

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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Thomas Seccombe Writes the Gissing Entry in the *D.N.B.*

Pierre Coustillas

To the average reader of George Gissing’s novels, the name of Thomas Seccombe is associated with the introductory survey which he wrote at Constable’s request for *The House of Cobwebs* (1906), perhaps also with the article on the novelist in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Although we have the word of Otto Kyllmann – a Director of Constable & Co., in the early 1900’s – that Seccombe followed Gissing’s career very closely, no other published comments than the survey and the *D.N.B.* entry have come to light. (1) Perhaps he reviewed Gissing’s books

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anonymously in some newspaper or periodical, but of this there is no evidence available. Seccombe’s comments, as we have them, are characteristic of the first decade after the novelist’s death; they show great sympathy for Gissing the man and the writer, but they are now largely superseded. Besides, careful though he may have been, he had to trust too many inaccurate written as well as oral sources, with the inevitable consequence that his facts, as often as not, have been proved false. (Who, one wonders, could nowadays quote three figures in a footnote and be three times wrong?). (2) Yet his introductory survey is still useful and, considering the popularity of *The*

*House of Cobwebs* up to the Second World War, this piece is likely to have been the first (and perhaps only) average-length criticism of Gissing read by many Englishmen. Even at present such a starting-point in the process of initiation into the works is not exceptional.

## I

Seccombe never met Gissing though they could certainly have attended the same literary gatherings in the late nineties, before the novelist went to live in France. Nine years younger than his subject, Seccombe was the son of a country doctor and had been educated at Balliol College, Oxford where he won the Stanhope Prize in 1887 with an essay on "Political Satire in England in the Eighteenth Century." He was a B.A. and M.A., and must have been well introduced since he became assistant editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* under (Sir) Sidney Lee in 1891, four years before he obtained his M.A. His own biographer, E. I. Carlyle, noted that "in this post Seccombe's kindness and courtesy made him a favourite with the contributors." It was in the field of eighteenth-century literature that he made his mark – *The Age of Johnson* (1900) still makes pleasant reading today. At the time he came to write on Gissing he was in a rather insecure position: he had lost his *D.N.B.* job when the editorial staff had been disbanded on the completion of the 66

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volumes (later reprinted as 22) which constituted the original *D.N.B.*, and it was only in 1907 that he was appointed lecturer in modern history at the East London College in the University of London. It is appropriate to record in passing that among his associates of the period was William Robertson Nicoll, of the *Bookman* and *British Weekly*, a man addicted to literary gossip who had met Gissing in the days of his nascent fame and knew a good many friends of his such as C. K. Shorter, George Whale, and Edward Clodd. Therefore, in addition to Gissing's works, which he read as they came out, he was not unacquainted with the broad lines of the author's life. Little information is available about his association with Constable, except that provided by the firm's bulletin at his death: "For many years Seccombe was literary adviser to Constable & Co., coming at least twice a week to the office in Orange Street to discuss projects and manuscripts, and to share with members of the firm his wide and sympathetic knowledge of letters ancient and modern [...]. He it was who urged the first publication in book form of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*." (3) And this can easily be accounted for: Seccombe was a booklover, a man who despite his comparatively reduced circumstances had once committed himself to buy a book every day of his life. (4) No wonder therefore that he found much in *Henry Ryecroft* to please him – perhaps also to move him as it may safely be supposed that in the years of his lectureship at Owens College (he was appointed there in 1901) he heard the story of Gissing's youthful disaster.

Until after the First World War the names of novelist and critic remained closely associated. When Thomas Bird Mosher – another booklover, and an admirer of the belletristic side of Gissing's production – chose to reprint *Henry Ryecroft* (1921) after *By the Ionian Sea* (1920), he prefaced it with Seccombe's introductory survey, and whether he did so with its writer's permission is doubtful, as the Gissing family regarded this Mosher publication as a pirated edition. (5) When Alfred Gissing took over his father's literary interests from his uncle Algernon, and a collected edition was

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planned, one of the potential editors, together with Hardy and Chesterton, was Seccombe. This was in 1920, and both Dutton in the States and John Murray in England were willing to issue the

