

Supplement to THE GISSING NEWSLETTER

Volume XXVI, Number 3

July, 1990

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This supplement is entirely devoted to the ceremony which took place at the Gissing Centre, Thompson's Yard, Wakefield, on 5 May 1990. In order to give a full account of the formal opening, it has been decided, although this involves a certain amount of repetition, to add to Kate Taylor's report, the unabridged texts of the main speeches, the last one



Jacob Korg, Jane Gissing-Pétremand, Douglas Hallam and Pierre Coustillas, at the opening of the Gissing Centre, Thompson's Yard, Wakefield on 5 May 1990. (By courtesy of the "Wakefield Express")

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corresponding approximately to pages 2 and 3 of the leaflet, written by Clifford Brook himself, which was distributed at the entrance to the Centre. Like John Goodchild, the Wakefield Archivist, Kate Taylor is an authority on the history of Wakefield. Her two volumes on the *Wakefield District Heritage* (1976 and 1979) are an invaluable source of information on a number of persons and places repeatedly mentioned by Gissing in his letters and private papers.

The Opening of the Gissing Centre
Saturday 5 May 1990.

Kate Taylor
Wakefield

It was a sunny day. Literally the sky was cloudless, the day warm and the sunshine brilliant. But metaphorically too it was a day when all was golden. The Gissings' family home, so long dilapidated, had been reinstated. The rooms, leased at a peppercorn rent to the Gissing Trust, had been decorated and carpeted, through the goodwill of the National Westminster Bank, and furnished, if a little sparsely, in late-Victorian style. And so many people who have written about Gissing, so many who have worked hard to bring the Centre into being, were there to see it formally opened and to hear the man who has contributed more than anyone else to Gissing scholarship, Professor Pierre Coustillas, give the opening address. Scholars were there from England, the Continent of Europe and the United States. Representatives of Wakefield Historical Society and Wakefield Civic Society were there as were some of the Centre's principal patrons. Wakefield MD Council was represented by its mayor, and staff from its planning department and its museums and art galleries service.

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Welcoming the Mayor and Mayoress of Wakefield, Councillor and Mrs. Frank Ward, and other visitors, the Chairman of the Gissing Trust, Mr. Douglas Hallam, paid a particular tribute to Clifford Brook, whom he described as "the authority on the Gissing family in Wakefield," for his leading role in bringing to fulfilment the dream of establishing a centre at Gissing's boyhood home. He singled out for welcome, too, Francesco Badolato who had come specially from Italy, Mrs. Shirley Slotnick, who had come with her daughters from America and who had so generously given the Centre her late husband's collection of books by or about Gissing, and Gissing's grand-daughter, Mme Jane Gissing Pétremand, who, coming from Switzerland, was visiting her great-grandparents' home for the first time.

Mr. Hallam referred to the Trust's plans for the future of the Centre: it was intended that there should be exhibitions, talks and video films provided there on other Wakefield literary personalities as well as on George Gissing and his family. The resources of the Centre would be available for students. The public would be welcome to visit on the regular open afternoons and parties would be able to visit at other times. The principal room would be used for various meetings.

There had been many years of struggle, Mr. Hallam reminded the gathering, and thanks were due to all of those present for the contribution they had made to the tangible result now to be seen.

The author of the definitive biography of Gissing, and founder of the *Gissing Newsletter*, Professor Jacob Korg spoke next. He spoke of Gissing's tenacity, determination and strength of will, emphasising the significance of his life as well as of his literary achievements. The 1870s had seen the beginning of a series of disasters which left Gissing, at a mere nineteen, poverty stricken in London. With quite remarkable persistence, heroic courage in the face of adversity and isolation, and despite rejection, he had begun and continued to write. Refusing to

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compromise his standards he was, in the course of his writing career, to abandon no fewer than 39 novels. Of him George Orwell had said that "England has very few better novelists."

Professor Korg paid tribute to Professor Coustillas for drawing attention to the claims of Gissing and said that the opening of the Centre demonstrated the recognition today of those claims.

