

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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A George Gissing Centenary

A paper read to the Manchester Literary  
And Philosophical Society on March 16th, 1977

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In 1950 an American journal *The Western Humanities Review* printed an article entitled “Who Knows George Gissing?” Well, of course, quite a number of people did, including George Orwell, V. S. Pritchett and Walter Allen, who had all written pieces about him, but what they could know were only the very broad facts of his life, largely as filtered through a fictional biography of Gissing

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called *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, by Morley Roberts, an old college friend of Gissing’s.

The book had appeared in 1912, nine years after Gissing's death, and was, it can now be seen, distinctly inaccurate and was always untrustworthy in principle from its very fictional disguise. And they knew his works, of course, or some of them, for much was then out of print. As the writer of the challenging American article wrote, Gissing's life was "a moving story, but a story not known except for rags and tatters of scandal and sentimental commiseration..." and he continued, "Mrs. Grundy, whom Gissing more than once defied by name and defeated...exults over him now that he is dead, and fear of what that woman might say has induced people who loved him to lock up letters and choose their phrases." And indeed the volume of Gissing's *Letters to Members of his Family*, collected by his brother and sister, and published in 1927, was heavily bowdlerized.

A little sensationalizing, that quotation, perhaps! – and by quoting it I certainly do not mean to excite your baser interests in a "Read all about it" manner. I merely wish suitably to herald the fact that, fairly soon after those remarks were made, scholarly research in depth into Gissing's life and remains developed and soon produced substantial results. Volumes of his correspondence have been published, there has been a fine full-scale biography (by Jacob Korg) and a bibliography, an organ *The Gissing Newsletter* has run for twelve years, and there has begun an edited, annotated edition of his novels – which have been hard to obtain for a long time. There is now much more knowledge of him available and very much more critical discussion, too. I have thought that such a Manchester gathering as this will wish to see if there is anything more it ought to know about a writer who in his lifetime published twenty novels and an interesting study of Dickens, who went to school at Lindow Grove School in Alderley Edge and to college at Owens College (now Manchester University) – where, after a great deal of stir and opposition had been aroused when a fund for a

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memorial to him was set up, he was eventually commemorated by a tablet let into the wall on the main corridor of the old University building.

When I was first invited to address you it was thought that I might do something about the United States in their bicentenary year. It was hardly my place to do that, of course, but it seemed to me that I might reasonably take a lead from the general tendency to celebrate anything American to start from a very much lesser American centenary: I mean the fact that one hundred years ago six days back the young George Robert Gissing published his first piece of fiction (a story called "The Sins of the Fathers") in the *Chicago Tribune*. This is a great improvement, symbolically and actually, on what I should have had to take as my anniversary occasion if I'd been speaking to you before Christmas – namely Gissing's arrest and imprisonment when he was 18 years of age and in his fourth year at Owens College.

As Morley Roberts, nine years after Gissing's death, was the first to disclose, he had fallen in with a girl "of the streets," Marianne Helen Harrison (or Nell) who was 17 years old, was given to drink and prostituted herself to gain the money for it. In some mixture of love and idealism, Gissing tried to supply her with the requisite money and to reclaim her, but his funds dried up and he began to steal from the College cloakroom. He was caught in the act by the police and sentenced to one month with hard labour. He was afterwards helped across to America to make a fresh start (the U.S. did not have its rigorously prophylactic immigration laws then), where after a short time "teaching high school" in Waltham, near Boston, he moved to Chicago, looking for work – and found none, but successfully braved the editor of the *Tribune*, offering to write fiction for it. He managed to sell his stories for some months, then drifted through New England back to Boston as assistant to a photographer and thence home to England again – in October 1877 – where he went to live in London, in Charlotte Street (in November), and promptly signed in the register of the British

Museum for his first reader's ticket in the same month. He had maintained touch with Nell and she came down to live with him: they did get married – though not until October 1879, but, not too surprisingly, they did not live happily ever after.

Making some sort of living by tutoring and clerking at a hospital, Gissing regularly had for his “daily bread” (he has noted), well, bread – and not much besides: “Breakfast – bread, dripping or butter, tea or coffee. Dinner – bread, bowl of soup made from a penny packet. Tea – bread, dripping or butter, tea or cocoa. Supper – bread, cheese, tea or cocoa. Occasionally, a plate of beef at a cabman's shelter” – this shared with his consort. And he worked away at his first novel – which was declined (and both MS and title have been lost); and then, rapidly, at his second, called *Workers in the Dawn*, which was to be his first published book (in 1880) – but only at his own expense. He had inherited £300 and spent nearly half on the book – which was a complete failure. His sparing diet and his mean lodgings were not the worst things, though. Nell was now chronically addicted to drink, was gravely ill with tuberculosis, and was in the habit of creating scenes and disturbances. Gissing went some way (but only some way) towards a divorce in 1883, after she had drifted away from him in the previous year, and he was never to see her again until she died in conditions of grim poverty and squalor. In her last six months she had three times pledged herself to abstain from drink. Not a spectacular fulfilment for a man who as a schoolboy and a college student had been both brilliantly clever and singlemindedly studious! He had taken prizes and scholarships galore, for German, Greek, Latin and English, coming first in all England in the Oxford Locals in 1872 and first in English and Classics in the London University Intermediate exam, and he might well have been headed for a bright academic career. There is evidence that he would have liked that – or there was a man who matched his achievements a year later who eventually became Treasurer of the University.

However, *Workers in the Dawn*, failure as it was commercially (and later Gissing was to

repudiate it artistically), did bring him some good fortune. He had been converted from socialism to Auguste Comte's “positivism” (or “Religion of Humanity”) by reading the work of Frederic Harrison, and he sent a copy of the book to Harrison. Harrison was enthusiastic, made Gissing tutor to his sons and brought him into contact with a leisured and cultivated society and with other novelists and editors (but Gissing would not do reviewing for them – he thought it “degrading”). This made a discrepant element with his harassed domestic life and hardly helped this latter to achieve harmony, but... well, he and Nell were parted from 1883 on and in 1888 she was dead. One can have some pity for her in her hopeless involvement with someone so consciously unsuitable, I think.