collected works. A letter from Seccombe to Dutton, dated April 22, 1920, at which time he was a lecturer in the School of English Language and Literature at Oxford, shows that he had a fairly elastic notion of collected works. Volume 1 would be *Henry Ryecroft* with his old introduction. Then chronological order would be more or less closely adhered to as follows: 2, *Workers in the Dawn*; 3, *The Unclassed*; 4, *Isabel Clarendon*; 5, *Demos* (then in print at John Murray's); 6, *Thyrza*; 7, *A Life's Morning* ("not quite sure of this"); 8 and 9, *The Nether World* and *New Grub Street* ("perhaps his two strongest"); 10, *Born in Exile*; 11 and 12, *The Odd Women* and *In the Year of Jubilee* ("typical"); 13, *The Paying Guest* and *Eve's Ransom* ("a good volume"); 14, *The Whirlpool* ("autobiographical"); 15, *The Town Traveller* ("with fragments of *The Emancipated* and *The Crown of Life*"); 16, *Charles Dickens* ("valuable"); 17, *By the Ionian Sea* and *Veranilda*; 18, *Will Warburton* ("dubious of worth"); 19, short stories ("a good selection would make this strong"). He concluded by remarking that "perhaps 18, conceivably 7 and 15 could be omitted." Maybe the oddity of this plan, which further left out altogether *Denzil Quarrier*, *Sleeping Fires* and *Our Friend the Charlatan*, accounts in part for its miscarrying. As late as June 18, 1922 Alfred Gissing agreed to having Seccombe as editor. Another year went by, however, and Seccombe's death put an end to the plan associated with his name. In 1921 he had accepted the chair of English literature at Queen's College, Kingston, Ontario, but illness compelled him to resign and he died shortly after his return to England, on June 20, 1923.

What became of his literary papers is not known, but it may reasonably be assumed that they passed into the hands of his descendants. The *D.N.B.* entry about him, based on private information and personal knowledge, tells us that he married in 1896 and had a son and two daughters. In any

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event, a substantial batch of documents recently came on to the market in America, and it was acquired by Alfred M. Slotnick, of Brooklyn, who, with rare generosity has given me permission to use these items as I think fit. They are seventeen in number and they can be divided into three groups: (i) three press-cuttings about *The House of Cobwebs* (1906) and a letter from (Sir) Sidney Lee to Seccombe in which Gissing is referred to; (ii) five letters from Algernon and Ellen Gissing to Seccombe as well as three from Frank Swinnerton, a corrected proof of Seccombe's *D.N.B.* article on Gissing, notes by Morley Roberts on his friend, and a letter from Adolphus W. Ward to Seccombe, the whole material being more or less closely concerned with the *D.N.B.* article; (iii) copies of two very significant letters from Gissing to James Payn, editor of the *Cornhill Magazine* and manuscript reader for Smith, Elder & Co.

## II

Two of the three press-cuttings are reviews of *The House of Cobwebs* recorded in the bibliography of *Gissing: The Critical Heritage* (p. 546) – one by H. Hamilton Fyfe in the *Evening News* (June 18, 1906, p. 2), the other in the *Athenaeum* (July 7, 1906, p. 10). Hamilton Fyfe (1869-1951) begins by stressing Gissing's poverty and giving a short, rather inaccurate account of his early life; he also knows more than he is prepared to admit when he writes of the autobiographical short story "A Lodger in Maze Pond":

There is one story in this book which, I fancy, lays bare the writer's own character. In it a man (Henry Shergold) explains how he feels himself to be at the mercy of women. "I can't be friendly with them without drifting into mawkish tenderness". The consequence is he marries a lodging-house girl. It

seems sheer idiocy to his friends, but he cannot help himself. Gissing made a

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marriage of this kind himself. Probably he felt just as much afraid of cultivated women, and just as much at the mercy of the uneducated and h-less as did Henry Shergold in his story.

Gissing himself wrote in an unpublished letter to his friend Clara Collet, just after he first separated from his wife Edith: "Do you remember my story 'A Lodger in Maze Pond'? There is my own silly self." (February 18, 1897). (7)

For the collection of short stories, Hamilton Fyfe had nothing but praise: "For those (...) who are interested in life as it is his books have a never-failing attraction, and I can promise all such rare enjoyment from 'The House of Cobwebs.' Every story in it is a little masterpiece. If they were in French, we should have all our superfine critics of literature falling down and worshipping, yet I dare swear there is no collection of character sketches in any language which keeps up a higher level than this." The anonymous writer in the *Athenæum* was far less inclined to praise. While admitting the specificity of Gissing's work as a whole, he was impressed by the qualities he did not find in it and quoted Seccombe about the "absence of transcendental quality," the "failure in humour," the "deficiency in awe and mystery," the lack of emotional power and dramatic faculty, and startlingly – "the remoteness from actual life." He questioned Gissing's sense of the short story, concluding that here was "an intellectual observer painfully toiling with brushes the use of which he hardly understood."

The third press-cutting, also a review of *The House of Cobwebs*, is by far the fairest and most carefully written, but its origin is mysterious to the present writer who knows of twenty-nine reviews of the book and of twenty-seven newspapers and periodicals which did not review it. The type used and the width of the column, headed "George Gissing's Last Tales," clearly indicate that the piece appeared either in a daily like the *Standard* or a Sunday paper like the *Observer*, both

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unchecked. The anonymous reviewer, eschewing the flamboyant style of Hamilton Fyfe and the cool, spiteful approach of the *Athenæum*, made a serious attempt to define Gissing's art of the short story:

The stories themselves [...] all deal with characteristic incidents taken up from the grey world of middle-class poverty, struggle, and cheerlessness, in which Gissing lived, and which he knew so well. They have the characteristic quality of good short stories, in that they are essentially episodic in their conception and treatment, specimen fragments chipped off from the mass. As the veiled gleam of Gissing's lantern passes over the welter of dim, inconspicuous effort, it picks out a group of humble personalities here and there, reveals them for a few moments in some unnoticed tragedy or subdued comedy or prosaic idyll, and then quietly drops them back again. The tragic note is, as usual in this writer's work, the dominant one; and, as always, it is tragedy stripped of all its romance, its splendour, its dignity, its excitement. For the most part, the stories are those of broken lives, of sordid failure, of disappointment and depression, relieved, however, by that touch of humanity which shows heroism and nobility of soul

under the threadbare vestment of some unsuccessful small tradesman or shabby, undersized clerk. Artistic the stories are in their rigid restraint, their level precision of style, and their quiet fidelity of observation.

Seccombe may have sent a copy of *The House of Cobwebs* to (Sir) Sidney Lee (1859-1926), his former colleague, whom Gissing had met on July 22, 1897 at the home of a common friend, George Whale, solicitor, man of letters and book-collector. The novelist's diary records this pleasant occasion: "In evening to Blackheath to dine with Whale. Guests: Sidney Lee, Clodd,

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Shorter, West, and Wheatley the philologist. Lee told me of an oldish literary hack, who one day came to him in great discouragement, and said he should abandon literature. It turned out that he had been reading *New Grub Street*." (8) Lee's letter to Seccombe, on note-paper of the Athenaeum Club, is only in part concerned with Gissing:

30/5/1906

Dear Seccombe,

I have been reading Geo. Gissing with increasing admiration. You have really converted me to believe in him.

I suppose you are occupied over Whitsun. I have been greatly obsessed by Maitland's biography of [Leslie] Stephen, by my American publishers' (Orcutt's) troublesome proposals, and by other trifles. I should like to get away for a few days' rest – a very few – from Saturday till Monday.

Yours always,

S. Lee.

### III

The material related to the Gissing entry in the *D.N.B.* shows that if the result achieved is, by present-day standards, rather poor because of the factual errors and doubtful statements it contains, Seccombe spared no pains to secure accurate information. He was in touch with Morley Roberts, who had known Gissing for about thirty years, had read all his books and published at least four articles, two of them anonymous, on his works. (9) In the bibliography appended to his introductory survey Seccombe had listed none of these; so before writing the biographical entry he attempted to fill some gaps – and actually did so in the bibliographical note which completes the Life. Roberts

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must have mentioned his unsigned article "The Exile of George Gissing" (*Albany Magazine*, Christmas 1904, pp. 24-31), and perhaps parted with a spare copy. With the better known piece in *Literature*, he dared not part and was content to send Seccombe notes from it. The two sheets in Roberts's handwriting must have been three originally since a comparison between the printed text and the notes reveals the absence of the central portion – about one third of the article. Sheet one begins with "Exact Reference to Nineteenth Cent | Nineteenth Century Sept. 1906 | George Gissing

by Austin Harrison,” and then proceeds in this strain about his own article in *Literature* (July 20, 1901): “*George Gissing*: Literary descent of second rate writers rarely in doubt and of no interest for critics. Only new development or striking personality compel individ. attention. Geo. Gissing compels this interest and stands in a high and solitary place. . .”

The five letters from Ellen and Algernon Gissing about their brother George are of course valuable as an index to the nature of Seccombe’s enquiry, but also because they betray the family’s fear lest certain phases in the novelist’s life should be tackled too directly. They are of special interest if compared with the proof of the article and the definitive version.

St. Mark’s Avenue  
Leeds.

June 7, 1912.

Dear Mr. Seccombe,

I am sorry – my brother’s birthday is Nov. 22. I ought to have said so before. Kindly mention with regard to his father that he was a “Pharmaceutical Chemist” and a great Botanist. He published a Book called “The Flora of Wakefield,” also some poems.

His mother’s father was a Lawyer in Droitwich. The Bedford family was well-known in

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Worcestershire, especially in the village of Broadway near Evesham. There they have property.

I am sorry I don’t at all remember the date of the death of my brother’s first wife. I should certainly make no reference to “Madame Gissing.” I think it cannot be in any way necessary.

With regard to any idiosyncracies or perhaps I might say “characteristics” of my brother, I hardly know what to mention.

I think he was a man more sensitive to the *pain* of others than anyone I have ever met. To pass any poor or pitiable object in the street would lie on his mind and sadden it for the rest of the day. He had a great love for animals especially cats, and made quite a companion of the different cats he kept from time to time in his flats in London – talking with them, with much affection. For every cat he had one title and that was “Grimmy Shaw.” I don’t know where he picked it up from, but note the tone in which he said it – it expressed infinite affection.

His *intense* love – from earliest boyhood – for all classical literature and classical places, esp. of Greece and Rome, you will no doubt know well enough. It was a very strong feature, and one cannot think of him without it. It amounted to a passion.