Professor Coustillas owned that he found a particular pleasure in reflecting on the "revenge of time" represented by the commemoration of George Gissing in his home town and his birthplace. He referred to Gissing's breadth of interests and outlined Gissing's strengths, and his prophetic vision, in writing of the issues and the problems which confronted England at the

end of the 19th century or which were to emerge in the 20th: socialism, imperialism, the status of women, the nature of education, the place of the artist in a materialistic world, rampant industrialism and pollution, and urban concentration. To all this he attributed the increasing following Gissing had inspired across the world and he praised the scholarship, as well as the devotion, of men such as Vincent Starrett, Christopher Morley, Alfred Slotnick, Shigeru Koike, Masanobu Oda, Professor Otsuka, and Francesco Badolato. Professor Coustillas concluded by referring to the immense scope for further research on Gissing in the future and the role the Centre would play in promoting this. He then declared the Centre open.

Clifford Brook spoke last. He reviewed the history of the Gissing Trust, its objectives, its difficulties as well as its achievements, and he thanked all the persons and institutions which have been instrumental in the foundation of the Centre. In his evocation of the future aims of the Trust, he appealed to further support from the novelist's admirers.

After a lunch at Wakefield Town Hall, less than five minutes walk from the Centre, Clifford Brook led a pilgrimage to a number of places in Wakefield where members of the

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Gissing family had lived, attended school, or had connections in other ways. The sun, which had blessed the day throughout, still shone. And back at the Centre guests were able to see the three videos devised by members of the Trust and created by members of Wakefield Cine Club. These included "Introducing George Gissing," "Gissing and *A Life's Morning*" in which Clifford Brook talks about the novel and the places in Wakefield portrayed in it, and "A Prospect of Wakefield," a film based largely on historic maps and engravings, in which John Goodchild speaks of the development of Wakefield from the middle ages.

Yes, a very sunny day.

THE SPEECHES

I. Jacob Korg

This Centre is the work of many years and has required the devotion of many people. What we see here today has resulted from remarkable efforts, mainly by citizens of Wakefield, and also by people in many parts of the world. But our thoughts must go primarily to the writer who has inspired this devotion and who is commemorated here.

George Gissing's books represent a victory over life as well as a literary achievement. Let us put ourselves in his position in 1877, when he arrived in London. He could already look back on a life that had been a series of disasters. His father had died when he was thirteen, leaving his mother with five children. The boys went to school only because the town of Wakefield raised funds to pay their fees. Gissing was a brilliant student, but the pressures of love and poverty led

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him to commit a petty crime. He was expelled from his college, sentenced to prison for a month, and sent to America to escape the scenes of his disgrace. In America he drifted about, penniless and alone for a year, and returned to England loaded with debt. Unwelcome in Wakefield, he moved to London, where we find him, living in poverty, with a girl he loved, who was a street-walker, uneducated, an alcoholic and in terrible health. He had no means of earning a living. He was nineteen, a month short of twenty.

It was from this low point that Gissing began his ascent to literary success. Under these conditions, he began to write, first stories, and then the enormously long novels fashionable in Victorian times. He had no encouragement. His first, second and third efforts were rejected, and

he had to begin over and over. But he persisted over a period of years, with a courage that can only be called heroic, and eventually began to see his work published.

Before we examine his career, let us turn to a happier time of his life. It is the summer of 1899. Gissing is living in France. He is a man of forty-one. He has fulfilled various ambitions; he has become well-known as a novelist, travelled in Italy, earned a sufficient income, and found the woman he loved, a Frenchwoman who admired his novels and translated one of them. "For the first time," he wrote to a friend, "I am at ease." From this time on, his life was comparatively tranquil. He lived in France with the woman he was unable to marry, since his estranged wife was still living. There were tensions, but their physical circumstances were comfortable, and there was a genuine love between them. He did some of his best work, in spite of deteriorating health, and his fame steadily increased. Unfortunately, this interval did not last long. Gissing wanted to die in England. When he fell ill in southern France where he had gone for his health, he asked to be taken back to England. But it was impossible, and when he died in December 1903, at the age of 46, he was buried in the graveyard of St. Jean-de-Luz.