*Workers in the Dawn* is a novel not easily come by. There is only one edition in print, an American photo-reproduction. The only English edition there has been is the first edition, of which by far the greater number of the 277 copies printed were remaindered. It is a long book, crowded with incident and characters, and about a child of artistic gifts, Arthur Golding, brought up in a fearful slum, but child of a downfallen father of better origins, who has great ups and downs (socially as well as in feeling) as he moves from one benefactor, one influence to another; who marries, and tries to improve, Carrie (a poor, uneducated and disreputable girl with much in common with Nell Harrison), then left by Carrie, comes to love a cultivated, intelligent and comfortably-off young woman called Helen, a clergyman's daughter who has lost her religious faith in typical Victorian fashion and become a secularist social worker – ultimately a disillusioned one.

This relationship ends because he is married. He goes to America, learns practically simultaneously that Carrie is about to die but that Helen is dead, and jumps into the Niagara Falls, murmuring the name of Helen. Committed social reform is, so to put it, tried out in the book and fails; positivistic social alleviation too, and the socially uncommitted way of the committed artist: all fail. It is an

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intensely gloomy book; and it is not a good novel, though it has areas of power – descriptions of the life of the slums, chiefly; it has promise. It is not surprising that in 1882 Gissing wrote an essay discarding his optimistic positivist principles and affirming those of Schopenhauer, “The Hope of Pessimism”; which remained unpublished till 1970 (he was afraid of what Harrison would think about it). What, in some ways, is the most interesting feature of *Workers in the Dawn* is that, though it has been customary to remark the close resemblance of the wretched relationship between Arthur and Carrie to that between Gissing and Nell, it was only when Gillian Tindall pointed it out in 1974 that it was realized that the novel *precedes*, not follows, the discord and acrimony with which Gissing’s marriage ended. Gillian Tindall puts it like this: “he appears to be using his novel to test out in fictional form a possible course of action for himself, and did indeed succeed in proving, within the book, that marrying Nell-Carrie would not do. And yet, in his life, he went ahead and did it, thus making his novel the most curious pre-recognition of what was actually to come to pass”. There would be very fine points involved in a full examination of this fact, but it fairly obviously won’t do to take a mechanistic view of it, and be astonished at his heedlessness. What it certainly testifies to, however, is the perceptiveness of Gissing’s analysis of human factors.

Two years later he had finished another novel called *Mrs. Grundy’s Enemies*, of which he says, in a preface he drafted, that it is addressed to those to whom Art is dear for its own sake: also to those “who, possessing their own ideal of social and personal morality, find themselves able to follow the relativity of all ideals whatsoever.” In March 1880 he had written to his brother Algernon and asked him to persuade Will (his other brother, who was, Gissing said, “rusting at Wilmslow”) to write me a description of Stockport as seen from the railway viaduct, which I could make use of; some of the scenes of my novel will be in Stockport, some in Macclesfield and neighbourhood.”

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Unfortunately, that novel sank, leaving practically no trace: it was accepted for publication, then not proceeded with, and then it disappeared. Gissing had written to Algernon later in 1880 as follows: “I mean to bring home to people the ghastly condition (material, mental and moral) of our poor classes, to show the hideous injustice of our whole system of society, to give light upon the plan of altering it, and, above all, to preach an enthusiasm for just and high *ideals* in this age of unmitigated egotism and ‘shop.’ I shall never write a book which does not keep all these ends in view.” *Mrs. Grundy’s Enemies*, one must suppose, would have conformed in some measure to these specifications, as well as to his description of it as pressing an Art for Art’s Sake line highly characteristic of this period.

From then on Gissing’s journey as a novelist was a not unusual uphill one, with him establishing himself in reputation only in 1891 with his novel of the literary world, or rather one area of it, *New Grub Street*. Before it he had published seven other novels of various types and flavours, the majority of them reasonably in accord with the quasi-manifesto I have just read. *The Unclassed*, *Demos*, *Thyrza*, *The Nether World*, are the names of these, all dealing in one degree or another with matters of socio-political concern but without there being involved any class-championing of the kind one might expect. Indeed, there is in Gissing a fastidious distaste for

the habits of many of the poor; he never sentimentalizes them (nor does he patronize them) and he himself had always a want of a somewhat ideally conceived cultivated middle-class existence. The words “vulgar” and “ignoble” are favourite words of his. But there are some rivetingly “actual” appalled and appalling, depictions of poverty and squalor in *The Unclassed* and *The Nether World*. Two other novels, *Isabel Clarendon* and *A Life's Morning*, however, are renderings and analyses of attitudes to life more akin to the work of George Meredith and Henry James (both of whom had an effect on Gissing), more in the area of Gissing's own type and level of cultivation and reflection and therefore more inward to him, more exploratory for him. They are, of course, less of an innovation

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and some would, rather shakily, feel that they were less “characteristic” of him.

*The Emancipated*, of the year before *New Grub Street*, is a case of this kind. It is described by Gissing himself as about “a tolerably large group of people – some remarkable, some representative of English follies and vulgarities – temporarily settled at Naples”: “The people,” he says, “are a curious mixture of intellectual and worldly, artists, philistines, beauties, adventurers”: “*The Emancipated* simply means the English people who have delivered themselves from the bondage of dogma and from the narrow views of morality that go therewith”: and he adds, “the satire is rather savage.” The novel is not unlike some of E. M. Forster, and is a book well worth knowing. It is much more complex and subtler than it might sound, for the culturally emancipated girl at the start ends in pathetic plight, the grimly conventional, puritanical girl of the start ends with an enriched consciousness and in loving marriage with the hero. If the novel doesn't seem quite to tally with Gissing's description – written in advance of its completion, this only means that with novels it is sometimes a case of author proposing, something-or-other else disposing: which Lawrence had in mind when he said: “Never trust the teller, trust the tale.”