With kind regards. Please forgive a somewhat hurried note, to-day.

I am  
Yrs sincerely,

Ellen S. Gissing.

In accordance with Ellen’s wishes, her father’s occupation was described as that of a “pharmaceutical chemist,” but “great” botanist was denied him. The phrase “a Suffolk man of literary attainments” did not go far to suggest that Thomas Waller Gissing wrote poems, as

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distinguished from other literary forms, in his youth. The feline associations did not find their way into the article, but Ellen remembered the omission and made up for it when she wrote her recollections of George in the volume of letters to his family. (10) As for "Madame Gissing," that is George's French common-law wife, Gabrielle Fleury, she was ignored by the Gissings in print, but not quite in life, to the end of her long existence. Although Morley Roberts gave a full, yet inaccurate account of the part she played in his friend's later years in *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* (1912), where she appears as "Thérèse," George's family – in accordance with her somewhat erratic wishes – prudishly concealed her significant place in Gissing's emotions. His devotion to classical studies was duly mentioned, and commented upon respectfully. Seccombe followed the lead given by *Ryecroft* and *By the Ionian Sea* and was perhaps prompted by a desire to stress an influence which H. G. Wells had derided in his rejected preface to *Veranilda*. (11)

In turn Algernon, who was then at the depressing end of his career as a novelist, replied to Seccombe's enquiries:

66 Marchmont Road,  
Edinburgh.

14th June 1912

Dear Mr. Seccombe,

I am so sorry for this delay as I have been on the move and I have just seen your last letter. The last London flat was 7K Cornwall Mansions (originally Residences) close to Baker Street Station. I have no list of all the photographs. There is a good one by Mendelssohn – only fair by Elliot [*sic*] and Fry in my opinion – but better than all to my mind is Mr. W. Rothenstein's sketch which was reduced (not very successfully) for the little *Ryecroft*.

Yes, the MSS of "New Grub Street" and "Born in Exile" are to be sold at Sotheby's on the

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28<sup>th</sup> inst. but there is no contemplation of a general sale. Your own appreciation of G. G. is clearly expressed and I will certainly remember your wishes as to manuscript relics even if I can't get down to a bargain and sale with you over them. I hope I have not hindered you by this delay and scribble this in haste tonight rather than lose another post. If writing again kindly address here at present.

Yours very truly

Algernon Gissing

The good photograph by Mendelssohn – which Gissing's diary shows to have been taken on November 5, 1895 – was hardly ever used in periodicals and books until the publication of the Gissing-Wells correspondence in 1961, but it was that which the author most willingly gave away when he had a present to make in later life. (His own framed copy is in the present writer's collection.) By the Elliott and Fry portrait, it is difficult to know what Algernon meant exactly, though neither the date (late May 1901) nor the occasion (the publication of Morley Roberts's article in *Literature*) are in the least uncertain. It just happens that three portraits were taken on the

same day, which have often been used – one of the novelist holding a manuscript on his lap (in H. G. Wells's *Autobiography*, for instance), the two others of the writer at his desk (in the 1935 edition of *Workers in the Dawn* on the one hand and in *The Letters of George Gissing to His Family* on the other). (12) The sketch by (Sir) William Rothenstein, made at the artist's studio in Glebe Place, Chelsea, on June 7, 1897, was indeed one of the best, only to be matched by the Russell photograph which first appeared in the *Album* for February 25, 1895, and is currently available in *George Gissing: Essays and Fiction* (1970).

The latter part of Algernon's letter has a distinctly bibliographical appeal. In the previous year he had been selling many of his brother's manuscripts to Frank Redway, the Wimbledon dealer, at

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prices (usually eleven guineas apiece) which failed altogether to satisfy him as he was convinced that they would soon become much more valuable. But he could not afford to wait: he had a wife and five children to support and his own stories brought him in nothing more than a mere pittance. The sale of two of the more potentially valuable of George's MSS was purely experimental. He hoped to get a much better price at Sotheby's than he would get from Redway. But the experiment proved disastrous, for "New Grub Street" and "Born in Exile" fetched £5 and £5.10s. respectively. In the course of time the two MSS passed from the hands of their purchasers – Walter T. Spencer for the former and Maggs for the latter – to their present "homes" – the Berg Collection and the Huntington Library. Algernon remembered Seccombe's request for some relic among George's papers: a copy of *Henry Ryecroft* – a proof copy dated 1902 with an autograph letter signed and a manuscript sheet – was sold by the American Art Association in its sale of February 5 and 6, 1925. It was described as Seccombe's former property, and fetched \$380.00.

