the 13th July he wrote, “hot, misty, wrote 4 ½ pp. Much toil all day long, wanting to be out on the shore.” On the 17th a “fine but dull day,” he finished the story. On 22nd July he made a trip to Cheddar and was impressed by the “grandeur of the cliffs.” “On way back spent an hour at Axbridge—delightful, sleepy old town.” He tells his brother of his visit to Cheddar and compares it with Cumberland. “On Monday we shall leave Clevedon, and go to a little seaport called Watchet...I think it will be out of the reach of the Bristol cheap trippers. But with Clevedon itself I am anything but disappointed. The shore is not good, but the inland scenery is most delightfully varied. I was never in more rustic surroundings than one reached by half an hour’s walk in any direction. And the air is very inspiring.” At the end of his stay he visited the gardens at Clevedon Court and on the following day made an excursion to Minehead and travelled back by a regular train which he described as “a terrific experience.”

In February the following year Gissing wrote from Exeter to his friend Eduard Bertz, “The book I now have in mind is to deal with the great question of ‘throwing peals before swine.’ It will present those people who, congenitally incapable of true education, have yet been taught to

consider themselves too good for manual or any humble, work. As yet I have chiefly dealt with types expressing the struggle of natures endowed *above* their stations; now I will turn to those who are *below* it." The book was written in six weeks in the autumn and was called *The Odd Women*. Of its title Gissing wrote to Bertz "the title means 'Les Femmes Superflues'— the women who are *odd* in the sense that they do not make a match; as we say 'an odd glove'." *The Odd Women* begins in Clevedon with Dr. Madden and one of his daughters walking along the coast. Dr. Madden, a widower, has practiced medicine in the town for twenty years and lives peacefully surrounded by his daughters. A farmer at Kingston Seymour is taken ill and the doctor goes to attend him, but on his way home is thrown from his vehicle and dies. Suddenly the security of his daughters is broken. The doctor's will only provides them with small annuities and they are forced to work for their living. The youngest daughter, Monica, is apprenticed to a draper at Weston-super-Mare. Alice becomes a governess, while Virginia is accepted as companion by a gentlewoman at Weston-super-Mare. Alice and Virginia are later in London, poverty stricken and unemployed. Monica has also moved to London, and works as an assistant in a draper's shop.

Monica later meets Rhoda Nunn, the heroine of the story, who is assisting Miss Barfoot, who runs a typewriting school with the idea of emancipating young girls who would otherwise be tied to shopwork. Monica also meets Edward Widdowson, a wealthy bachelor, and eventually marries him. He, however, imposes great seclusion on her. In the third volume of the novel Monica returns to Clevedon where her husband has purchased a house. Monica later dies in childbirth and the baby is looked after by the heroine.

The descriptions of Clevedon are very slight in the first and third volumes. Gissing mentions the town's associations with Coleridge and Tennyson, but Clevedon really only forms a simple backdrop to the novel. The characters and their problems are too powerful to allow the scenery to brighten or distract from the plot.

Gissing lived for a while at Brixton, but after domestic discomfort he decided to give up the house and store the furniture. On 2nd June 1894 the family arrived at Clevedon. He succeeded in getting "our old rooms, together with a third, which I shall use as a study.... rent 20/a week with a few extras." Two days later he wrote to his sister, Ellen. "You will be surprised at my sudden change of purpose—but such surprises have often befallen you." The reasons for Gissing again selecting Clevedon was because the bad weather made the east coast unsuitable on account of his son's health and because his "work had come to an end." On midsummer day he wrote of Clevedon in a letter to Eduard Bertz. "This neighborhood suits me very well. It is full of old historic associations, and I cannot live with any pleasure in a place which has nothing of the kind."

Gissing at this time was working on *Eve's Ransom*, which appeared as a serial in the *Illustrated London News* and was later published in book form. Often he found writing "a horrible struggle, a sinking misery." For relief at night he read. Fleas and the lack of whole-meal bread did not help his work and to remedy the latter he walked to Yatton "to try the whole-meal from the baker there." On 17th June he walked half-way to Kingston Seymour and on the 24th "we all went to Kingston Seymour and had milk there fresh from the cow." On the following day his diary records, "Am having a summer suit made here 50/-." *Eve's Ransom* was finished

on 29th June. The next day the family went on a steamer trip around the light-ships.