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Between these two points we witness one of the most remarkable careers in English literature. During that time, Gissing did not have a happy life. After the death of his first wife, he endured a period of loneliness, then made another unhappy marriage which he was forced to escape after the birth of two sons. In spite of many hardships and adversities, he continued, not merely to write, but to pursue the exacting standards of his art. His main effort was directed toward the truthful, detailed and scrupulously honest depiction of social life. He recognized both the painful deficiencies of human nature and its wonderful idealism. In novel after novel he focused on what he considered to be the true values of life, and showed both how poverty degrades character and how the greed for wealth corrupts it. He understood the plight of the young who were able though poor, and were not offered a place in society, and the sufferings of women who were denied independence. He felt the destructive effects of commercialism and class division as if they were personal emotions.

These feelings are recorded in an enormous life's work of twenty-two novels, many short stories and three works of non-fiction, most of them written under difficult conditions. One aspect of Gissing's struggle is suggested by the fact, revealed by a recent scholar, that he started and abandoned no fewer than 39 novels in the course of his career. Four others were completed, but never published. We do not know all the reasons for this record, but some of these failures must have been due to the distractions he faced, and others to his refusal to go on with work that failed to meet the standards he set for himself. The most conspicuous features of his life as a whole are his heroic tenacity in continuing with his work, and his refusal to compromise the high standards he observed. George Orwell, who knew the kind of life Gissing wrote about, said "I am ready to maintain that England has produced very few better novelists."

Gissing has, of course, enlarged the place that Wakefield holds in English literature. He is

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primarily a London novelist, but when he needed a provincial setting, he usually turned to his memories of Wakefield. Unlike his predecessor, Goldsmith, he was not sentimental, and, in fact, Wakefield had changed considerably since Goldsmith visited it in the eighteenth century and used it for his setting of peasant life. The town turns up in Gissing's novels as the Dunfield of *A Life's Morning* and the Wanley of *Demos*, and is recognizable in a number of the other works, under different names. In addition, Gissing sometimes turned to it as a refuge from the hectic life of London, and wrote parts of *The Emancipated* and *New Grub Street* here.

The merits of Gissing's novels are not obvious. At his best, he has a quiet power, a

reserve of feeling and conviction that is perhaps easy to miss. Some of us have been caught up by this with the first book of Gissing that we read, sometimes by the first page. Even when he did not have many admirers, those who read him were fiercely attached to him, and there was an underground cult of Gissing in the United States during the years when he was most neglected. His novels constitute a remarkable panorama of English social life toward the end of the nineteenth century. That is no doubt his most important achievement. But he also wrote the first critical study of Dickens, which holds its place today. And several generations have found his most popular book, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, a valuable source of personal encouragement. He is sure to retain an important place in English literature. The recognition of his achievement has been slow to emerge, and the opening of this Centre shows that it is coming at last.

I do not want to conclude without saying a word about the scholar who is responsible for the flourishing state of Gissing's reputation, and for much of what we know about him. Pierre Coustillas has always been foremost among those who justified Gissing's claim to our attention. His energy, tenacity and literary judgment come closest to matching Gissing's own. It is

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impossible to enumerate the varied services Pierre Coustillas has performed over a period of many years in the publication, interpretation and world-wide dissemination of Gissing's work. He has been generous with his unparalleled knowledge of Gissing, an indispensable source for those of us who have studied him. It would be fair to say that this Centre is, in some measure, a tribute to Pierre Coustillas as well as to George Gissing.

II. Pierre Coustillas

On such a day as this, when George Gissing's achievement is being commemorated in his native city, I am naturally led to think of one of his own remarks on posthumous fame. Writing to his sister Ellen who, during a stay at Scarborough in 1888, had visited Ann Brontë's grave, he commented: "Strange to think of Charlotte Brontë having stood on the spot, – at the time of course regarded by those with whom she had dealings as an insignificant stranger. These revenges of time are very palatable to me. I think of such cases with a sort of exultation over oblivion, – a rebellious triumph over the world's brute forces." Particularly sweet in his case is the present revenge of time because it is enacted in the house in which he was born, only a short distance from his mother and sisters' later home in Stoneleigh Terrace, where, a hundred years ago, he wrote his novel *The Emancipated*.

