

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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Some Notes on THE ODD WOMEN and the Woman’s Movement

Joyce Evans

This is the centenary year of the organised woman’s movement in England, when on June 7th 1866 Elizabeth Garrett and Emily Davies delivered a petition for the extension of the franchise to women into the hands of John Stuart Mill, Member of Parliament for Westminster.

The Odd Women is the work of Gissing’s which most thoroughly explores the position of women in nineteenth century England. At the beginning there is a brief reference to a Mr. Smithson—the object of Rhoda Nunn’s early infatuation—who “thinks there ought to be female members of Parliament.” But that remark begins and ends Gissing’s concern with women’s political rights. This lack of interest is one of those curious omissions which makes the reader wonder how much Gissing really knew about the efforts of women leaders of the time. His friend Clara Collet, a Labour correspondent of the Board of Trade, writer of articles on the economic position of women, one of the few women holders of an M.A. degree, would have seemed the obvious source of information. But Gissing did not meet her until after *The Odd Women* was written. We know that he read at the British Museum in order to collect material for the book which he, alas, never finished — *The Headmistress* — but apart from such reading where did he learn the arguments, the tone of voice, the feelings of Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot?

Among many interesting observations at the beginning of the chapter *The Woman Problem* in his study of Gissing, Professor Korg makes one important suggestion. The prototype of Miss Barfoot’s bureau for teaching educated young women how to type was, he suggests, The Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, founded nearly thirty years before *The Odd Women* was written. Both the resemblances and differences between this society and Miss Barfoot’s bureau are equally striking.

In 1858 Bessie Parkes bought a newspaper which she had found for sale in Edinburgh, and with a small enthusiastic band of friends launched *The Englishwoman’s Journal* in March of that year. Each number of the periodical contained comment on the wretched conditions of employment prevailing in the only two respectable female occupations—governessing and dressmaking, described openings in new fields and gave accounts of such eminent women as Florence Nightingale, Rosa Bonheur, Rachel, Elizabeth Blackwell. It attracted so much attention that the little group rapidly expanded. A club was founded, called The Ladies’ Institute, at 19, Langham Place, and in 1860 an elaborate prospectus was issued. The Ladies’ Institute, we are told, comprised five departments. The first was a reading room furnished with all weekly papers. Then there was the office of *The Englishwoman’s Journal*. There was a register for women wanting work as “nurses in hospitals . . . matrons in workhouses, teachers in individual schools, clerks, bookkeepers . . . but not governesses,” which employers could examine between 10 and 5. There was a committee room for the use of philanthropic associations. And lastly, the Institute was also the home of The Society for

Promoting the Employment of Women, with none other than Lord Shaftesbury as President, as Vice Presidents Gladstone, the Bishops of Oxford and London, and Vice Chancellor Sir William Page Wood, and a supporting committee of 22, including 11 well-known and distinguished men. The work of this illustrious body was carried on under the sheltering approval of The National Association for the Promotion of Social Science.

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Typical of some of the Society's enterprises was Jessie Boucherett's school for shop assistants whose twenty pupils learnt "to write a letter grammatically, to calculate rapidly without a slate and to keep accounts by single and double entry" and were examined by no less an institution than the already famous Queen's College of Harley Street; Emily Faithfull started The Victoria Press, which employed 12 women; Marie Rye employed another ten in copying legal documents. But not all their activities were so earnest. Municipal swimming baths were closed to women so here was another door that must be opened. After persistent efforts the ladies of Langham Place were informed that if 30 women presented themselves at the Marylebone Baths on a Wednesday afternoon, these would be at their disposal. And 30 women were duly prevailed on to take to the water each week.

Gissing places Miss Barfoot's bureau geographically very close to the Ladies' Institute; Langham Place and Great Portland Street are adjacent. But he makes the bureau a much smaller and less ambitious affair. It offered no club facilities, although there was a very small library and two dressing rooms. The scope of its work was also much narrower. It was confined to women of the educated and middle classes and 13 was a more than full attendance at one of Miss Barfoot's occasional talks. The teaching of one specific skill, rather than general propaganda and varied pursuits (certainly not such fringe activities as Baths for Ladies—Rhoda could not swim!) was Miss Barfoot's aim, and this skill—typewriting—was one not dreamt of by the ladies of Langham Place, since typewriters did not come on the market until 1874. Two girls were preparing to be pharmaceutical chemists, two others opened a book shop and several had clerkships in view. At the end of the book a newspaper was about to be launched and larger premises were envisaged. But these seem small achievements compared with those of The Society for Promoting the Employment of Women. Nor is there any suggestion of influential people outside taking any interest or of contacts with public figures such as marked the efforts of the Langham Place ladies. Nowhere does Gissing introduce the names of men and women who had played or were playing a part in the women's movement. The only woman writer mentioned is the totally unimportant if notorious Ouida. Ruskin gets three references: one by Widdowson who tells his wife that she will find every word of his "good and precious," the others by Rhoda and Everard Barfoot who, of course, speak of

his views with impatience and disgust. It would have been natural if Miss Barfoot in her stirring little talk on "Woman as an Invader" had referred to those women of the time who had invaded men's sphere successfully. But none is mentioned.