But I must not continue simply to report bits of news about Gissing's life and career; and I can best go into a more critical gear with *New Grub Street*, the novel pretty generally reckoned his masterpiece. This is the first of the two novels I have decided to focus on rather more closely this evening: the other is *Born in Exile*, published in the following year, which begins in a disguised Manchester and whose protagonist, Gissing said in a letter, “is myself – one phase of myself.” Let me first say only that in 1890 Gissing decided to make “a change of life.” He had written this: “Marriage, in the best sense, is impossible, owing to my insufficient income; educated English girls will not face poverty in marriage, and to them anything under £400 a year is serious poverty.” So he casually met and rapidly married an Edith Underwood, whose origins are not entirely clear, but who

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seems to have met his specification of “a decent work girl.” Again he tried to raise the woman to his own level of cultivation, again he failed – and whether or not the marriage was “another of those acts of self-mortification that Gissing committed from time to time,” as Jacob Korg suggests, it soon broke down in incompatibility and neurotic strain. There were two sons of the marriage. In 1897 the couple parted, shortly before Gissing learned that he had emphysema, and in 1902 Edith was committed to an asylum. By then Gissing had met, in all auguries of mutual satisfaction and contentment, a Frenchwoman, Gabrielle Fleury, who had asked permission to translate *New Grub Street* into French. He soon “married” her, bigamously (I suppose), in a ceremony more symbolic than actual. Edith did not die until 1917. Gissing then lived mainly in France and died in the Pyrenees in 1903, having written ten more novels (including a historical one), some short stories, the study of Dickens, a travel book (about Southern Italy) and his best selling book, *The Private*

*Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (of 1903), a meditation on life by a fictionalized form of Gissing himself. I do not deal with Ryecroft here because it is very easy of access (in both applications of the term) and because it has much less distinctive quality, to my mind, than the novels proper. The later novels are all worth taking some trouble to read except *Sleeping Fires*, *The Paying Guest* and *The Town Traveller* though *The Paying Guest* is quite amusing.

Gissing was in many respects, one might say – with a tinge of an older meaning, *devoted* to unsuccess, and one can say the same thing about the man he puts at the centre of his story in *New Grub Street* – Edwin Reardon. The title is, of course, derived from the Grub Street of early 18th-century London, renowned as the dwelling-place of hackwriters, but now it is the London literary world of the free lance magazine journalist and the struggling novelist in the eighteen-eighties; and the material comes straight from actual life centred in the British Museum Reading-Room – or as

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straight as things in fiction can come (which is not as straight as is sometimes thought). It therefore has something of a start with literature academics: it is set in country which is near to their country, deals with matters which are close to their interests; it is an illustration of certain facts of literary history and makes, therefore, a good double-purposed set book for courses; and being fashioned around, or within, observations of certain cultural erosions of the late 19th century it is a great gift to the sociologically-orientated among us. But I think it will have impact and vividness for anyone.

Essentially it is the story of Jasper Milvain, a clever novice man-of-letters with very little principle, either professional or private, being determinedly and by nature mercenary in his attitude to both Art and Life, to both his writing and matrimony. The book opens with him at breakfast in a country town, cheerfully and bumptiously cracking an egg and having coffee (as he says) “as good as can be reasonably expected in this part of the world – (Do try boiling the milk, Mother)”: it closes with him entertaining a “select” party of friends to dinner at his newly acquired house in Bayswater. Inside this framework is the story of his friend Reardon, a novelist; and this positioning of Reardon, the real centre of interest, away from the limelight of the opening and the close is a part of the story. He is just the opposite to Jasper. After a bright beginning as a novelist, he is failing in powers, in health, in confidence (and the three are seen as related) and also in mutual relations with his wife. The emotions of Amy, the wife, are drawn to their baby boy, Willie, and are progressively less drawn to a more and more unsuccessful, enfeebled and plaintive (indeed, self-pitying) husband. The husband is not materialistic, has high ideals of substance and execution, is deeply at home with ancient classical literature, and scorns the production of literary goods for the popular tastes of the market-place. His inspiration failing, he writes with difficulty and self-disgust a pot-boiler, which is rejected; he has to sell things, he panics and takes again the humble job he had started out with, a

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clerking job in a hospital; at which Amy goes home with the baby to her mother's. She had been set on his becoming a famous novelist, she refuses the drop in living standards, she has lost patience with Reardon's tortured blend of ideals and hopelessness. Jasper does not get married until the end of the book and then he marries Amy, now the widow of Reardon, who has died with congestion of the lungs, a failure. She has for some time obviously been attracted by Jasper's eye-to-the-main-chance and unsentimental drive – (though never at all criminally, and her underlying affection for Reardon had strongly reasserted itself at the end). Jasper and Edwin are pretty well polar opposites, and as the literary world in which they live is one increasingly and calculatingly catering for “the quarter-educated,” is one of seeking favour with useful contacts,

politic reviewing and spiteful animosities, Jasper goes to the top, Edwin to the bottom.

A strongly developed incidental strain is the wooing by Jasper of the sweet and modest Marian Yule, which finally founders on Jasper's mercenary motivation – Marian being the daughter of the veteran Alfred Yule, a disappointed, second- or third-rate ex-editor. She works on magazine articles in the British Museum Reading-Room for her father. The lesser characters are tellingly sketched in by Gissing and are chiefly different types of literary aspirant: Quarmby, the "inveterate chatterbox of the Reading-Room" with "no passion for clean linen"; Whelpdale, the amiable and sentimental literary adviser who thinks up the money-making format of the journal *Chit-Chat* (*Tit-bits* was founded nine or ten years previously); and Harold Biffen, who is single-mindedly, as it were selflessly, in pursuit of "an absolute realism in the sphere of the ignobly decent" and is writing a novel called *Mr. Bailey, Grocer*. (Biffen is writing in the wake of literary movements in France – and so is Gissing). Biffen is a man whose "excessive meagreness would all but have qualified him to enter an exhibition in the capacity of living skeleton," his "garments would perhaps have sold for

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three-and-sixpence at an old-clothes dealer's": but he was a man of "cultivated mind and graceful character." These minor characters are entirely supernumerary to the main action, but not to the book's theme: they show us literary types of New Grub Street, they provide occasions for thoughts on the ways of this world and furnish discussion of points involved in them. We have Whelpdale's recipe for a popular novel, for instance. "I gravely advise people...to write of the wealthy middle class; that's the popular subject you know. Lords and ladies are all very well, but the real thing to take is a story about people who have no titles, but live in good Philistine style. I urge study of horsey matters especially; that's very important." Or there is his description of the essence of modern journalism: "Everything must be short, two inches at the utmost; their attention can't sustain itself beyond two inches. Even chat is too solid for them; they want chit-chat."

