

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*.

Volume IV, Number 4

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Announcement

Beginning with Volume V, No.1, the editorship and management of the *Gissing Newsletter* will change hands. The new editor will be Pierre Coustillas, and the functions of business manager will be performed by C. C. Kohler of Dorking. Shigeru Koike of Tokyo and I will continue as members of the Editorial Board.

Contributions and correspondence about editorial matters should now go to:

M. Coustillas
10 Rue Gay-Lussac
59 La Madeleine-lez-Lille
France

(Mr. Coustillas explains, for the benefit of our non-French readers, that the word “lez” in his address is an archaic form meaning “near” which is found only in place-names.) Subscriptions and correspondence about business matters should go to:

Mr. C. C. Kohler
141 High Street
Dorking, Surrey
England

Perhaps an explanation of the recent irregularities in the appearance of the *Newsletter* is in order. The recent numbers have been dated far earlier than their actual appearance in order to allow the editor to begin as of January 1969, with Volume V, No. 1. Further, trans-Atlantic readers have experienced considerable delay in receiving their copies because of the dock strike in the east coast ports of the United States, which has prevented the shipment of surface mail.

Jacob Korg

In Search of Gissing Memories in Switzerland

Pierre Coustillas

(Reprinted, by permission, from *Book Collecting and Library Monthly*, May, 1968, 147 Gray's Inn Road, London, W.C. 1).

The best key to an author's mind remains his books and personal papers even if speech and the ability to transcribe it are said, half in jest, to have been given to man that he may the better conceal his thoughts. To understand George Gissing nothing can replace an assiduous perusal of every single line that came from his pen and of the thousands of volumes that he read, from the stories habitually put into the hands of Victorian children to Mgr. Duchesne's *Christian Worship*, a study of the Latin liturgy up to the time of Charlemagne, the last book he read. Yet an acquaintance with the people who were privileged to know him or have been the recipients of an oral tradition concerning him or again an acquaintance with the places the novelist lived in and was influenced by may be as rewarding as shutting oneself up in a library. I can understand that American who, in the course of a visit to Wakefield some years ago, insisted on being shown the rooms on the first floor of the chemist's shop in Westgate, in one of which the author of *New Grub Street* was born. True, it can't have led the visitor to any discovery, but it probably helped him to correct some inevitably misconceived notion of what the place must have been like over a hundred years ago when the novelist's father gave what little leisure he had to the study of the local varieties of ferns or to the composition of poems which never won recognition beyond a circle of friends. And, since the imagination of the biographer is only too apt to suggest details which will infuse life into the dry facts of official records, any attempt to nourish one's vision with scenes and actors that were in the background of the writer's existence, cannot fail to be worth making.

I had long intended to call on Mr. Alfred Gissing, the author's younger son, but somehow half a dozen years passed before a definite appointment was made. Mr. Gissing was first known to me through his prefaces to books concerning his father and better still by his article on *Veranilda* published in the January 1937 issue of the *National Review*. This is the only article I know of that has done justice to that neglected historical novel, after a handful of enthusiastic notices that hailed the original publication of the book. Besides, we had exchanged some correspondence about genealogical and bibliographical matters, with much benefit to the inquirer.

A glance at maps of Switzerland, which fail as a rule to show the little scattered mountain village of Les Marécottes, but always indicate the neighbouring centre of Martigny, a few miles distant from the French border, had called up in my mind the characteristic image of a picturesque time-proof locality, snow-covered during the autumn and winter months.

Coming from France along the lake of Geneva, you are rather disappointed to see the mountains receding from the road as far inland as Martigny and you may even wonder whether after all you are not going to face the ultimate prospect of meeting your host on a plain without ever climbing a mountain side. But once at Martigny you are offered a

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compensation which revives in you the comforting belief that your knowledge of geography was after all sound enough. Your car, whose gentle roaring in the plain seemed to mock the challenge of the mountain roads, now has to nerve itself to ascend the narrow winding road, commanding a precipitous view over the valley you despaired of leaving. You drive up through Salvan where Mr. Alfred Gissing founded an English school just after the Second World War and soon after, at an altitude of about 3,500 feet, you reach the village of Les Marécottes on a comparatively gentle slope.

Mr. Gissing has been living in Switzerland for the last twenty-three years and he does not contemplate returning for good to his own country. If he has ceased to write on his father's works, he has certainly lost no regard for them and indeed is rejoiced by the present revival of interest in them. As these are now out of copyright, some reprints may escape his notice but his correspondents try to keep him well-informed. A man of seventy-two, he spends his days in a peaceful retirement which, but for its location, would have pleased his father and Henry Ryecroft. However, Ryecroft lived the life of a bachelor whereas Mr. Gissing enjoys the genial company of a wife, a son named Michael who has inherited his grandfather's talent for drawing and occasionally devotes himself to painting, and until recently a daughter called Jane, now married after making herself a name in the British Olympic skiing team a few years ago. Neither George nor Algernon Gissing, who never succeeded in making literature a really paying profession, would have complained that the next generation should manifest no desire to "drive the quill."