Gissing uses Miss Barfoot's work as the means of presenting a thoughtful if limited and slightly out of date study of the plight of the unmarried woman. "No making a pair of them," said Rhoda. "The pessimists call them lost, useless futile lives." But it was the marriage relationship which interested him most. If we except the too frequent thumb-nail sketches of unhappily wedded couples, introduced with such little artistic justification that the novel sometimes approaches what George Eliot called "that most offensive of all teaching"—the doctrinal, Gissing's best writing is reserved for an examination of marriage as it was and as it might be.

Gissing was interested in the education of women and their preparation for active useful life chiefly because he saw this as a means of producing the kind of women who would satisfy the intellectual man such as himself. But the only example of a happy union which he offers is that of the Micklethwaites, one substantially of the "old fashion in its purest presentment." Yet among the leaders of the women's movement he could have found many couples living the kind of life he dreamed of. Josephine Butler, Millicent Fawcett, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Barbara Bodichon—these women had entered into marriages which provided in the highest degree that "mutual incitement of vigorous minds" which was Everard Barfoot's ideal. Particularly was this true of the Bodichons.

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At the age of 30, Barbara Leigh Smith, already a pioneer in many fields, went out to Algeria with a sister who was ill. There in 1856 she met Eugene Bodichon, sixteen years older than herself, a doctor and surgeon of repute, an anthropologist, a writer and a revolutionary. To the conventional he seemed farouche and deplorably eccentric. Tall, very dark, dressed in the Arab burnous, he struck Barbara's friends as "ugly and terrific." But all the artist and adventurer in Barbara, "one of the cracked ones of the world," she called herself, went out to meet this singular man. And all the idealist too. For both wanted to reform the world, whether by planting the desert with eucalyptus trees or abolishing slavery. Florence Nightingale had complained that men and women met only in idle drawing rooms: "Did they meet to *do* something together then indeed they might form some real tie." Here were two united by the common desire to advance the day when, in the doctor's words, "le genre humain ne formera plus qu'une seule famille."

Once married they lived lives which anticipated the rules Gissing made Tarrant lay down at the end of *In the Year of Jubilee* for ensuring married happiness—separate establishments. During several months of the year Barbara lived in England while the doctor remained in Algeria. Nor did Barbara subscribe to the doctrine of utter absorption of the woman in the duties of married life. When she told a friend that there was so much she wanted to do in the world that she wished she could have three lives, she added that she would devote only one of those to her Eugene.

Set beside this pair Everard Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn for all the simple, sturdy strength of the latter, seem positively insipid and genteel. Still, if it is everywhere less bold, less avant-garde than life itself, *The Odd Women* is yet one of the most spirited and serious studies of the relationships between the sexes to appear in the last two decades of the century. Perhaps the reason for the comparatively slight attention which it attracted both at the time and since is that though an illicit union was contemplated it was never accomplished. That is to say there was nothing in the way of incident to shock its readers. It was the introduction of such incidents that won notoriety for *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *The Woman Who Did* (1895). Today the Schreiner and Hardy novels are famous for reasons largely remote from what scandalised

a contemporary public, while Grant Allen's coy, sentimental and thoroughly dishonest work can be read only for amusement or for period flavour. *The Odd Women*, on the other hand, still engages interest and respect for the nature and quality of its ideas and the integrity with which they are presented.

Recent Publications

Anon, "Gissing in Japan," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, LXX (March, 1966), p. 140. A note about Shigeru Koike's review of Pierre Coustillas' edition of *The Letters of George Gissing to Gabrielle Fleury* in the "Books from Abroad" column of the Japanese literary periodical, *Eigo Seinen*, December, 1965.

Coustillas, Pierre. "'My First Rehearsal' by George Gissing. An Unpublished Short Story," *English Literature in Transition*, IX (January, 1966), pp. 2-10. In his introduction to this "First Edition," Mr. Coustillas places the story as one of the pieces Gissing wrote after completing *Workers in the Dawn* in 1880. It was transcribed from a manuscript in the Yale University Library.