In his next letter, Algernon saved Seccombe from several factual errors due to ambiguous statements in previous correspondence:

66 Marchmont Road,  
Edinburgh

18th June 1912

Dear Mr. Seccombe,

I am sending the proof on to my sister today. I can fancy your annoyance. I feel doubt about a few of the facts but I haven't papers here to refer to. You will see that I have made two or three jottings. I can safely say that it was £150 not £250 that he got from Smith & Elder for "New Grub Street". This I know as a fact. They never went beyond this with him except for "Life's Morning,"

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which was also used serially in "Cornhill." Of course the £150 was for the whole copyright.

Evidently I put my information about the flat clumsily. It referred to the time before second marriage. He had no flat at all latterly in London, just stayed with friends or at hotel when there.

The portrait in small "Ryecroft" which you refer to is Rothenstein's, but is naturally very much better in the full-sized print.

I only wish you could have had more room but of course it isn't possible in such a Dictionary.



Ever yours,

Algernon Gissing

A comparison between the proof and the article shows that the wrong figure for *New Grub Street* was amended, but Algernon's implication that his brother received more than £150 for *A Life's Morning* was definitely a mistake. According to George's own statements he got £50 for the book (only £25 according to the publishers' records) and another £50 for the serial which ran in the *Cornhill* from January to December 1888. Seccombe also cancelled the following sentence in his last paragraph: "A speaking likeness in outline was prefixed to later editions of 'Ryecroft.'" The final version reads: "A portrait appears in William Rothenstein's 'English Portraits' (1898), reduced in later (pocket) editions of the popular 'Ryecroft Papers.'" The two or three jottings made by Algernon concerned several points which were not invariably corrected afterwards: thus Peak, the anti-hero of *Born in Exile*, is still called Godfrey, instead of Godwin in the Dictionary, and despite Algernon's addition on the proof that Casti is a character *The Unclassed* the inadvertent reader will imagine that he is to be found in *Workers in the Dawn*. Someone (probably not Algernon) added in

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the margin that *Ryecroft* was written at Budleigh Salterton, but fortunately this irresponsible suggestion was ignored.

Ellen's next letter does not enable us to determine what alterations she requested. The proof carries no comment unmistakably in her hand. But it is clear enough that she cared but moderately for Seccombe's piece.

St. Mark's Avenue  
Leeds.

June 19, 1912

Dear Mr. Seccombe,

I return the MS which my brother has sent on. We have each made *slight* alterations, I think.

Here and there are points which I think might perhaps have been better omitted, but possibly if it proves too long for the Dictionary these may vanish. It is difficult to give a true picture of the man. The dark and unsatisfactory side always seems to me so unduly accentuated. I suppose I knew another side best.

I am

Yrs very truly

Ellen S. Gissing

The alterations suggested by Algernon and Ellen Gissing caused Seccombe to realize that the biographical section of his introduction to *The House of Cobwebs* contained not a few errors and it would seem that he contemplated making corrections in the next edition. Whether Algernon kept his promise to help or not is uncertain, but there is no difference between the 1907 and the 1914

impressions of the book, perhaps because the publishers were unwilling to make corrections on the plates. (13)

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The last item of correspondence from Algernon is a postcard addressed to Thomas Seccombe Esq., 18 Perryn Road, Acton, London, W. It reads:

Edinburgh, 24th June '12.

Yes, I will gladly correct your original article on G. G., but I must wait until I have my papers at hand as I could then do it so much better and more safely. It may even be two or three months, but I will take it for granted that I may let you know when I have them. Do not trouble to reply to this.

Ever yours,

A. G.

(to be continued)

- 1 - One exception, Seccombe's review of Frank Swinnerton's *George Gissing, a Critical Study* (1912) in the *New York Times* is recorded below.
- 2 - *The House of Cobwebs and Other Stories*, London, Constable, 1906, p. XI. Seccombe declared that £250 was paid for *New Grub Street*, £200 advanced on *The Nether World* and £150 refused for *Born in Exile*. In fact Gissing received £150 for each of the three novels, less his agent's ten per cent commission on *Born in Exile*.
- 3 - "A Great Bookman: Thomas Seccombe," *Constable's Monthly List*, July 1923 (unpaginated cutting in the Wakefield Public Libraries). Eveleigh Nash also claimed that he had been instrumental in securing *Henry Ryecroft* for Constable: "While at Constable's, I saw in the *Fortnightly Review* a series of papers 'An Author at Grass,' by George Gissing, who, after being for years the spokesman of those on whom good fortune never seems to smile, strayed

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into a happy field to write some beautiful things about his love of the countryside and of English ways. I was so delighted with this journal of a recluse who enjoys release from poverty and worry that I called on Mr. J. B. Pinker, who was Gissing's agent, and asked him whether we could have the book rights of the work. Fortunately, no arrangement had been made for its publication in volume form, and with the approval of Mr. Kyllmann I agreed to the terms proposed. The title was changed to 'The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft,' and it was the most successful of all Gissing's works." (Eveleigh Nash, *I Liked the Life I Lived: Some Reminiscences*, London, John Murray, 1941, pp. 53-54)

- 4 - "It was characteristic. . .of the man's generosity and of his love of letters, that at one time he made it almost a rule of life to buy at least one book a day. This rule he faithfully observed, and not without personal sacrifice, for he was never a rich man." *Constable's Monthly List*,

July 1923.