Gissing interrupted his time in Clevedon by going to Hitchin in search of a house. However, he was unsuccessful. On 19th July the family went to Weston "chiefly to buy some clothing for boy. Find it was the day of a horsefair, and that shops had closed at 2."

On 3rd August Gissing walked from Cheddar to Wells and "enjoyed myself... Liked Wells better than ever." He wrote to his brother on the following day, "Yesterday I had a most

delightful walk from Cheddar to Wells, along the lower slope of the Mendips, about 8 miles. It is exquisite country, and if ever I am able to build a small house, I think it will be somewhere in that region. Wells itself is ideally situated, amid the hills which break away from the windy Mendips to the great Somerset level. A peaceful village, little more; and at the turn of the street you come upon that glorious cathedral set amid surely the most beautiful Close that exists." On the 14th he took his son to Wells. "Afternoon service in Cathedral, the boy sitting very quietly; much impressed by organ. Rambled about the moat.— Boy chiefly anxious to throw stones into the water." Four days later Gissing went by train to Yatton and walked to Wrington and back by way of Congresbury, where he had tea at the Ship and Castle Inn. On 26th August he notes, "packing for my departure tomorrow," and on the 27th, "left Clevedon by the 8.30, got to London 12.25." Gissing was undoubtedly greatly impressed by the Somerset countryside. Perhaps if he had lived long enough he would have returned to build "a small house" on the Mendip Hills.

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Further Notes on Gissing, II

E. F. Matthiason

(Mr. Matthiason, whose article on his father's acquaintance with Gissing appeared in the number of April 1965, has very kindly allowed me to share some excerpts from his letters to me with our readers. These notes are continued from the number of June, 1965. — J.K.)

In my earlier letter, I spoke of G's being a religious man at heart, accepting my father's opinion. Your book (your intensive researches) support in the main a contrary view. "...the native malignity of matter" (p.16) "...the convincing metaphysics of death" (p. 52). "I see no single piece of strong testimony that justice is the law of the universe; I see suggestions incalculable tending to prove that it is not" (*Ryecroft* quoted p.115.) And so on. My father would no doubt have taken him up on such points as these. Aeschylus, he might have argued (meeting those blue quizzical eyes), has declared the grounds of his faith in a just ordering of the world. Or he might have quoted Plato, in the *Gorgias*, to the effect that to do evil is worse than to suffer it; that to go unpunished is an injustice to the evildoer. *Nulla poena quanta poena!* Or he might be moved to suggest the existence of that perfect state (away from the disharmonies of 7K) "which lieth in the heavens" and that "God is great in it, and grows not old." On earth — man's longest life but a moment spent out heaven — bitterness that may turn to sweetness is

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better than sweetness that must turn to bitterness, here quoting Christina Rossetti. Pascal he would have quoted — the *Pensées*—I'm sure of that. Amiel's *Journal intime*, perhaps. Newman, whom he had sat under in the Oratory at Birmingham. His little vellum Epictetus thrust hand to hand across the table (over broken kippers and stewed coffee): "Man's ethereal existence staggering under the burden of corpse." "There in little is your pessimism, Mr. Gissing," my father's voice hardly above a whisper, "but what if the corpse is let drop or thrown aside?" G. doesn't answer, but his mouth under the heavy drooping moustache twists into a smile. Poor Gissing, dying at 46, may have journeyed, in extremis, somewhat beyond Death's convincing metaphysics. Have become *voyant* as his lungs slowly drowned, seeing about him the golden city that Traherne saw. Illumination the like of which brought Pascal to make his hundred-to-one wager on God's existence. "Si vous gagnez, vous gagnez tout ; si vous perdez, vous ne perdez rien." We lose nothing by belief, but doubting we may forfeit eternity. (G. by the way, suffered from bronchiectasis. Dilatation of the bronchi or bronchial tubes, commonly

due to the formation of fibrous tissues in the lungs. The condition is irreversible, today as sixty years ago. I work voluntarily in a hospital, hence my medical knowledge!)