---. "Gissing: Some More Biographical Details," *Notes and Queries*, XIII (February, 1966), pp. 68-69. Augments the information about Gissing's London relations in Gordon S. Haight's *Notes and Queries* contribution of 1964, and confirms Haight's speculation about the occupation of Edith Underwood's father.

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Recent Publications continued.

Coustillas, Pierre. "Compte Rendu," *Les Langues Modernes*, 60ème année, No. 2, p. 82. A review of the English edition of Korg's *George Gissing*.

Gordan, John D. "George Gissing," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*. LXIX (November, 1965), pp. 602-3. From the article, "An Anniversary Exhibition: The Berg Collection, 1940-1965, Part II." This is the exhibition notice accompanying the Holograph Diaries, 1887-1903. It reads in part: "The Berg Collection also has twenty-five other manuscripts, including those of *New Grub Street* and three other novels; nearly 650 original letters; and a complete run of his first editions."

---. "*New Grub Street* and George Gissing," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, LXIX (June, 1965), pp. 397-8. From "Novels in Manuscript: An Exhibition from the Berg Collection, Part II." Describes the MS of the novel, which is accompanied by a note in Gissing's hand giving "Oct-Dec 1890" as the time of composition.

Graham, Kenneth. *English Criticism of the Novel. 1865-1900*. Oxford University Press, 1965. Cites a number of Gissing's critical statements, but makes no use of the comments about fiction in *The Unclassed* and *New Grub Street*.

Kagarlitski, J. *Life and Thought of H. G. Wells*. Sidgwick and Jackson, London, 1966. Wells' relations with Gissing are discussed on pp. 102-104. (Submitted by Neil Menzies, University Library, King's College, Aberdeen.)

Lelchuk, Alan. *Victorian Studies*, IX (December, 1965), pp. 173-4. Review of Coustillas' *Letters of George Gissing to Gabrielle Fleury*.

Maini, Darshan Singh, "A Loney Victorian," *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. May 22, 1966. Review of Korg's *George Gissing*.

Our Italian Journey

Part II

Hélène Coustillas

Saturday, August 21st, saw us exploring places to the North West of Naples: proud Posilippo, industrial and foul-smelling Bagnoli, Pozzuoli, picturesque and brightly coloured, Baia and its Roman Therma, and most lovely of all Lake Avernus; it is an almost perfect circle, and the most beautiful green. Round about three quarters of it, inland, the ground slopes down to it in terraces; but on the remaining quarter, it is nearly on a level with a very narrow plain behind which stretches the sea and Cape Misenum, It is one of the sights that made us most regret we didn't have a film camera, and a coloured one at that. Thom we lost our way several times trying, from Lake Avernus, to find Cumae, which is quite near it. We saw Lake Lucrino with its oyster-beds, near Baia, a smaller lake on the plain mentioned before but not visible from Lake Avernus, then Lake Fusaro, bordered with reeds, near Cumae. There you go in at a gate in the midst of hilly countryside and wander at leisure through a kind of park in which we visited the famous Sybil's den, a sort of long, dark tunnel, of a surprising trapezoidal shape, a deep and impressive Roman crypt, and some remains of temples high up on the hill, overlooking a flat and shining shore. From there I wanted to go right to the tip of Cape Misenum but the road was so narrow and steep that we had to give it up. Ischia and Procida lie behind it. On the way back we stopped at Cape Posilippo and gazed long at the island of Nisida.

Sunday was hallowed by our visit to the temples at Paestum. The autostrada took us to Salerno through pleasant countryside and mountains and from it we overlooked Vietri, another

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picturesque town, not far from Amalfi, niched down below by the sea, its yellow and green tiled cupolas glistening in the sun, Salerno struck us as a very active place, with lots of new houses, cleaner and more orderly streets than most towns. But then, I believe it suffered greatly during the war and that very likely accounts for its present appearance. From Salerno to Paestum the country is flat and rather uninteresting. And suddenly out of the plain, by the road, spring the two temples and the neighbouring basilica. There were few people about, and the sun was blazing over the pale yellow stones, along which gold and green lizards were darting to and fro. We spent several hours walking in and out of the temples – that of Ceres, smaller and not so well preserved as that of Neptune – watching the light, the sky and some distant mountains through their columns. The basilica is less attractive, whitish and of less elegant shape. We had, not bread and cheese, but some fruit for our lunch, sitting on some truncated columns lying among dry grass by the temple of Ceres. We then looked into the new museum opposite; only part of it was opened, and we did not see much, but I remember some wonderful black and ochre ancient pottery.