One often finds reminders of family history as one looks around in Mr. Gissing's home. He still has the clock which was in the possession of his grandfather, Thomas Waller Gissing, over a hundred years ago, with its mechanism that defies time; also his father's desk, divorced from its chair which, together with several other heirlooms still belongs to Gabrielle Fleury's family. On the walls of the sitting-room, the specialist easily recognizes portraits which have been used in books – the photograph of George reading which Royal A. Gettmann was apparently the first to use in his edition of the Gissing-Wells correspondence, or that which was taken by Messrs Elliott and Fry for a special number of *Literature* in 1901, just before Wells and Henry Hick persuaded the novelist that he must go and recuperate in the East Anglian Sanatorium at Nayland, or again a copy of the medallion (by Spicer Simson, I presume) put up in the University of Manchester in memory of its former student.

The books on Mr. Gissing's shelves are similarly rich in associations: few collectors have ever laid hands on Thomas Waller Gissing's *Materials for a Wakefield Flora* (London, J.

Van Voorst, Paternoster Row, 1867) or the even scarcer volume entitled *Margaret and Other Poems* by an East Anglian (London, Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1855). Not until 1966 was it revealed that the chemist of Wakefield was also a poet; we knew that he would correct his eldest son's poems in the late eighteen-sixties and indeed some of George's early attempts at versifying bear traces of variants from the pen of Thomas Waller. The family had of course been aware of this, as it was of the publication of *Margaret and Other Poems*, but somehow

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the latter fact had been allowed to fall into oblivion. And now I am told that Thomas Waller had another volume of poems printed in 1853 with a title-page bearing his initials and this discovery was confirmed by Mr. Alfred Gissing. Here is a sample of his grandfather's verse, not to be found in either volume, since it is dated July, 1864. It has been rescued from the files of the *Wakefield Free Press* for July 8, 1871, a paper to which the chemist-poet-botanist contributed occasional articles or letters to the editor on matters of local politics.

Brignall Old Church*
By the late Thomas Waller Gissing

I.

Still! so still! fit place for the dead!
Nothing unholy to raise a sigh!
Playfully o'er its rocky bed,
Greta's stream goes tumbling by.
From rugged crags far overhead,
Summer woods send a smothered sigh;
And winter brings the leaves they shed
To hide the knolls where darlings lie.

II.

Gently, gently, the long grass waves,
In heated air of summer noon;
And overtops the rustic graves,
Where grief so oft has made its moan.

III.

The church, tho' crumbling, guards the place,
And like a watchful mother stands,
Protecting with its sacred grace,
This little spot from ruthless hands.

IV.

The drowsy hum of woodland bee –
The noiseless flight of songless bird,
The lull of insect minstrelsy,
From trees whose leaves are barely stirred –
Bring softened memories of death,
Of life and love gone long ago;
And angels named with whispered breath,
Bring heart to heart again below.

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V.

Still, very still! farewell! farewell!
'Mid winter snow and summer gleam,
May holy peace for ever dwell
With Brignall graves by Greta's stream.

July, 1864

*Now deserted – the little square graveyard only being left.

In some of his dominant tastes and traits of character Thomas Waller foreshadows George; the elder man's decision to marry his fiancée at Grasmere because of its literary associations (for indeed neither bride nor bridegroom had a connection with the Lake District) is of a piece with his son's choosing Clevedon for a holiday on account of its memories of Coleridge.

The presence of George Gissing seems to haunt Les Marécottes. As his diary records, he walked part of the distance from Trient to Salvan on August 21, 1899, accompanied by Gabrielle and their new acquaintances, the Bovets, a young Swiss couple who took away with them a copy of *The Nether World*. To-day, books to which the novelist's letters and diary fervidly allude are to be seen on his son's shelves; my eye was caught by his Shakespeare, the *Pickwick* he edited for the Rochester edition, The *Letters* of George Sand and many other volumes pregnant with connotations which revive pleasant or painful reminiscences in the Gissing scholar. It is a pity his library, which so much reflects the man's widespread interests, has not remained whole and entire. Even before the first World War occasional volumes coming from his shelves found their way to the shops of second-hand book-dealers, as Gabrielle remarked to her friend Clara Collet. Such volume would now be extremely difficult to trace, but the bulk of the author's library has escaped the sale-room and is preserved by the family. Of another collection of great interest I shall give an account some day. Ryecroft used to lament the damage suffered by his books in the course of removals, but I had always suspected that his creator had made him exaggerate, and I was glad to see that my hopefulness

was justified.