Jasper (despite his name) is not all the time presented as despicable by any means (or certainly doesn't seem so to a reader who is less than fanatical), nor is Edwin always presented as admirable. Gissing seems often to esteem Jasper's sensible practicality and distinct self-knowledge, and often to criticize Edwin for his feeble emotionality; but it is Edwin that is the final beneficiary of his author's sympathetic feeling as distinct from his unprejudiced judgment. It is with Edwin that Gissing falls into a high degree of self-identification and he does this, incidentally, in passages of that internal monologue which takes an author into a sharing relationship with his fictional personage as distinct from an observing relationship, into a subjective rather than an objective place in things. I should be surprised if most readers did not find Edwin provokingly, unapprovably weak and deficient in self-criticism and his wife often justified in her withdrawals. This identification of Gissing with Edwin's unacceptable features, though it produces some moving scenes, is a weakness in the book. I can perhaps ask why Edwin's opposite number in practicality and unsentimentality

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has to be someone tainted with all the indubitable faults that Jasper possesses. Are there (or were there) no practical, unsentimental idealists? – no honourable men of businesslike good sense? (In fact, there is one in the book Gissing wrote a year later). Here is where we realise that, despite the particular interest of sociologically biased critics, *New Grub Street* is not for us primarily *or reliably* a record of life in the literary world of the 1880's: it is a playing-out of its author's propensities and aversions in union with the *form* which, in a fiction, takes the place of the *truth* of a true story. It is the one or the other which enlists the reader's interest; and the one disturbs, takes over the moulding

of the other. This in conjunction, of course, with Gissing's observations of the way the practice of literature was going. And it is factually true that this area of literature was going the way of *New Grub Street* and a reviewer of the time, in the publication of the Society of Authors, did say that he knew all the characters in the book personally.

In his own voice, Gissing thus describes a married couple: "They were poor as church mice, they wrangled incessantly...They had three children: all were happily buried." This is part of a passage on "unpresentable wives" which goes as follows: "These men were capable of better things than they had done or would ever do; in each case their failure to fulfil youthful promise was largely explained by the unpresentable wife. They should have waited; they might have married a social equal at something between fifty and sixty." Similarly, of Alfred Yule, who had married an assistant from a little shop, it is said: "Many a man with brains but no money has been compelled to the same step. Educated girls have a pronounced distaste for London garrets; not one in fifty thousand would share poverty with the brightest genius ever born." (He had said that outside fiction, you'll remember). He says about the Reardons' child: "Willie was always an excuse – valid enough – for Amy's feeling tired. The little boy had come between him and the mother, as must always be the

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case in poor homes, most of all where the poverty is relative." In the parting quarrel scene at the Reardons' he writes: "Amy turned scornfully away from him. Blows and a curse would have overawed her, at all events for the moment; she would have felt: 'Yes, he is a man and I have put my destiny in his hands.' His tears moved her to a feeling cruelly exultant." Speaking again in his own voice, near the end of the book, Gissing says: "The chances are that you have neither understanding nor sympathy for men such as Edwin Reardon and Harold Biffen. They merely provoke you...You are made angrily contemptuous by their failure to get on..." "It was very weak of Harold Biffen to come so near perishing of hunger as he did in the days when he was completing his novel. But he would have vastly preferred to eat and be satisfied had any method of obtaining food presented itself to him. He did not starve for the pleasure of the thing, I assure you." The irony, the sarcasm of this is the innermost theme of the book, expanded into a deep and thorough pessimism. As Gissing says in another passage of authorial statement: "In certain natures the extreme of self-pity is intolerable, and leads to self-destruction; but there are less fortunate beings whom the vehemence of their revolt against fate strengthens to endure in suffering." It is on the warp of such sombre, disillusioned opinions that Gissing weaves his very impressive expression of how his ten years or so of writing in London had made him look on writing for a living. But notice, as to literal autobiography, aspects of Gissing's own life are distributed among various characters. It is Whelpdale who recounts his penurious days in America almost identically with what we know of Gissing's; Biffen it is that works determinedly in extreme poverty as Gissing had done, but with no wife, or the like; Yule has the unpresentable wife (but not like Nell); Reardon himself does hospital clerking but he has a most presentable wife, beautiful, intellectual, not badly off; Reardon is an inner voice of Gissing but he is not literally Gissing: and these are not faults, they are factors of fiction. What *is* unfortunate for the novel is that there is an artistic liveliness and clarity, free from

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emotional clogging, about the presentation of Jasper, which leaves him, unheroic though he is, rather more vividly and agreeably in our reading sympathies than the evident hero, Reardon, who cannot be called heroic either, while Amy, the wife, manages to draw an amount of sympathy which muffles the intended condemnation of her.



A year after this book Gissing published the second of the novels I have chosen to focus on – *Born in Exile*. This opens in 1874 at the prize-day of Whitelaw College in the “money-making Midland town” of Kingsmill. It was a little slack of me to speak of a “disguised Manchester”: strictly, it is simply a provincial college with an open space in front, a pastry-cook’s opposite, some theatres and an “admirable (girls’) High School”; and some public houses in which, on the evening following the prize-giving, the hero, having gone into one to take a refreshing glass of beer, and having encountered two celebrating fellow-students, recklessly earns a good halfday of headache and nausea. The going-in for a glass of beer, we are told, was an “unwonted indulgence.” It is true that in Kingsmill there is a “smoke-canopy above” and there is “drenching rain” on the one night we are there; and that the marble effigy of the college’s founder which has just been unveiled has soot-stains on it “which already foretold its negritude of a year hence.” And it is certain that the personal experience which underlies the beginning of the book was acquired in Manchester at Owens College.