The day ended at Ercolano (Herculaneum), where we looked at the remains of the old town. Not as impressive or striking as Pompeii – for one thing it is much smaller, but it contains nevertheless some valuable treasures, admirable mosaics, magnificent many-coloured marble floors,

statues, etc.

One third of our time had already elapsed.

I realize that I have not mentioned such details as the tremendous heaps of green watermelons piled on pavement, roadside or square, priced very cheap, the display of prickly (and to us not a bit tempting) Barbary figs, green outside, yellowish inside, which look as if they are very poor food – the chap who sits among his baskets of fish, in a doorless shop, whisking the flies away with a pink and white paper-thonged whip, – the carts that go about the streets, drawn by gaily harnessed donkeys or tiny horses, offering rather faded vegetables to the housewives – the many different ways of growing the vine, but in particular the ancient one of having the vines supported by elms, and stretching from one tree to the other.

(This account will be continued in a future number.)

Explanation and Apology

The interruption in our fairly regular quarterly publishing schedule was due to the departure of the *Newsletter*'s publishers (Mrs. Korg and I) for a vacation tour in Europe. We had the pleasure of seeing several members of the Gissing circle in Paris; we were hospitably entertained by M. and Mme Coustillas and by M. and Mme Le Mallier, and enjoyed the company of Mr. Badolato, who was in Paris *en route* to London. Not long before we left, Mr. and Mrs. Rosengarten came to Seattle to visit us. The *Newsletter* continues publication, but readers should not be surprised at occasional interruptions or delays. J. Korg

On the Names of Gissing's Characters

P. F. Kropholler, Paris

It has often been pointed out that Gissing's work shows in many ways the influence of his mid-Victorian predecessors. He took over their somewhat rambling plots and sub-plots as well as the direct form of address to the reader. It seems to me that in the choice of names for his characters, too, Gissing is to some extent the successor of Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope.

The Victorian era was the heyday of grotesque and symbolic names. Indeed, Thackeray and Trollope, with their Lady Bareacres, Mr. Quiverful and Dr. Fillgrave, carried the process so far as almost to destroy the reality of their own creations. Such names can, incidentally, be traced back at least as far as the mediaeval allegories by way of the 18th century novelists, the Restoration dramatists and Shakespeare.

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In accordance with his standards of realism, Gissing made only a discreet use of this device. There is, however, sufficient evidence that he selected the names for his characters with an eye to their possible effect on the reader. That he realized the importance of names appears from his remark that "Dickens was careful in the choice of names" in his critical study of Charles Dickens (Ch. V).

Gissing's very first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, provides some typical illustrations of this point. One of the least attractive characters is the curate Orlando Whiffle, the absurdity of whose surname is thrown antithetically into relief by his high-flown Italian Christian name. By contrast, a far more likable clergyman in the same novel has the perfectly respectable name of Heatherley. Names like Blatherwick and Pettindund must be reckoned among the grotesque variety. The choice

of names for the male and female protagonists of *Workers in the Dawn* is of some interest. Arthur Golding may derive from the Elizabethan translator of Ovid and Julius Caesar. Gissing's use of an existing name is probably the result of a subconscious reminiscence since the hero of the novel has little in common with the real person. The heroine of this book is Helen Norman and we know Gissing's first wife was called Marianne Helen. She was generally referred to as Nell, which is a pet form of Helen. There is not the least resemblance between the real character and the fictitious one but the coincidence cannot be wholly accidental.

Passing on to Gissing's second novel, *The Unclassed*, we again come across a few key names. Slimy is an undisguised attempt to describe the repulsive character, "whose proximity was at all times unpleasant." Dr. Tootle of Tootle's Academy is, of course, purely Dickensian. Harriet's landlady, Mrs. Ogle, would seem to belong to the same category but she is in fact described as a "decent, cheerful woman." The name of Ida Starr was obviously regarded as extravagant. At least, Gissing explains that it was derived from a penny weekly. Waymark, who was not unbiased, thought it a beautiful name.

In the next novel, *Isabel Clarendon*, the names are more "serious." The book deals with upper class characters, who as so often in Gissing's pages, receive more normal names. *Thyrza* was to juxtapose Hellas and Lambeth and this is expressed in the Greek-sounding names of the Trent girls, Thyrza and Lydia. Thyrza is a rare name—it is not recorded in Withycombe's *Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*—though some years later Gissing had a servant called Thyrza. As for Gilbert Grail, his surname may be intended to symbolize his passionate quest for knowledge. We know that Gissing was an admirer of Malory. Grail's initials are those of his creator, which is probably accidental.

