

10-2021

Moulding A Persona: The Life and Letters of William Sharp and Fiona Macleod

Michael Shaw
University of Stirling

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shaw, Michael () "Moulding A Persona: The Life and Letters of William Sharp and Fiona Macleod," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 47: Iss. 1, 178–181.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol47/iss1/15>

This Book Reviews is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

**MOULDING A PERSONA:
THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF
WILLIAM SHARP AND FIONA MACLEOD.¹**

Michael Shaw

I wonder if you ever know such gales at Portland as we have in Western Scotland and above all in the Atlantic Isles? Last night the sea was like a jungle on fire, filled with howling beasts of prey—so vast was the roar of the furious waves, so shrill and various and inexpressibly wild and melancholy and savage the multitudinous cries of the wind. This morning the wild coast is strewn with wreckage, and close upon a score of sea-fowl lie dead, having been dashed against the rocks or these old walls, blinded by the beacon-light always set aflame on nights of storm. Even now clouds of spray are in the air, it is all a white world,—the mountains in snow, and the sea a mass of foaming billows.

Fiona Macleod to Thomas B. Mosher, 12 December 1901.

I am intensely interested in the fuller development of the Celtic Trilogy—and shall help in all ways. You say I can give you what you have not: well, I am glad indeed. Together we shall be good Sowers, Fionaghal mo run: and let us work contentedly at that.

William Sharp to Fiona Macleod, 12 September 1905.²

Recognised in her time as the leader of Scotland's Celtic Revival, Fiona Macleod—the heteronym of Paisley-born novelist, poet and critic, William Sharp (1855-1905)—was described by Hugh MacDiarmid as one of Scotland's six greatest short story writers. After his death, Sharp's friend

¹ William F. Halloran, ed., *The Life and Letters of William Sharp and "Fiona Macleod,"* volume 3: 1900-1905 (London: Open Book Publishers, 2020). Pp. x + 471. Hardback, £36.95, ISBN: 978-1-80064-007-8; paper, £25.95. ISBN: 978-1-80064-005-4; and available as a free open-access digital text (pdf and html) at: <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/1221>. Vol. 1: 1855-1894 (Open Book, 2018), reviewed in *SSL* 45.2 (2020): 172-173, and vol. 2: 1895-1899 (Open Book, 2020), not separately reviewed, are also available in hardback, paper, and open-access digital format, with the 3-volume set now available at £83.99 hardback or £57.48 in paper.

² Epigraphs from Halloran, III: 128, 380; subsequent quotations are referenced in the text by volume and page.

and correspondent, W. B. Yeats, described him as “the most imaginative man ... I have ever known” (Halloran III: 397). Sharp’s work proved enigmatic, influential and popular, and in recent years his writings and life have been the subject of increased critical attention in both Scottish and Victorian studies. But researching and studying Sharp poses several challenges, not least the complicated persona of Macleod and the fact that before she died his wife, Elizabeth A. Sharp, burned a “mass” of his papers, and that in her memoir she refrained from telling the full story of Macleod or Sharp because “other people are so much involved” (III: 399).

The three volumes of the Sharp/Macleod letters edited by William F. Halloran mark a major intervention in our understanding of Sharp, shedding light on his life, on his literary networks, and on Macleod’s literary development. Through decades of research and his detailed editorial apparatus (including lengthy introductions to each year of Sharp’s life), Halloran not only contextualises the surviving letters but unlocks and interprets many otherwise opaque details within them, such as Sharp’s coded references to his muse and the inspiration for Macleod, the writer Edith Wingate Rinder. As such, these volumes provide the most detailed portrait available on Sharp, his networks and movements, and how Fiona Macleod came to be.

Volume 1 traced the emergence of Sharp as a professional writer, and his dogged determination to insert himself into various literary scenes, including that of the late romantics, while volume 2 (1895-1899) covered the growth of Fiona Macleod and Sharp’s involvement in the Celtic Revival. One of Sharp’s main correspondents in those years was his collaborator, Patrick Geddes, whose firm, Patrick Geddes and Colleagues, published several of Fiona Macleod’s texts, including *The Washer of the Ford* and *From The Hills of Dream* (both 1896). His letters to Geddes often focus on the development of *The Evergreen* magazine, revealing Sharp’s ambition “to centralise in Edinburgh all the Celtic work now being done by Scottish, Irish and Welsh writers” (II: 40). The letters in volume 2 also give us glimpses of various unrealised Fiona Macleod projects, including an epic trilogy on the fall of the Stuart dynasty.