The prize-giving begins with the appearance of “a dark-robed procession, headed by the tall figure of the Principal”; there is “a moment’s silence,” then “outbursts of welcoming applause” – for “the Professors of Whitelaw College were highly popular, not alone with the members of their classes, but with all educated inhabitants of Kingsmill.” No need to point out how Owens College has grown! We soon meet the protagonist, Godwin Peak, going up for a prize. He has been “born in exile,” that is to say in the lower classes, and he is destined to remain always outside the refined and cultivated class he hankers to be one of. He gains a large number of prizes, though – to his chagrin –

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many are only second prizes. He has been charitably helped to college, he is a “stern ‘sweater,’” concentrating entirely on his studies and living on a starvation diet. He does not join the Students’ Union and he is a stranger to the “female sex” – which on the prize-day suddenly emerges for him as enchantingly endowed with young ladies who are intelligent and whose “sweet clearness of intonation,” “purity of accent” and “grace of habitual phrases” “were things altogether beyond his experience.” Though he feels he is one of Nature’s “aristocrats,” he will have to make his own career, “and *that* he would hardly do save by efforts greater than the ordinary man can put forth.” His younger brother says, “I am content to be like other people.” Peak replies, “And I would poison myself with vermin-killer if I felt any risk of such contentment.” His uncle, an uneducated and vulgar Cockney, buys the pastrycook’s in order to open dining-rooms, and he presumes that his nephew will soon be sending some student-custom his way: Peak is ashamed of this connection and does not return to college. Defeated in all the Art subjects (that is, having obtained only second prizes), having failed in his efforts to compose a Prize poem – and with the prize essay he had submitted, Peak now decides to go all out for making a name in Science. As from an early age he has “hated the name of religion,” he is thoroughly the late Victorian scientific rationalist atheist. He leaves home with a laugh of “scornful superiority” to mere academic successes and sets forth “on a voyage of discovery.”

Eight years later we are with him in London. He is working in a chemical factory, leading a sparing, “ascetic” life, writing some Radical anti-religious articles for the press, and he has, as he says, “the supreme desire of marrying a perfectly refined woman”: “I am a plebeian and I aim at marrying a lady.” He goes on holiday in Cornwall, meets an old college-friend, of well-to-do squirearchical family, and is welcomed to his home; and he suddenly finds himself, as if impelled

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by some deterministic influence, avowing to his incredulous friend that he intends to take holy orders. This is pure opportunism, to ingratiate himself and to settle himself in smooth relations with this higher-class family and their circle, and then specifically with their daughter; but he actually has no moral beliefs which would prohibit the action, though he suffers “torments” at his own hypocrisy and deceitfulness – but not to the point of renouncing the deceit. Not long before he has written and published anonymously a fierce and satiric attack on Christians, and in due course, just after he has declared his love for the daughter, her brother confronts him with the tell-tale essay of which he now knows the authorship, and Peak has to withdraw from the social territory he has gained. His love-affair, genuine now, in its degree, continues by occasional letters while he takes fairly lowly employment and tries to build up a financially adequate position; but ultimately, when through a legacy he can firmly propose marriage, the woman cannot bring herself to break family ties and take the plunge and he cannot attempt to sweep aside her hesitation. As Gissing has him think to himself, “but neither was *he* cast in heroic mould... A critic of life, an analyst of moods and motives; not the man who dares and acts”. He is, it seems, half-glad; and he goes off, a “full man” to seek contentment among cosmopolitan people on the Continent. He dies there a year or so later, from the results of malarial fever, fruit of what in a letter he calls “some monstrous follies there’s no need to speak of.” The friend who has received his last message muses: “Dead, too, in exile,” he thinks, “Poor old fellow.”

Gissing wrote in a letter: “Peak is myself – one phase of myself”; but he adds, “I described him with gusto, but surely I did not, in depicting the other characters, take his point of view?”; and most often Gissing is coolly critical of the man he says “was a force,” whose own character it is which prevents the social gates from opening to him. There is nothing here like the sentimental partiality with which Thomas’ Hardy renders his protagonist in *Jude the Obscure*. Yet it is obvious that at the centre Gissing sympathises with Peak. The book goes a long way towards the “outsider” concept of

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the nineteen-forties and -fifties and it utters Gissing’s own feelings in this direction; but they are accompanied by a fair, impartial rendering of what conformity and the desired social medium genuinely has to offer, why (in fact) it is desired, and by an awareness of what moral nihilism is latent in the logical extensions of atheistic scientific rationalism.

Peak differs from Gissing himself in many obvious ways but for a long time it seemed that Peak’s college-days were essentially Gissing’s. However, when a few years ago, I came to look into the *Owens College Magazine* of Gissing’s time I found something rather different. It became evident that Gissing did not refuse or simply fail to participate in the quite thriving culture at Owens of what Matthew Arnold called “humane letters.”

November 12th, 1875: “Messrs. Gissing and Morant elected editors of the magazine” – Gissing being appointed also to the Union Committee. November 26th (at the second ordinary meeting of the Union): Gissing speaks in a debate following a paper on Sir Walter Scott. December 3rd: Gissing gave a paper on *Twelfth Night* to the Shakspeare Society. February 11th, 1876: A debate in the Union on education was opened by Gissing. February 18th: Gissing read Mr. Herford’s paper on ‘The Humour of Shakspeare’ as Mr. Herford was unable to attend. March 3rd: Gissing takes a principal part in a reading of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part II*. On March 17th, Gissing’s friend, John George Black, read an essay to the Shakspeare Society on ‘Shakspeare and France, with special reference to Voltaire.’ As had long been known, in 1873 Gissing won the poetry prize with a poem ‘Ravenna’; he also published a poem ‘To Truth’ and an article on ‘Our Shakspearean Studies’ in 1875 – in which he writes perceptively, “In these evil days of gloomy estrangement between so-called ‘Science-men’ and ‘Arts-men,’ what goes on in the domains of the one is generally as

much a matter of utter indifference to the other as if it had transpired in some remote world. This

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estrangement...will vanish, we must believe; but..., it is fostered to a deplorable extent by certain palpable errors connected with our sudden awakening to the necessity of becoming as a people educated." This is not quite the "stern 'sweater'" that Godwin Peak is. (1)