- 5 - Both the 1921 and 1928 editions carry the introductory survey by Seccombe.
- 6 - Berg Collection.
- 7 - Unpublished letter (Robert Collet).
- 8 - *Letters of George Gissing to Members of His Family*, London, Constable, 1927, p. 352. That Seccombe knew George Whale is established by Frank Swinnerton's letter of August 18, 1912, printed further on in this article.
- 9 - "George Gissing," *The Novel Review*, May 1892, pp. 97-103. Reprinted in *Gissing: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 208-214. "Mr. Gissing's New Novel – and Mr. Gissing," *The Review of the Week*, November 4, 1899, pp. 16-17. The authorship of this article is established by an unpublished letter of Gissing to Roberts dated November 19, 1899 (Berg Collection). The

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other two pieces are mentioned in this article.

10- Appendix C.

11 - Reprinted in *George Gissing and H. G. Wells* (London, 1961).

12 - Gissing had also sat to Elliott & Fry in 1895 (see the reproduction in Edward Clodd's *Memories*), but it is doubtful whether Algernon meant this comparatively early portrait.

13 - A slight change was made between the first and second impression. On the last line of footnote 2, on p. xviii, Seccombe added: "The name is from Byron's *Elegy on Thyrsa*."

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An Unrecorded Presentation Copy

Bruce Garland  
Trenton, N. J.

Association and presentation copies have a special literary life all their own. They are endowed with character and personality by the presenter's inscription and the owner's name; they belong to literature and have a bibliographical significance which goes to the collector's heart. They also tell a tale which is worth repeating. So, when Al Slotnick allowed me to carry home a presentation copy of *Forster's Life of Dickens* abridged and revised by Gissing I was determined to develop its personality and introduce the book to *Newsletter* readers.

The presentation reads "To my Dear Mother | George Gissing | St Jean de Luz | Oct.1902." The

book must have been sent on the 16th of October since a letter of George to his sister Nelly dated October 18, 1902 asks : “Did mother receive the copy of my edition of Forster which I sent two days ago? No doubt.” (1) A similar enquiry was made of Eduard Bertz: “I wonder,” he wrote on October 26, “whether you have received the copy of my edition of Forster’s Dickens, which I sent some few days ago?” (2) It is clear that he worried about the poor postal service – about three years before several copies of *The Crown of Life* had been lost in the post, in particular one to his friend Clara Collet. Whether the comparative unreliability of the postal service has somehow increased the scarcity of presentation copies of *Forster’s Life of Dickens* is difficult to say, but the fact is that no other presentation copies of this volume seem to be on record.

In abridging Forster’s original three-volume work Gissing used a cut and paste method combined with his own careful corrections, revisions, and additions. (3) He thought the typist would find the task an easy one despite the alarming appearance of the “manuscript.” However,

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somewhere along the line three errors crept into the book which Gissing felt compelled to correct in his mother’s copy. The pencilled corrections are all unquestionably in his hand. They appear in the margin as follows:

- p. 17, 1. 9, “m/”; “Whosoever” changed to “whomsoever.”

- p. 125, 1. 11, “thousand/”; the word “thousand” had been skipped by the printers.

- p. 193, 1. 25, “of that day”; “English men and women of that day whom fame remembers.”

The first two corrections concern passages which were printed correctly in Forster’s original work; the third one occurs in a paragraph entirely rewritten by Gissing.

While none of these corrections will change the course of Gissing scholarship, they do reinforce the view of Gissing the perfectionist. This book is by no means the only one of his with corrections in the margin. He said he was a bad proofreader, but this was not true. The printers were more often to be blamed than he was. Proofreading was at all times a task he performed most carefully. In the present case, however, his corrections were – not through his own fault – of no use to readers of subsequent impressions, as the publishers did not trouble to make the desirable changes on the plates. None of the six copies in the collection of Pierre Coustillas shows any alteration in the text. (4)

Those who wish to read things into the inscription’s brevity, or into the fact that the presentation was even made, are free to do so. However, the relationship between George and his mother has already been investigated by scholars to whom I reverently defer. (5)

1 - *More Books* (The Bulletin of the Boston Public Library), December, 1947.

2 - *The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz*, p. 312.

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3 - Spiers and Coustillas, *The Rediscovery of George Gissing*, p. 125.

4 - In Chronological order: (1) the first edition in blue cloth and gilt titling (Chapman & Hall, 1903, but actually issued in October 1902); (2) a variant with black titling; (3) the first American edition (McClure, Phillips & Co., 1902), published in red cloth gilt; (4) the

Chapman & Hall 1907 impression, like no. 2; (5) and (6) reprints as Vol. XX of the Special Authorized Edition of the Works of Charles Dickens in twenty volumes (Cassell & Co.), respectively in green cloth and black quarter leather with gilt decoration on the spine, and in brown imitation leather with the spine ornamentation.

