



***The Life and Letters of William Sharp and "Fiona Macleod". Volume 1: 1855-1894,***  
 Edited by William F. Halloran.

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This first volume of *The Life and Letters of William Sharp* is a significant achievement, one that will surely be foundational to the ongoing reassessment of Sharp, his contemporaries, and the persona and writings of Fiona Macleod. William Halloran is a thoughtful and attentive editor, and his organization of the edition into chapters prefaced with a biographical summary maximizes the edition's scholarly value. Halloran's substantial volume (nearly 700 pages) is available both in print and in open access online formats. For ease of reference, this review quotes from the paginated PDF version of the edition, but readers may prefer to use the HTML version which includes hyperlinks to the volume's notes.

In his introduction, Halloran outlines the circumstances that led Sharp to publish as Fiona MacLeod, concluding with a brief discussion of the edition's structure, goals, and rationale. That brevity constitutes the only flaw in an otherwise excellent project: Halloran informs the reader of his editorial decisions without fully explaining the rationale behind them. For example, the "Life" sections of each chapter, and the volume's notes, rarely "take account of what others have said or written about William Sharp" (4). It unclear what Halloran means by "what others have said or written"; more important, it is hard to understand how excluding prior commentary and scholarship supports Halloran's goal of facilitating "a more comprehensive study of [Sharp's] life and work" (4). For understudied writers, reliable biographical scholarship can be rare. This seems to be the case for Sharp, which is why Halloran's integration of substantial biographical commentary into the structure of the edition is both necessary and laudable. But that does not explain why Halloran omits prior work such as Flavia Alaya's 1970 scholarly biography, which is neither mentioned nor cited. The lack of any discussion of previous biographies is, at the very least, a missed opportunity to situate the edition as a form of biography and highlight the new information it provides.

Halloran's discussion of the letters' format is similarly underdeveloped. Hoping to "maintain a balance between authenticity and readability," Halloran deploys a "uniform format" that clearly conveys the letters' standard features; questionable or uncertain dates are identified, and Halloran marks line divisions in the original documents. But while Halloran refrains from making unnecessary corrections of "errors of punctuation and grammar" (7), he silently corrects "[o]bvious" spelling errors and mechanical or grammatical errors that obscure "the author's presumed intention"; he also incorporates marginal notes into the text (7). Presumably the rationale for these silent corrections is "readability"; perhaps they reflect the qualities of the documents with which he worked. Unfortunately, Halloran does not discuss the letters'

characteristics as documents, and the volume includes only one image of a letter from Sharp (538). Some readers prefer an uncluttered page, but others might wish to know if a crucial part of a letter has been corrected (especially when those corrections reflect an assumption about authorial intent), or to be alerted to marginal insertions. But one must weigh methodological differences and the occasional lacunae against the edition's overall quality, which is unquestionably high. Halloran's detailed annotations, along with the biographical summaries, are especially strong, providing ample context for the letters and identifying correspondents and other named persons. I noticed only one missed identification, the result of an error (either within Sharp's letter or its transcription) that rendered the name of novelist Augusta A. Varty-Smith as the unidentifiable "Miss Vartz Smith" (390). Some glitches seem to have been introduced in process of converting the text into multiple formats, but the advantages of providing the edition in accessible formats outweigh minor lapses in presentation.

Halloran's argument for the character of Fiona as a "compelling and provocative" literary work (6) will be better substantiated in the later volumes. Here, Halloran's biographical commentary highlights the emergence of Sharp's "double life" as William and Fiona over the course of his early life and career. Trying (and failing) to achieve recognition as a creative writer and the leader of various "movements," the letters show Sharp courting (and idolizing) mentors such as Dante Rossetti and George Meredith while steadily building connections within the publishing world. His success as an editor and literary critic barely kept him afloat financially, but by the end of this volume, Sharp's hard-won experience has begun to pay off by allowing Sharp to secure advantageous publishing contracts for his "cousin" Fiona.

Sharp's letters will be of interest to many Victorianists, given his extensive professional network both in Britain and the United States. But Sharp's own professional, psychological and intellectual development is absorbing, if at times puzzling. Sharp's willingness to challenge sexual and gender norms in his life as well as his writing is a case in point. His belief in the "equality of the sexes" caused him to call out sexism in a friend's poem as "damned rubbish" (199), and he disapproved of the "subjection" of women that he witnessed in Germany (313). Evidently, Sharp viewed women as literary equals: he co-authored a novel with Blanche Howard (*A Fellowe and his Wife*, 1892), and the letters show him offering constructive criticism to women writers he knew personally, such as Vernon Lee, Mona Caird, and Nina Layard. He praises George Meredith's "extraordinary insight, understanding of, and power of depicting woman's nature" (497), perhaps viewing him as a model for his own explorations of women's consciousness. Yet his letters also show surprisingly little awareness or interest in what contemporary women writers might have to say about women's experiences, an especially strange fact given that his wife Elizabeth was the editor of *Women's Voices* (1887), an important anthology of women's writing.

While some readers might wish for more information about the letters per se, Halloran's approach is well adapted to his goal of fostering further research on Sharp. To spur scholarly interest in understudied writers, primary sources need not only to be accessible, but contextualized. Halloran's edition demonstrates how that might be done, providing a valuable model for other scholars who are working with noncanonical authors.

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