The schoolboy who wrote his first poems, essays and translations of Latin authors in this house became in his lifetime one of England's leading novelists, and he is now regarded as a major figure in Victorian fiction, a status which would have delighted his father, an influential

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local figure in the 1860s, even more than himself. There are many reasons why Gissing's works live and will live. He is in a way a regional novelist, but more significantly, together with George Meredith and Thomas Hardy, a thoughtful writer whose work is a truthful mirror of the problems with which England was confronted at the turn of the nineteenth century, and his appeal has been and is increasingly international.

He was a regional novelist in the sense that he wrote a full-length story largely set in Wakefield, *A Life's Morning*, but also drew on his familiar knowledge of his native city and its surroundings in such other novels as *Denzil Quarrier* and *Born in Exile* and possibly *The Whirlpool* as well as a number of short stories. His correspondence with his relatives bristles

with references to Wakefield people and affairs. If the amount of biographical and critical research which has been devoted notably by Clifford Brook and his friends to this aspect of Gissing's background is considerable, there is no doubt that many avenues, especially in the files of old Wakefield newspapers, still have to be explored. He was a Wakefield man more than is commonly assumed.

Yet his inspiration transcended local realities. In his twenty-one social novels concerned with English life, he addressed himself to all the issues which were publicly discussed during his twenty-five years' career – political issues like socialism and imperialism, social questions such as the status of women in society, the forms and development of education, the place of the artist in a materialistic world; also more specific cultural problems which concerned artists of all sorts. Just as he pleaded for emancipation from religious formalism, he advocated more liberal artistic criticism and greater dignity on the stage. An ecologist at a time when the word was barely yet in use, he denounced rampant industrialism and pollution and was an apt analyst of

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all the doubtful benefits of urban concentration. His work in these domains is the equivalent for the late Victorian age of what Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell's novels were to earlier decades, and it has been assessed in numberless volumes and articles, from the first significant survey by W.T. Stead in 1887 to the latest critical study by John Sloan, published last year, volumes and articles which have discussed not only his life and works, but his travels, his culture, classical and modern, English and European, for besides being a talented storyteller with a philosophic turn of mind, he was a Latin and Greek scholar familiar with what was best in American, French, German, Russian, Italian, Spanish, and even Scandinavian literatures.

In this variety of interests lies the reason for the extraordinary capacity of his work and personality to rouse devotion in his readers, and this devotion has been noticeable just as frequently abroad as in England. Most of us are aware of the enthusiasm of those American literary men and journalists of the interwar period such as Vincent Starrett who patiently tried to identify his anonymous short stories in the Chicago papers, or Christopher Morley who missed no opportunity of mentioning his name in the *Saturday Review of Literature*. Those were the days when *New Grub Street* and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* were selling like hot cakes in the Modern Library. The American enthusiasts and collectors of the period have had descendants, notably Alfred Slotnick, who beat them all, and in five years did more bibliographical work than others in a lifetime. Gissing never had a more active propagandist. But he has had admirers of another kind outside English-speaking countries. Translations of his works are on record in about a dozen European and Asian languages, – French, German, Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Chinese, Korean and last but not least Japanese. A

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full history of the reputation of Gissing in Japan would fill a volume. For years, from 1909 onwards, the Japanese concentrated on the belletristic side of his works and the short stories. They published dozens of translations, bilingual editions and editions in English for schools and universities. They published selections, they divided the *Ryecroft Papers* into two or four parts; they identified Gissing's literary and biblical allusions at a time when annotated editions of the author were unknown in all other countries until the political authorities became aware that Gissing's pacifism – a fine fruit of his humanism – was dangerous, and they banned his *Ryecroft Papers*. But the victory of militarism and violence over culture can only be temporary, and time has mended matters. In no country perhaps is the name of Gissing better known to the intelligentsia than in Japan. The current work done by Shigeru Koike and his team of devoted translators is a handsome tribute to a man whose works are prized for their intelligent criticism

of the evils of modern civilization and for the cultural values they imply or advocate. Thanks to them such novels as *Born in Exile*, *The Odd Women*, and *The Whirlpool* have been made available for the first time to the Japanese public. Volumes on Gissing have occasionally appeared in Japanese since the dainty pioneering work by Masanobu Oda in 1933. A book like Professor Otsuka's meditations on the *Ryecroft Papers* has no equivalent in English.