5 - See, e.g., Gillian Tindall, *The Born Exile*, and Mabel Donnelly, *George Gissing, Grave Comedian*.

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### The Missing Short Stories

Pierre Coustillas

This is a reply to my own query in the January 1977 number of the *Newsletter*, p. 22. While in London in August I was at long last able to clarify two of the three obscure points I mentioned. "Joseph," the story Gissing wrote on March 9, 1896, was published in *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* (which was edited by Thomas Catling) on May 17, 1896, p. 8. It relates the adventures of a young man-servant and is by no means as bad as Gissing's own masochistic diary entry for March 9 would suggest. The unidentified short story for which a payment of £4.2 was recorded in the novelist's Account of Books in 1895, proves to be – quite unexpectedly – a story which was included, as to all appearances unpublished, in *George Gissing: Essays and Fiction* (Johns Hopkins, 1970), i.e. "Their

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Pretty Way." However the title in the newspaper is "Their Pretty Ways," a change which was surely Gissing's own. Whatever variants occur between the text printed from the manuscript in 1970 and the version in *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* for September 15, 1895, p. 6, certainly correspond to corrections that were made on the proofs, as no typescript of this story is known to have existed.

No *London Magazine* is on record for the year 1895, so that the title mentioned by Gissing must be incomplete or inaccurate. "A Freak of Nature" must therefore be considered as lost until the present owner of the manuscript chooses to share his knowledge with other Gissing enthusiasts.

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### Book Review

John Halperin  
University of Southern California  
Los Angeles

George Gissing, *Our Friend the Charlatan* (The Harvester Press, Hassocks, 1976). Edited with an introduction by Pierre Coustillas.

The Harvester Press's new edition of Gissing's *Our Friend the Charlatan* (1976), impeccably edited by Pierre Coustillas, is a mixed blessing: it is good to see another of Gissing's novels again available, and yet one can hardly recommend this particular book, except as a curiosity-piece, to the serious student of English fiction.

The novel first appeared in 1901. A second edition came out in 1903 and a reprint in 1906. This is the first new edition since 1906, and it is not difficult to see why there has been no demand for the book in the intervening 70 years.

In his Introduction Professor Coustillas admits that Gissing's approach to his subject in *Our*

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*Friend the Charlatan* "is devoid of passion, there is no personal involvement on the novelist's part." This is precisely what is wrong with the book. Gissing's greatest novels are those which are written from life. To put it another way – when his fiction most nearly approaches autobiography he is at his best. For many writers the reverse is true – they are unable to escape the distorting lens of self-interest and can write effectively only after they have exorcised their personal demons, usually in their earliest writings. But Gissing presents a different case. His passion, his power, his sporadic brilliance as a novelist derive almost exclusively from personal experience and out of subjects with which he feels a personal kinship. His best books contain a character or two very much like himself, depicted with a vividness and depth of feeling never achieved when the *personae* or the subject are less familiar. His most powerful stories are about sex, money, and class, and this is because Gissing himself could never get these things out of his mind. The earlier novels are the most, the later the least, autobiographical. *Our Friend the Charlatan* falls into the latter category.

Throughout much of his life Gissing was contemptuous of both party politics and the well-meaning but useless attempts of institutionalized charity to change the nature of the social fabric. He was always angry, too, at hypocrites, *poseurs*, and charlatans of various shades. In the novel about a moral fraud who has political ambitions and who spends much of his time courting women whose chief interest is improving the condition of the poor there can be little that the novelist finds congenial, and thus his sympathies are disengaged. That is the trouble with *Our Friend the Charlatan*. Temperamentally, Gissing is so far from his subject that he is unable to see how one-dimensional his characters are, how heavy-handed the satire is. His was not the sort of

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personality he writes about here; he knows too little about it. His strength as a writer does not lie in the negative capability of a Keats, able to enter into alien places and understand them at will through an act of self-denial, but rather in his power to render, from personal experience, that direct impression of life so necessary, in James's view, to the writing of fiction. James would approve the throbbing dramatic intensity of several of the novel's confrontation scenes, but there is little else to recommend it.

Professor Coustillas in his Introduction compares Gissing's comedy in this book with Meredith's, but Meredith, a disciple of Molière, was never so lacking in subtlety ("I do not feel enthusiastic about his novels," said Gissing of Meredith, in a letter to Bertz, in 1892). Nor is it useful to compare Dyce Lashmar, the politician-protagonist of *Our Friend the Charlatan*, with the frauds and hacks of *New Grub Street* such as Jasper Milvain, who has depths and interesting pockets of personality (because there is a little of Gissing in him) simply missing in Lashmar (in whom there is nothing of Gissing). Indeed, Gissing has made Lashmar so unprincipled and predictable as to be utterly tedious. Professor Coustillas is certainly right to identify Lady Ogram and Constance Bride as two of Gissing's most interesting creations in *Our Friend the Charlatan*, but they are not enough to save the novel from silliness. Perhaps only *The Town Traveller*, written just before *Our Friend the Charlatan*, is a worse production. Gissing's lack of personal involvement in both novels is fatal: these are books with no heart and soul.