And when, a few years earlier that fine Gissing investigator and scholar, Pierre Coustillas of Lille University, had come to look into the University archives, he too found something different. He found four letters to Gissing from his friend, Black, written between the end of February and April 11th, 1876. All are written from Cleveland Villas, Crumpsall, Manchester, and the first two are addressed to Gissing's lodgings at 43 Grafton Street, Chorlton-on-Medlock. In the first Black apologizes vehemently for having had sexual intimacy with the girl Nell some days previously in total unawareness of Gissing's real affection for her. He writes: "In an unlucky hour I walked to the Free Library, and as I was coming back at about seven, I thought I would go and see if you were in Water Street..." (Gissing wasn't, nor on a second visit, but the girl was): and Black continues, "It afterwards came out that you had told her you were of Owens College. It struck me you could not have known what you were doing – so I denied it instantly." In the second letter he gives some addresses in Southport for Gissing to try for his intended stay there with Nell. The other two letters are addressed to one of the Southport addresses, and in the first of them he describes the emergent symptoms of a suspected venereal infection ("or, is it like your inflammation?" he asks); in the last he tells of several enquiries made by their teachers about the still absent Gissing. (2) Less than two months later Gissing was arrested. I have elsewhere shown cause for believing that Gissing was affected by the works of Walter Pater and M. Coustillas has added that in an unpublished letter Gissing speaks of reading Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* in the year it came out, 1885. (3) It was three years before the arrest, 1873, that Pater's book *The Renaissance* appeared, with its notorious "Conclusion":

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"Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point..."

Great alarm was caused by this; it was held to offer a licence for unlicensed behaviour. Was the youngster Gissing affected by it? It is evident that Owens College thinking circles were not behindhand with current literature, and Gissing might have done what Godwin Peak does – namely, joined a circulating library, taken a literary paper ("which taxed his stomach"), and obtained "new publications recommended to him in the literary paper." (Peak devotes most of Sunday to "non-collegiate reading"). Or Gissing might simply have read the Pater in the Free Library Black went to. The book was acquired in 1874. It is still in the Manchester Central Library, descendant of the Free Library.

(I may here note that the Free Library was in Byrom Street – opposite the present Opera House – and that, in addition to the Water Street which runs along the River Irwell from the bottom of Regent Road to Bridge Street, there was another one in Salford near the corner of Blackfriars Street and Chapel Street. It isn't in the current *A to Z* and it isn't now a thoroughfare, but it still bears its street-sign; and it is possible that this is the street Black speaks of. It would be no less on the way

home from the Free Library to Higher Crumpsall, and, being over the river, in Salford, it would be more out of observer range of the Free Library – and Black sets store by their remaining *incognito*. Several policemen, including a superintendent, lived in the *Manchester* Water Street in 1876).

The likeness between George Gissing and Godwin Peak is one of mind, not of history, and it can be discerned (in fact, has to be) without the often unhelpful help of biography; but it is a likeness not an identity. The mind of the author of *Born in Exile* was perhaps a divided one: Godwin Peak's, alas, was not.

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I will end by reading to you a little from a letter written in 1914 to the Vice-Chancellor of the now Victoria University of Manchester by C. H. Herford, Professor of English Literature in the University. As I told you at the start, a fund had been established to provide some memorial of Gissing's connection with the University, and the Council, in harmony with a good many public objections, had declined to accept this in the visible, public form of a memorial-tablet. Herford is appealing – successfully – to the Council to relent: –

“...I would ask whether even the final disaster which cut short an exceptionally brilliant studentship was, when its circumstances are fully understood, of such a nature that it ought to cancel in our memory everything that was worthy of remembrance about him.... I have been privileged to see a series of his private letters... which discloses a personality far other than the bare recital of his acts or even of his sufferings suggest, a personality in which much was weak, misguided, perverse, but nothing sordid, nothing vulgar. The criminal act which ended his career here was inspired by an almost quixotically heroic motive; a worse man than Gissing would never have dreamed of committing it...” (4)

The memorial tablet, incidentally, is by Eric Gill; and the man who instituted the fund had had in mind a much more prominent place for its display. There exists a somewhat embarrassed letter to him from the Vice-Chancellor, regretting that when he had got back from his holiday, he had found that the Bursar's men had already embedded the tablet in the wall where it is now.

1 - See *Gissing Newsletter*, V.2 (1969) and VI.2 (1970)

2 - See *Etudes Anglaises*, XVI (1963), pp. 255-61.

3 - See *Gissing Newsletter*, VI.3 and VI.4 (1970)

4 - *Times Literary Supplement*, 12.3.71. p. 296.

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### “The Quarry on the Heath” - When and Where

Clifford Brook

Because of the title, it had long seemed likely to me that the scenes in “The Quarry on the Heath” were centred on the area around Heath Common, but until a few months ago, I had not tried to pinpoint the buildings mentioned in it. I had thought that Gissing had chosen buildings from unrelated places: in particular there is a well known terrace of pit houses some four miles along the road from Heath Common to Doncaster, at Nostell; and yet the two churches serving Nostell and

Heath respectively are far from being examples of “modern tastelessness.” As Gissing says, the land near (Wastell) Heath is dreary; and people do not drive for pleasure along the roads of that part of the South Yorkshire coalfield – there are few leafy lanes or picturesque villages. So although I live only a mile or so from Heath, I did not know the area beyond it particularly well. However when I read in *Essays and Fiction*, p. 50, that Pierre Coustillas identified the story with Agbrigg, which is obviously wrong, I felt it worthwhile to make a detailed tour and the following arose from it.