Returning to this world, those two awful marriages of G.'s (my God, how he punished himself!) Have you any cast-iron evidence for claiming that, after the formal separation in October 1882, "Helen remained his wife, but he never saw her again until after she was dead" (1888). I rather gather that man and wife met on several occasions during those six years. Nell knew of his whereabouts, 7K easily accessible to her (G.'s tenancy recorded in the London P.O. Directory). Topsy enough, down to her last sixpence, she would come traipsing draggle-tailed along Marylebone Road. And, with others of the Sisterhood, in a love-hate relationship, G. would have her. It was the craving for a woman's body, he admitted, "the trouble in his flesh." In his nineteenth year it threw him into Nell's arms, and the ills resulting, venereal infection the least of them, were life-long. It put him behind prison bars, which in turn implanted a trauma that could only die with his last breath. It wormed him at the core, embittered him, although, as my father testified, he had in him to laugh gaily as a schoolboy.

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Our Travelling Correspondent.

Mr. Coustillas and his wife were travelling in Italy last summer, visiting sites associated with Gissing. His activities were reported in the *Gazetta del Sud* of Messina on September 5, 1965 ("Pierre Custillas (*sic*) Visita Gerace") and in *Il Tempo* of Rome on September 8, 1965, in an article by Antonio Delfino ("Un francese....sulle orme di George Gissing"). *Newsletter* readers are promised an account of this pilgrimage in a further number.

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Gissing and Joyce

Jacob Korg

James Joyce did not have a very high opinion of Gissing as a novelist. The following paragraph from Richard Ellman's *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford, 1959), p.242, gives his view, citing two unpublished letters from Joyce to his brother Stanislaus (November 6, 1906 and September 13, 1906). Ellman has just reported Joyce's unfavorable reactions to some novelists he has been reading. After describing his dissatisfaction with Hardy's work, Ellman continues:

Gissing's *Demos: A Story of English Socialism* (an ancestor of the proletarian novel) was worse. "Why are English novels so terribly boring?" he asked, and derided the conventional melodrama of having a worker inherit a fortune, marry a lady, become a big employer, and then take to drink. "There is a clergyman in it with searching eyes and a deep voice who makes all the socialists wince under his firm gaze." A second book of Gissing's *The Crown of Life*, was written outrageously; Joyce gave two instances: "'Arry, in fact, to use a coarse but expressive phase, (*sic*) was a hopeless blackguard," and "When he left, which he did later in the day (to catch a train), the conversation resumed its usual course &c." Gissing's books reminded him of *pasta e fasoi* (noodles and beans), a Triestine soup.

Some mild confusions have crept into this passage. As readers of *Demos* will recall, Mutimer, in spite of his other deficiencies, did not take to drink. Also, the sentence about 'Arry is offered as if it were a quotation from *The Crown of Life*, but 'Arry Mutimer appears, of course, in *Demos*. Because of the conjunction of both single and double quotation marks at the point in question, the apostrophe indicating the missing aspirate in his name, so uncharitably

insisted upon by Gissing, is lacking. This really unusual example of the tyranny of typography calls for a double quote followed by two single ones. It's not surprising that the proofreader should have refused to put up with this situation.

V.S. Pritchett, in an observation unfavorable to both novelists, once pointed out some resemblances between Joyce and Gissing. Reviewing a new edition of *Dubliners* (*New Statesman*, XXI, February 15, 1941), p.162, he said that the stories recalled Gissing in displaying "the same amateurishness of touch, the same self-pity, the timid moan of the depressed adolescent as he furtively races down the street, his head full of Araby, and his ears tingling with guilty eavesdropping."

Joyce may have responded to Gissing in some ways, in spite of his disapproval. Both novelists wrote convincingly about the lower-middle class, and the resemblances between the Gissing man and Stephen Dedalus might bear sustained investigation. Both appear in Maurice Beebe's *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts* as fictional treatments of the artist-type, but Gissing's contributions to the subject are given only the most cursory mention. Also, the relation of Gissing's flat realism in such passage as the following one from *Demos* to the celebrated objective style of *Dubliners* might be considered:

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The old woman muttered something inaudible and, after feeling her iron and discovering that it was cold, she put it down before the fire. Her tongue had eased itself, and she fell again into silent grief.