Perhaps in the wake of the Japanese, the Chinese have recently contributed to the international recognition of his originality. It was something of a surprise last year to receive palpable evidence that just as two different translations of *The Odd Women* had appeared simultaneously in Tokyo, the Chinese had published two translations of *New Grub Street* in the same year. Still it is from Italy and to a lesser extent from Sweden and Romania that further

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translations can be expected. Dott. Francesco Badolato has lately found allies in a number of Italian academics who are busy translating and commenting upon his novels and belles lettres. Gissing's absorbing interest in Italy, ancient and modern, is surely a solid foundation on which to build a comprehensive edition of his novels of London life a hundred years ago. The latest volume that has reached me from Italy came from Paola, the city from which Gissing started on his memorable trip to Calabria in 1897, and its author, Mauro Minervino, concluded his covering letter with a motto which is an index to his enthusiasm: In Gissing we trust.

Gissing's relevance is not likely to decrease in the predictable future for the simple reason that he always saw beyond late Victorian reality. However, for this relevance to be apprehended by the better portion of the reading public, some conditions must be satisfied. It is vital that his works should be kept in print, that the whole of his correspondence and private papers should be made available, that his novels should be more widely translated into the major languages, notably German, French and Spanish, that all the areas of his culture – classical and modern, English and Continental – should be systematically investigated or reconsidered in the light of the new material – manuscripts, correspondence and notebooks that is being discovered.

Part of this huge programme implies familiarity with Gissing's origins and with his Wakefield background in particular. It implies access to all the sources which went to the making of his personality and culture. To this the new Gissing Centre can contribute substantially by diffusing information about all possible aspects of his life and work, by making his books readily available locally, by encouraging further research on him, by organising meetings and lectures likely to promote a wider knowledge and appreciation of his writings.

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The task that awaits present and future researchers is an exalting one, and it is important that anyone concerned should know that henceforth, in Gissing's native city, in the house where he was born, not only is he commemorated permanently, but that a solid opportunity is offered to do original, extensive and soundly documented research about his highly significant contribution to the English novel and to English culture in general.

Doing George Gissing justice by fostering international interest in his artistic achievement has been for some thirty years the major intellectual aim in my life and it is with a deep sense of cultural gratitude to him that I declare the Gissing Centre open.

III. Clifford Brook

The Gissing Centre has come into being as a result of a meeting in 1977 at Wakefield attended by Pierre Coustillas, Chris Kohler and representatives of Wakefield Historical Society and Wakefield Civic Society.

The two local societies and representatives of *The Gissing Newsletter* formed the Gissing Trust in 1978 with the aim of purchasing this house in Thompson's Yard behind what had been George Gissing's father's chemist's shop. The house has the special significance to Gissing readers of having been occupied along with the shop by the Gissing family. It was an objective of the Trust to create in the house a centre for the study of the literary and social history of Wakefield with an emphasis on George Gissing who spent his childhood here.

During the last twelve years the Trust has had high points and low ones. The saddest

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occasion was the death in 1984 of Heather Lawrence whose presence on the Committee was so valuable. What appeared to be the worst blow was the demolition of the servants' quarters of the house one Sunday morning in 1979, but fortunately the Government, recognising that the house is a listed building, ordered it to be re-erected and the resulting structure is a perfect match. In spite of a good initial response to the appeal for funds it became obvious that we should not raise sufficient money to purchase the house so we were pleased when Wakefield Metropolitan District Council, the owner, offered us the present accommodation once the derelict building had been repaired. It was not until the National Westminster Bank, then occupying the adjacent property, took a long lease on the shop and house that there were any signs of renovation taking place. We pay the Bank our whole-hearted thanks for honouring the local authority's promise to allow us these rooms and for the thorough and sympathetic restoration of the shop and house. Particularly are we indebted to the Bank for the refurbishing of the rooms that form the study centre: but for this generosity there would be no opening today.