I have written (*Gissing Newsletter*, April 1975) on the beauty of Heath village itself, and it is certainly an oasis in that locality. The view westwards from there is across the Calder valley to Wakefield, the centre of which is on high land about two miles away. Very differently, eastwards, the terrain is much flatter with only one of the fifty-foot-apart contours meandering across the map over an area of five or so square miles. About a mile in that direction from the quarries on Heath Common, along an unclassified road, is New Sharlston Colliery, opened in the 1860s; and noticeable amongst the older houses by it are some nineteenth century terraces. There are several with their doors fronting onto Crossley Street, New Sharlston, but one at right angles to that street must be, surely, the Pit Row of the story. It is called Long Row, and consists of one block of forty-

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six houses running in a straight line for nearly three hundred yards. Some of the houses are no more than two or three hundred yards from the pit-head buildings though now separated by a pit stack (spoil heap) so that only the top of the winding gear can be seen from them. They were completed in 1873, and in spite of changes, the houses furthest from Crossley Street still have their long front gardens which end at the foot of the pit heap. There is a roadway to the houses along their backs, but at the front of the terrace access is by a four foot wide path past the front doors and dividing the houses from their gardens which, where they are tended, grow vegetables. I was fascinated to note as I walked along the path, that in these days of central heating nearly every house had an open coal fire burning in its front room – coal miners get an abundant supply of free coal as a perquisite. The houses are identical two storied dwellings, a door and one room wide to the front, though originally as a long term resident told me, fourteen of those in the middle of the terrace were divided into back-to-back houses, so making a total of sixty houses in Long Row.

The picture of the church in the story worried me as except for the “stumpy tower” it matched St. Catherine’s Church opposite “James Hood’s house” in Agbrigg. So I was pleased when I found St. Luke’s Church, Sharlston, a mile to the south of New Sharlston, by the side of the A.645, Wakefield to Pontefract road, and still separated from Long Row by fields. The only adornment on the otherwise plain stone building is, quoting from the *Wakefield Express* report (7th August, 1886) of its plans on the occasion of the laying of the foundation stone, “above the chancel arch, a turret containing two bells surmounted by a small spire.” This tower is no more than six feet across and about ten feet high. One difference is that the burial ground is not around the church but on the opposite side of the road.

Trying to identify the “parsonage” has been much more difficult and I can only offer a tentative solution, The present vicar lives in a twentieth century house opposite the church and from

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him I learnt of an earlier one, possibly older than the church and some hundred yards away. Again, different from the one in the story it is a good sized double-fronted building, recently altered by having two small wings and a porch added to it to make it more suitable for its current use as Sharlston Working Men’s Club. I have spoken to local inhabitants and none remembered any other

parsonage being used. At first the church was served by a curate of Kirkthorpe Church and Kelly's Directories for those years just give his address as "Sharlston."

Not finding a likely residence in Sharlston I considered other possibilities. Gissing writes of the gravestones "all black with coal-dust," which implies that they had been there for some long time; and hard by, "the low brick parsonage with a tall stack of irregular chimney-pots, not even a garden enclosing its desolation." I looked for these features by the old church at Kirkthorpe and although the graveyard fits, the parsonage is too grand.

More likely, but still rejected by me, is a building which, though not a parsonage, is called the Priests' House and is on Heath Common. The name arose when during the Napoleonic Wars a number of French nuns came as refugees to Heath to live in Heath Old Hall, and the small plaster-covered (over stone) house by its gates was used as a hospice for visitors. Its tiny garden is bounded by a brick wall and the house stands at the northern edge of the upper common, so to walk to New Sharlston from it one would need to cross the common and pass by the quarries.

I am suggesting that the most likely candidate is the then vicarage of Wakefield Parish Church, now Wakefield Cathedral. It is three miles from Sharlston Church but otherwise fits Gissing's description well. In 1776 a writer said that it was "mean and small" and in 1876 the newly inducted vicar moved elsewhere into finer accommodation. It (now Wakefield Conservative Club) is a low, mostly brickbuilt, structure with a hotchpotch of alterations carried out over five hundred years

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before and after Gissing's time. I have studied it using a map of 1851, the census returns for 1871, a unique drawing of the 1890s and by visiting it. From these sources it is clear that when Gissing knew it the entrance was, as now, a few feet from Zetland Street. Also, until a few years ago, there was a long established burial ground by it and between it and the church. It is less than three hundred yards from Gissing's birthplace, and from 1855 to 1875 was occupied by the Rev. Canon Charles Joseph Camidge and, in the earlier years, by his son the Rev. Charles Edward Camidge. The father was associated with T. W. Gissing and others, most of whom were members of Wakefield Mechanics' Institution, as a trustee of Wakefield Industrial and Fine Arts Institution, which resulted from the profit from the Wakefield Industrial and Fine Arts Exhibition of 1865. Further, and possibly in spite of T. W. Gissing being "a religious skeptic," the father "performed the last sad rites" at his funeral (and since I completed this article I have discovered that he baptised George, though not his brothers and sisters). T. W. Gissing wrote a disparaging review of a book by his son on the Exhibition, denying young Camidge's claim that the idea for the Exhibition had come from the night school at the Parish Church, although it should be pointed out that the son was a Joint Secretary of the Exhibition.

Pierre Coustillas has told us that the manuscript of the story contains the date 1881 written in Gissing's hand, and yet the foundation stone of St. Luke's was not laid until 31st July 1886 and the building consecrated on May 3rd 1887. I have made a casual study of the *Wakefield Express* and *Wakefield and West Riding Herald* newspapers for 1885 and 1886 without finding other references to the church, though plans for the project must have been discussed at that time, and Gissing spent some of that period at his mother's house in Stoneleigh Terrace only a mile from Heath. I might be wrong in claiming that the story was written after 1885, but the quarry, church, pit, "Pit Row," and "the dreary, flat woodless country" all fit together.

Further, an intriguing but possibly only coincidental point arises in *A Life's Morning* which was written in 1885 but altered before it was published in 1888. It contains a similar incident to one in the short story: a death at the quarry at Heath; and the name St. Luke's is used in it for what is actually the church and district of St. John's in Wakefield. Did Gissing know of the St. Luke's

Church, Sharlston when he wrote the novel, or was it chance that he chose that particular evangelist's name to hide the other one?

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Another short story, "The Firebrand," has a "Pit Row," and in it Gissing writes of "a plot of sorry garden in front of each [house], and behind them walled back-yards, where shirts and petticoats flapped in sooty air." Nowadays there are no enclosed back-yards to the terrace at New Sharlston, though such an arrangement was common and still exists at Nostell Long Row. In a conversation with a lady who has been a resident there since 1913, I was told that there were walled back-yards until the extra rooms were added.