In *A Life's Morning*, the names are unobtrusive. The next two novels, published within a short time of each other, offer a curious contrast. *The Nether World* with its numerous shiftless, vulgar and vicious characters contains names like Candy, Peckover and Squibbs, whereas in the sophisticated surroundings of *The Emancipated*, we meet with Ross Mallard, Cecily Doran and Madeline Denyer. Thus, the effect of the names heightens the ugliness or the distinction of the scenes described.

In *New Grub Street* the characters are strongly individualized. Their names are in no way commonplace without being unusual and the same applies to the names in Gissing's other successes in realistic fiction, such as *Born in Exile*, *The Odd Women*, and *In the Year of Jubilee*. I have an idea that Biffen in *New Grub Street* contains an oblique reference to his creator. Their names have a good deal in common. In his biography Roberts disguised Biffen as Gifford, which may be another pointer. Biffen certainly shares some of Gissing's characteristics. He is a lover of the classics and is fond of minor points of prosody. His method of careful observation was used by Gissing in *The Nether World*. He has enough of Gissing in him to make me regard him as a caricature of what Gissing himself might have been in certain circumstances. I feel less sure about Jasper Milvain. According to Withycombe the name of Jasper has never been popular in England. It seems to have carried a faint aura of villainy in Victorian fiction, the best-known example being Jasper in *Edwin Drood*, though this is a surname. In *New Grub Street*, Milvain might be regarded as a villain, even if he is not a villain of the worst type.

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Born in Exile contains the most unmistakable example of a key-name for a leading character. Peak's surname suggests the ambitious man and may be compared to Trollope's Mr. Slope for another type of social climber. Peak's Christian name of Godwin is full of political overtones. Gissing chose it, however, to bring out the character of Peak's father with his radical and intellectual interests. Similarly Godwin's brother was named after Oliver Cromwell, with whom he

has nothing in common. The name of Godwin's brother-in-law Cuss is another attempt to mark a vulgar character by a trivial name.

In *Eve's Ransom* and *The Whirlpool*, the names call for no special mention though it is remarkable that Rolfe of *The Whirlpool* at first disliked Alma's name because it "had a theatrical sound and a suggestion of unreality." Withycombe remarks that the name had a temporary vogue after the battle of Alma in 1854, so it must have been common in Gissing's generation. The millionaire Cyrus Redgrave deserves at least passing notice because of his American Christian name, which may suggest the pushfulness of the American businessman of the period. Am I too fanciful in thinking that the money-making popular composer Felix Dymes received his name from American dimes?

With *The Town Traveller* we are back among the lower middle classes, this time considered from a humorous point of view. Accordingly the names become frankly Dickensian, such as Bubb, Gammon, Nibby and, of course, Polly Sparkes, which admirably fits that spirited character without being unconvincing.

There is always the danger of suspecting too much behind the names of fictitious characters unless they are unashamedly of the Mr. Quiverful type. At a pinch most names can be made to mean something. We have a warning in Gissing's Alfred Yule, who derived the name of Hinks from the German "hinken". I hope I have kept clear of extravagant interpretations and that the following is a fair summing up of Gissing's use of personal names:

Most of them are striking enough to give individuality to his characters (Warricombe, Earwaker, Waymark, Luckworth Crewe are typical examples). Especially at the beginning of his career he used comic or symbolic names and those are mainly limited to unpleasant or lower class characters. If any meaning can be detected in the names of his leading characters it is discreetly concealed and never destroys the illusion of reality.

On Zinglessness

The *Newsletter* has achieved the notoriety of mention in the daily press. The writer of the "Letter from Paris" column of the London *Daily Telegraph* reported on March 21, 1966, that a reference in his column to the fact that Gissing had once lived in Paris brought a surprising number of letters from his readers. Someone sent him a copy of the *Newsletter*; his comments on it are both inaccurate and unenthusiastic. He says that our articles are "recondite and lacking in zing." We do not mind being recondite, but we must admit it never occurred to us to model the *Newsletter* after a used car, which is the association "zing" brings most readily to mind.

Information, Please.

In the TLS column of this name for April 7, 1966, Francesco Badolato of Bovalino, Reggio di Calabria, requests letters, documents, drawings or other material relating to a number of English travellers in southern Italy. Gissing is mentioned in a list which includes Henry Swinburne, Hon. R. Keppell Craven, Arthur J. Strutt, Edward Lear and Norman Douglas.

The Book Review Section of the *New York Times* recently published a note from Arthur C. Young, Department of English, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, requesting material for an edition of Gissing's letters. His inquiry suggests that Mr. Young intends to bring out more of Gissing's correspondence, and perhaps to repair the omissions in the 1927 volume of letters. We hope to have more information about this project soon.