Mutimer sat listening to the tick of the familiar clock. That and the smell of the fresh linen made his old life very present to him; there arose in his heart a longing for the past, it seemed peaceful and fuller of genuine interests than the life he now led. He remembered how he used to sit before the kitchen fire reading the books and papers which stirred his thought to criticism of the order of things; nothing now absorbed him in the same way. Coming across a sentence that delighted him, he used to read it aloud to his mother, who perchance was ironing as now, or sewing, or preparing a meal, and she would find something to say against it; so that there ensued a vigorous debate between her old-fashioned ideas and the brand-new theories of the age of education.

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The Ryecroft Papers: reply to Mr. Daniels Queries in our number of June, 1965

No more than Mr. Daniels have I succeeded in finding any mention of Topsham in Chaucer. W. W. Skeat's edition of the complete works (1905) and F. N. Robinson's (1933) contain no reference to the mysterious sailors. But I can confirm Mr. Daniels' suggestion that Gissing borrowed the quotation mistakenly ascribed to the *Imitatio* of Thomas A Kempis from Sainte-Beuve's *Port-Royal*.

In the privately held first manuscript version of the *Ryecroft Papers* (1900) there is no section on the Frenchman's bulky tomes. Neither is the quotation "In omnibus requiem quaesivi, et nusquam inveni nisi in angulo cum libro" to be found in it. Both were added about a year later when Gissing drastically revised his MS. This simultaneous use, together with the fact that both Sainte-Beuve and Gissing committed the same error, make it practically a certainty that the younger writer took his quotation from the elder.— Pierre Coustillas.

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Correspondence

The following comments have been received about Arthur C. Young's review of *The Letters of George Gissing to Gabrielle Fleury*, edited by Pierre Coustillas, which appeared in our last number:

From Francesco Badolato, Reggio di Calabria, Italy

I am inclined to doubt the value of Mr. Young's objection against what he calls personality interpreter's reports. Can it be safely decided that personality and handwriting are two phenomena devoid of relationship? While it would of course be dangerous to base one's interpretation of a person's character only on his or her handwriting, a graphologist's report is perhaps not to be rejected with a "superior" smile when other proofs tend to confirm its findings: is such evidence never used, for instance, in criminal trials?

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I also wonder whether the charge of idealization brought against the editor is quite founded. We surely do not form from the introduction the idea that Gabrielle was a blameless creature; even those graphologists' reports, for anyone who can read between the lines, seem to me to point out such defective qualities as Mr. Young may have in mind.

From the editor, Pierre Coustillas:

I would not have used the reports of "personality interpreters" had they not been in full agreement with all my other sources of information. They show a deep insight into Gabrielle's character and to the attentive reader certainly suggest potential shortcomings as well as good qualities. Aren't graphologists' findings sometimes used in trials? If so, I can't have erred greatly in granting them some space in my introduction.

Whether or not I have idealized Gabrielle is not for me to say. My judgments are based on other sources than the letters in print or those held by American libraries. I think I have formed a pretty clear notion of her temperament and interests, of her likes and dislikes. If I had thought she always appeared sweet-tempered and ready to comply with her friends' wishes or to approve their treatment of her in books, I would have kept in my files some letters of hers to Clara Collet – in particular her spirited indictment of *Henry Maitland*.

An additional note about the *Letters* comes from Shigeru Koike:

I have published a review of this book in the "Books from Abroad" column of the latest number (December, 1965) of the *Eigo Seinen* or the *Rising Generation*, the oldest and most established monthly periodical in Japan for teachers and scholars of English language and literature.

Of about twenty lines written in Japanese, the first half gives a brief account of Gissing's relationship with Gabrielle Fleury, whose name has been almost unknown to the general readers of *Eigo Seinen*. The review says that this collection of letters will reveal a new aspect of Gissing to many Japanese who have been familiar with him only through *Henry Ryecroft* (and there are many such readers in our country). They will be utterly surprised to see that the book expresses intense outbursts of passion.