In this story, the local town (Wakefield ?) is called Mapplebeck. It brings to mind Mapplewell, a small mining township between Wakefield and Barnsley. Also there was a George Mapplebeck who was a Wakefield town councillor from 1855 to '58.

Editor's note: My reading of the date "1881" on the manuscript of the story is corroborated by Algernon Gissing's own statement in his letter to Walter T. Spencer of September 17, 1926. The handwriting – among other things – makes 1881 quite plausible.

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#### Authors Pay Homage to Gissing - II

Alfred M. Slotnick

One of the great things about Gissing for us is that whatever has been done in Gissing research

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and scholarship, we know that the best is yet to come. Wherever I look I find bits and pieces I didn't know before. In the course of my searching I came upon a reference to Gissing in one of Thomas Burke's (1887-1945) books, *The English Townsman*, London, 1946. My interest in Burke was aroused and I started a search for other books by Burke with reference to Gissing. So far I have found no fewer than six books that have Gissing references, some admittedly slender. His works of fiction show an indebtedness to Gissing.

Burke burst out onto the literary scene in 1916 with a volume of short stories *Limehouse Nights – Tales of Chinatown*. The influence of Gissing is very strong and that of Arthur Morrison perhaps stronger. The book quickly became a best-seller and went into many printings. Just after the book's appearance, Burke found himself in pressing need and tried to sell the rights for £50, but his publisher Grant Richards would not accept, knowing he had a hit in hand. Burke had reason to bless him.

A passionate Londoner by birth, Burke loves to point out that all the great writers on London like Dickens and Gissing were immigrants. In his autobiography *Son of London* (1947) there are many references to Gissing. As a young man he had a picture of Gissing (among many others) in his room.

But the book that I want to cite is *The Sun in Splendor*, which is the name of a pub in Islington, right in Gissing country. Connie is the name of a waif who is abused by a "guardian" in the way Jane Snowdon is in *The Nether World*. She at last runs away from her tormentor right into the arms

of a prostitute. We lose sight of Connie, but later we meet her again as a young woman:

“... I’ll just go up and wash.”

Connie’s bedroom looked out on a small square of towzled backyard, and across to other towzled backyards. Beyond it were broken roofs and splintered

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windows and dustbins and dishevelment and decay. The room was a spot of makeshift grace in a circle of mess and muddle. On the walls hung a few carbon-prints, framed in passepartout, and a few unframed plates from *Colour* and *The Studio* fixed to the wall with drawing-pins. There were Grieffenhagen’s “Idyll,” Whistler’s “Battersea Bridge,” Burne-Jones’ “Golden Stairs,” Reynolds’s “Innocence,” Millet’s “The Angelus,” Rossetti’s “Reverie,” Furse’s “Diana of the Uplands,” Watts’ “Endymion,” against a screaming wall-paper of green and pink and yellow foliage. These names – Whistler, Rossetti, Millet, Burne-Jones – meant to her the grace and dignity of life, as the names Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, held, even in their printed form, some unnamable spiritual quality. On the dressing table lay *John o’ London’s Weekly*, *The Musical Herald*, and *The Bermondsey Book*. In a tin book-rack on the bedside table were her books – abridged editions of Tennyson, Keats, Shelley, and Browning; *Selections* from Masfield; *Sesame and Lilies*, Emerson’s *Essays*, Matthew Arnold, *The Roadmender*, *Henry Ryecroft*, *Afoot in England*, *Poets of To-day*. To the atmosphere of this room Ivy could not aspire, but she saw it as her superior’s cell of study and communion, and gave it the formal homage that one gives to the shrine of a foreign faith.”

Ivy is of course the aforementioned lady of the evening.

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#### Notes and News

The Harvester Press will be publishing Gissing’s diary later this year, under the title *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: the Diary of George Gissing, Novelist*. The American edition will appear under the imprint of Associated University Press. The original is at

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present on show in New York, together with many other diaries in the Berg Collection. An eight-page leaflet describing the exhibition is available to visitors at the New York Public Library. It is entitled *Self-Explorations: Diarists in England and America from John Evelyn to William Inge 1941-1962*. The exhibition will close on September 15th.

The new Harvester edition of *The Whirlpool* and *The Emancipated* are announced in the *Times Literary Supplement* of June 3rd for Autumn publication.



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Recent Publications

Volume

*Workers in the Dawn*. Three volumes in one. Garland Publishing, New York and London, 1976. Red cloth with black titling. This is a reprint of the first English edition (1880). It is no.75 in the Garland Series of Novels of Faith and Doubt, a collection of 121 novels in 92 volumes, selected by Professor Robert Lee Wolff, of Harvard University, with a separate introductory volume written by him especially for this series.

Articles, Reviews etc.

- Michael Collie, "How George Gissing Disappeared," *English Studies in Canada*, Winter 1975, pp. 434-49.
- Leonard Kriegel, "The Performing Selves," *Partisan Review*, January 1976, pp. 126-28. Review of *The Born Exile*.
- John Halperin, "Reviews," *Studies in the Novel*, Fall 1976, pp. 374-75. Review of *Gissing in Context*.
- Pierre Coustillas, "Reviews : I - This Will Never Do," *English Literature in Transition*, vol. XX, -- 30 --  
no. 1, 1977, pp. 46-47. Review of Michael Collie's bibliography.
- Anon., "Home Fans for 'Unknown' Gissing," *Yorkshire Post*, March 16, 1977.
- Anon., "Birthplace of Gissing," (Wakefield) *Express*, March 29, 1977, p. 5.
- Jacob Korg, "Reviews," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, March 1977, pp. 462-66. Review of *Gissing in Context* and *George Gissing: a Bibliography*.
- Douglas Johnson, "The Other Jubilee Year," *New Society*, May 12, 1977, pp. 289-90. Article on *In the Year of Jubilee*.
- Dorothy Eagle and Hilary Carnell, *The Oxford Literary Guide to the British Isles*, 1977. Gissing is mentioned many times.