Professor Coustillas's Introduction is especially useful for the light it sheds on Gissing's feelings about Izoulet's biosociological theories, so important in this story. The textual notes are rich and valuable, as is the bibliographical information provided. Any student of Gissing and of the British novel must be grateful to Professor Coustillas and to Harvester for making available so

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much that has been unavailable so long. Eventually Harvester will have all of Gissing's 22 novels in print in a uniform edition. The collected works of any writer, whatever his stature, contains some items one would prefer to skip quickly over. The fact that *Our Friend the Charlatan* is such a book does not diminish the importance of this continuing series, an integral contribution to the revival of interest in Gissing during the past two decades.

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#### Notes and News

Two books on Wakefield should be brought to the notice of Gissing's readers – one which was reprinted some nine years ago, *Memories of Merry Wakefield: An Octogenarian's Recollections*, by Henry Clarkson (S. R. Publishers Ltd, £3); the other only just out, *Drawings of Wakefield*, by Henry Clarke (Wakefield Historical Society, 30 Newland Court, Sandal, Wakefield WF1 5AC; £3). Henry Clarkson was 86 years old when he first published his book in 1887; the present reprint reproduces the text of the second edition (1889). His reminiscences help us to visualize Wakefield before T. W. Gissing settled in Westgate in the 1850's. He depicts the rise of industry and the development of the railways, also the Luddite disturbances of the 1810's. The other volume, which has a short, scholarly introduction by John Goodchild, the Wakefield archivist, contains 97 drawings some of which at least date back to the early 1890's. Among the drawings of obvious Gissing interest are several views of Westgate and Sandal, Back Lane, Stamp Office Yard, and Wentworth Terrace. Notes on the drawings and a map make the book easy to consult.

The *Victorian Studies Bulletin* for September 1977 announces that *English Literature in Transition*, XX: 4 (1977) will publish details about the MLA Special Session on English Fiction

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(1880-1920) in which recent criticism on Gissing, Bennett, Galsworthy, Moore, Wells and Wilde will be discussed. Professor John Halperin will read a paper on Gissing. The same number of the *Victorian Studies Bulletin* reports on the Victorian sessions at this year's Popular Culture Association's annual conference in Baltimore (April 27-30). "Focusing on Gissing's *New Grub Street*, Keith L. Schall (Hampton Institute) examined the debilitating effect of such circulating libraries as Mudie's on serious writers in the late nineteenth century."

W. W. Norton, the New York publishers, are soon to bring out the fifth impression of *The Odd Women* under their imprint since 1971. Unlike preceding impressions, it will have an introduction by Marcia Rose Fox.

Alfred Slotnick sends an extract from *The March of Literature*, by Ford Maddox Ford (New York, Dial, 1938), which, considering the stage reached by Ford's career when Gissing died, is

rather surprising: "Thus the writer was for a long time under the impression that Stendhal must have had a direct and quite strong influence over the late – and much too neglected – George Gissing. But shortly before his death Gissing assured the writer that he had never so much as heard of Stendhal."

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### Recent Publications

#### Volume

Michael Collie, *George Gissing : a Biography*, Folkestone: Dawson, £7, pp. 189. Blue cloth, no dust jacket. Published in America by Archon Books.

#### Articles, Reviews, etc.

Frederick John Bethke, "Elements of Autobiography in Six Continental Travelogues by Victorian

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Novelists," *Dissertation Abstracts International*, XXXV, April 1975, pp. 6702A - 03A.

Marcia Rose Fox, "The Woman Question in Selected Victorian Fiction, 1883-1900," *Dissertation Abstracts International*, XXXVI, September 1975, pp. 1495A - 96A.

Richard A. Levine (ed.), *The Victorian Experience: The Novelists*, Ohio University Press, 1976. Contains a long, thoughtful essay by Jacob Korg, "George Gissing: Humanist in Exile," pp. 239-73.

Kate Taylor, "Jubilee Heritage: Offices that once were home to the Gissings", (Wakefield) *Express*, May 27, 1977, Second Section, p. 19. With a photograph of Cliff Hill House in Sandy Lane, where Margaret and Ellen had their Preparatory School after George's death.

Anon., "Plan for a George Gissing Centre," (Wakefield) *Express*, July 22, 1977, Second Section, p. 3.

Anon., "The Clouded Crystal Ball," *New Yorker*, August 1, 1977, p. 55. Quotation of a passage from *The Nether World*.

William Haley, "Unclassed Novelist," *Books and Bookmen*, XXII, August 1977, pp. 28-30. A substantial review-article in which all recent Gissing publications in volume form are discussed.