The present volume, volume 3, charts the final six years of Sharp’s life when his health was deteriorating. Despite his failing health, the letters give the impression that Sharp was at his most content and grateful in these years, and his annual winter visits to Sicily proved particularly inspiring. There are several descriptions of Sicilian landscapes in the letters that would likely have fed into his projected book, titled “Greek Backgrounds,” which would focus on the geography of Sicily and Greece. Extending on the fascinating psychic experimentations that Sharp had with Yeats, detailed in volume 2, Sharp is at his most spiritual and symbolic in these final years, as is reflected in the texts he wrote during this period, such as

The Winged Destiny, *The House of Usna* and *The Immortal Hour*. Indeed, in the letters, Sharp can sound like an opaque oracle, predicting a “great unloosening” that will be individual, racial and general (III: 374). Sharp himself noted that his letters could be “mysterious or conveniently vague” (III: 392).

There is much of interest for scholars of Scottish literature in this final volume. From 1900, we witness the telling breakdown of Sharp’s friendships with several Celtic Revivalists in Ireland, most notably the “split” with George “Æ” Russell, which Halloran valuably contextualises. There are several letters to and about Russell, where Macleod expresses her dismay at Russell’s rebuke of her “Celtic” essay, in which she expressed her conviction in a unifying Britishness and resistance to Celtic “revolt.”³ The letters also reveal the ways that Russell and Sharp tried to reconcile, as well as the support Fiona Macleod had amongst other Irish revivalists, including T. W. Rolleston and Standish O’Grady. Later in the volume, Sharp expresses his frustration at Yeats ignoring his correspondence, but they do collaborate on drafting the first rite of the Celtic Mystical Order together and it is notable that one of Sharp’s final letters was to Yeats, where they try to arrange a meeting and discuss dream interpretation and spiritual matters. Their relationship may have cooled, but the letters show that Sharp and Yeats continued to value each other until Sharp’s death. At the end of the volume, Halloran fittingly includes the notes that Elizabeth sent to Yeats and Russell, clarifying that Sharp was the author of the Macleod texts.

Among the most interesting facets of the letters in this volume, as also in volume 2, is the way Sharp uses correspondence “to mold ... the persona of Fiona” (III: 5), as Halloran puts it. Far from being a mere pseudonym, the letters reveal the extent to which Macleod had her own biography, her own personality and her own writing style. Among the most fascinating letters in this collection are one that Sharp wrote to Macleod (quoted in the epigraph at the opening of this review) and one that Macleod wrote to Sharp. Although few of these reciprocal letters survive, this was apparently an annual custom Sharp undertook on his birthday. In her 1905 letter to Sharp, written in “Y-Braesil,” an allusion to the phantom island, Macleod scolds him for his laziness and the poor quality of his work. It’s clear that she serves as a harsh mentor, as well as an ideal he strives towards. But

³ Fiona Macleod’s essay, “Celtic,” appeared in May 1900 both in *Contemporary Review*, 77 (May 1900): 669-676, and in Macleod’s book *The Divine Adventure* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1900); it was separately reprinted as *Celtic: A Study in Spiritual History* (Portland, ME: Thomas B. Mosher, 1901), and revised for inclusion in Macleod’s *The Winged Destiny: Studies in the Spittual History of the Gael* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1904). See Halloran, III: 419 n. 27.

the two letters also reveal how mutually dependent Sharp and Macleod were and how deeply he believed in Macleod as a separate spirit, or facet of himself. We also witness his efforts to sustain the idea that Macleod was a distinct author to the public: there are various letters concerning Sharp's friends' petition to secure a place for him on the Civil Pension List when he was struggling for money. Sharp refused to reveal his authorship of the Macleod texts to the Treasury, which would have significantly strengthened the petition.

The letters also reveal Sharp's semi-nomadic life in these final years, covering his travels to Sicily, France, Italy and the United States, and the letters also detail his many trips back to Scotland. Sharp writes that he needed "fresh native & original wellsprings" for his creativity. His travels to the Highlands provided these, and his stay in Lismore in 1905 was particularly productive. While Sharp could draw inspiration from the Hellenic world of Sicily and Greece, he noted that the "Anglo-Celtic stock need the northern bite" (III: 313-314), reflecting his various debts to Matthew Arnold. But alongside the romantic glamour of the Highlands that Macleod is known for, the correspondence also shows Sharp and Macleod's material connections with Highland families and institutions, including their correspondence with John Macleay of *The Highland News*.

Upon finishing these three volumes, one wishes more of Sharp's correspondence had survived. What else might we know if more letters to Edith Rinder, Mona Caird, Catherine Janvier, or his wife (to name a few) had survived? But this collection nevertheless fills numerous gaps in our knowledge of Sharp, and (given how opaque Sharp can be, and how scattered his letters are) these volumes are a remarkable achievement. Along with all that they reveal about Sharp, his relationships, and his significance in late-Victorian literary culture, these volumes allow us to follow the creation and development of Fiona Macleod and reveal how crucial letter writing was for elaborating her identity.

University of Stirling