There are many others who have helped to make the Centre possible: Wakefield Metropolitan District Council and, notably, the Chairman and staff of its Planning Department; many donors, led by Messrs. Stonehouse and Chris Kohler, publisher of *The Gissing Newsletter*, and a large number of individuals both local and from many parts of the world; our honorary auditor, Peter Hepworth, and honorary solicitor, Michael Atkinson, whose professional assistance has been invaluable. But most of all the success of this venture has depended on the time and effort of the members of the Gissing Trust. Over the years some have felt unable to continue but they deserve our thanks. The others have reward in seeing the fulfilment of their dream. All have made invaluable contributions and yet Douglas Hallam, the Chairman, and

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Tony Petyt, doubling as Honorary Secretary and Honorary Treasurer, deserve particular mention. The Trust's patrons have given us not only their names and so helped to make our appeal credible, but also their moral support which has helped to sustain the members. Above all Pierre Coustillas has spurred everyone with the fanatical interest he has in George Gissing.

As the opening of the Centre has become more certain we have had different help – from members of the Wakefield Cine Club and we are sure that visitors will enjoy the growing library of video films that they are creating to illustrate the many aspects of Wakefield history.

At the Centre you will see exhibition screens, pictures and video films in surroundings which will evoke the Victorian period when the Gissings lived here. An important part will be played by the library given to us by Shirley Slotnick in memory of her late husband, Alfred, who was a renowned collector of Gissing material. It is a great pleasure to welcome Mrs. Slotnick and her daughters who have come from America to be at the opening.

For the future it is intended that the Centre will be opened regularly on Saturday afternoons when visitors will be able to study George Gissing and, as we build our collection, other Wakefield figures. It is hoped that groups will accept our offer to entertain them at their convenience at special evening occasions.

Although the house has been foremost in the minds of members of The Gissing Trust during the last years, they have been able to organise a range of events that satisfy the spirit of the Trust and it is hoped that these will continue. With the help of the Wakefield Library Service and the Wakefield Planning Department an exhibition has been mounted and displayed at several venues; we have given talks to various societies in West Yorkshire and have conducted parties on tours around Wakefield. Most notable was the seminar held at Bretton

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College in 1981, which attracted scholars from France, Italy, the USA and Canada, and it is pleasing that some of these travellers are here today.

Lastly there is that important subject, money. The Trust will be able to fulfil its aims and to support an acquisitions and exhibition policy, only if it receives further steady contributions. Now that the Centre is to be open for use we look forward to help from individuals and corporate bodies. Fortunately our essential expenses are limited to the cost of maintaining the small suite of rooms – insurance, equipment, and cleaning – there being no paid officials, and the Bank has promised us help with such important if mundane aspects of heating and lighting.

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Books Needed by
THE GISSING CENTRE

One of the functions of the newly opened Gissing Centre in Wakefield is to provide a collection of books by and about Gissing. At the moment, thanks to the generosity of Shirley Slotnick in donating books from her late husband's collection, as well as donations from a number of other people including Chris Kohler and Pierre Coustillas, we have copies of most of Gissing's works and the majority of the books about him. However, there are some gaps and we are appealing to readers of the *Newsletter* who may be able to donate items which will augment the existing collection. (We would also be grateful for donations of Gissing books which can be sold to raise funds for the Gissing Trust.) The following items would be particularly welcome:

Denzil Quarrier,

George Gissing's Commonplace Book,

Human Odds and Ends,

Isabel Clarendon,

Our Friend the Charlatan,

Selections Autobiographical and Imaginative,

Sleeping Fires,

Stories and Sketches,

A Victim of Circumstances,

Workers in the Dawn,

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Any works by Algernon Gissing, Ellen Gissing or T. W. Gissing,

Any early editions, especially first editions.

Offers of books should be sent to:

Ros Stinton,
7 Town Lane, Idle, Bradford, BD10 8PR,
England.