In the second half the review praises the editor for his very painstaking work of compilation and annotation and concludes with the prediction that this book will remain one of the landmarks of recently-developed Gissing studies.

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The New York Public Library has reported that its first issue of *The Letters of George Gissing to Gabrielle Fleury* has been sold out, and that a second printing is being prepared. Unless we are much mistaken, very few Gissing publications have met with such a fine reception.

Where Gissing Lived II

Arthur Lansdowne

(Mr. Lansdowne's first report, a description of 76, Burton Road, Brixton, where Gissing lived for a time, appeared in our last number.)

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No.55 Wornington Road, South Kensington, London. W.10.

This house is still in existence and I made a visit there recently.

Although situated in a dreary street of drab houses, No.55 is at present of clean, respectable appearance. Built of brick and stucco the exterior paintwork is recent and fresh.

It has a basement floor to which access is gained by a descending flight of stone steps to what is called an "area."

A flight of half-a-dozen stone steps lead up from the street pavement to the front door of the house, which is on a level with what is called the ground floor.

Above that are two more floors, known as the first and top floors, access to them being gained by an interior staircase.

All the windows facing the street were clean and bedecked with neat, bright cuttains.

I judge the house to be about 100 years old.

Wornington Road is a long, fairly wide, drab thoroughfare, about half-a-mile in length, situated just within the northern border of the Royal Borough of Kensington and adjacent to the Borough of Paddington. Most of its houses are in a state of neglect and inhabited by working-class families, a large number of these now being coloured people from the West Indies, Hindustan and Pakistan.

It is completely devoid of interest; no pleasant architectural features, front gardens nor trees, and is not far from the Westbourne Park railway sidings, sheds, goods depot and shunting yards.

I was particularly interested on reading the *Gissing Newsletter* vol. I, No. 1. of January, 1965 that George Gissing lived at one time in Wornington Road as I was born in Faraday Road, which runs into Wornington Road, in 1896, lived the first twenty years of my life there and up to the age of 14 attended the Wornington Road School which is situated a few minutes walk away from No. 55.

Wornington Road was in those days much as it is now, a rather dull, lower-class place, inhabited by a working-class population, most of the men being engaged on the nearby railway, the old Great Western. There were very few shops in it and other than the many houses which were almost all of the same design, there were the school referred to above and Christ Church, now demolished through lack of congregation. I must have walked and played in Wornington Road many hundred times in the early years of this century and I recall many trivial incidents relating thereto.

I wonder why Gissing chose to live there, so far from the literary and journalistic milieu of London.

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Bibliographical Note

Readers of the *Newsletter* will want to see the annotated Gissing bibliography in the recent number of *English Literature in Transition*, Vol. 8, No. 5.(December, 1965), pp.290-300. *ELT* regularly publishes bibliographies of recent publications on writers in the *ELT* period, 1880-1920, and occasionally brings out exhaustive annotated bibliographies on particular authors, as it has done for Moore and Kipling. Scholars who wish to keep up with the authors of this period find the *ELT* listings and their annotations indispensable.

ELT has, of course, covered Gissing publications in its regular bibliographies, but the current Gissing installment is exceptional. It is the joint effort of an impromptu international team, including Shigeru Koike of Tokyo Metropolitan University, Pierre Coustillas of the University of Paris, Paul Goetsch of the Philipps-Universität in Marburg, Germany and Helmut

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E. Gerber and Paul Armato of Purdue University. Its main purpose is that of reviewing recent publications, and it has annotated listings of the articles appearing in the *Newsletter* during its first year of publication. But it also includes a large number of items not previously mentioned in Gissing bibliographies, and not known to Gissing students. Mr. Goetsch has listed and summarized a number of German publications and unpublished theses, going as far back as 1918. Mr. Koike has listed the first allusion to Gissing in Japan (1908), and the first serial article on him (1909). Also of interest are references to three brief reviews newly attributed to H.G. Wells, contributed by Mr. Gerber.

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