Mr. Alfred Gissing showed me a collection of pencil and pen drawings which his father executed in childhood. They range from October 1866 to 1870, but most of them were made in 1867 when the future novelist, who was also at the time writing short plays and a variety of poems, was barely ten years old. Their subjects are mainly landscapes, fishing scenes and buildings. All show a remarkable precocity and prove that if the boy had chosen to become an artist he might have reached the same distinction as in the field of literature. His exacting nature and tendency to self-depreciation already gave themselves free play for it is indeed

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characteristic that one of the best drawings, picturing a bird in its nest and testifying to a patience and skill one would believe beyond the power of so young a child should be accompanied by this defeatist comment: "Spoilt by lack of patience and skill." In a sketch-book of heads drawn from models, two are brought to completion in a masterly manner, the others being merely sketched. Gissing soon gave up these early attempts but did not fail to use the various opportunities he had to fix on paper whatever remarkable scenes he came across during his travels in Italy and Greece. His diary and the first edition of *By the Ionian Sea*, with its good little sketches of vases and silhouettes and the fine pen drawing of the Table of the Paladins at Metapontum, show that he had lost none of his talent. Rightly enough it was acknowledged by some reviewers when the book first appeared.

Our conversation ran, among many other things, on some discarded novels that seem to have been lost. Tradition has it that *Mrs. Grundy's Enemies* and *Among the Prophets* were destroyed, but I have my own doubts about the latter, for didn't Gabrielle – shortly after the writer's death – let Bertz know that the only unpublished works left by her companion were, besides *Veranilda*, which was being printed, *Will Warburton* and *Among the Prophets*? A touching anecdote, which I had heard previously from Gabrielle's relatives but was glad to hear again, concerns the writer's dog on the death of his master. His name was Bijou, Bij for short, and readers may see him in Jacob Korg's critical biography and in my edition of Gissing's letters to Gabrielle Fleury, photographed with his mistress. Gabrielle would relate how Bij, accompanying her at Saint-Jean-de-Luz a fortnight after Gissing's death, left her behind as she entered the cemetery and ran up to the top part of it to lie down on his master's grave, to which of course he had never been led before.

The sombre prognostic of a world conflict made in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* materialized a decade later. The thing George feared most for his sons Walter and Alfred was the obligation to bend under military yoke, for indeed his hatred of anything connected with war, whether past or potential, dated from his childhood. So, he was prevented from utter despair by his own premature death, for Walter, who had been trained as an architect, and was engaged in 1916, fell in the battle of the Somme on July 1st. Mr. Alfred Gissing was not a little surprised recently to be visited by a young lady whose aunt, now

seventy-two, had been Walter's fiancée.

As can be seen from his articles and prefaces, Mr. Gissing has inherited from his father an enduring taste for the classics, whether in the form of literature or history. To him, *Veranilda* is a living book and one of the questions he is at present investigating concerns the crossing of the Alps by Hannibal. His knowledge of history and topography make him reject the traditional view about the route followed by the Carthaginian general. Again, this absorbing interest in antiquity calls forth images of his father wandering among the vestiges of the old world – seeking the Eumenides' well in Greece or the Galeso, beloved by Horace, along the Mare Piccolo at Taranto. The author of *Veranilda* had wished it were his “to wander

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endlessly amid the silence of the ancient world, to-day and all its sounds forgotten.” I see in Mr. Alfred Gissing's choice of Switzerland as a residence a happy symbol: it combines the variety of languages to which his father was attached, in addition to his own native tongue, and offers a peaceful refuge within easy reach of countries with a more troubled past and present. I cannot conceive quarrels like those which attended the reception of *Veranilda* or *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* taking place in Switzerland: to me it is among many other things the country where *By the Ionian Sea*, a travel book of such delicate and nostalgic charm, was brought to completion at a time when its author was regaining confidence in life.

I had arrived at Les Marécottes in a radiant sunshine that would have honoured the Bay of Naples. I left it gasping in incipient dripping gloom and reached my car under a friendly umbrella that would have done good service on a winter day in London.

Checklist of Gissing's Periodical Contributions.

1872-1877

Charles E. Yenter
Tacoma, Washington

1. “Ravenna,” *Owens College Magazine*, Manchester, 1874.
2. “To Truth,” *Owens College Magazine*, Manchester, 1875.
3. “Our Shakespearian Studies,” *Owens College Magazine*, Manchester, January, 1876.
4. “‘Elaine,’ – Rosenthal and Tojetti,” *Commonwealth*, Boston, 1876.
5. “Sins of the Fathers,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 10, 1877.
6. “R.I.P.,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 31, 1877.
7. “Too Dearly Bought,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 14, 1877.
8. “The Death-Clock,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 21, 1877.
9. “The Serpent-Charm,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 28, 1877.

10. "The Warden's Daughter," *Chicago Journal*, April 28, 1877.
11. "Gretchen," *Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 1877.
12. "Twenty Pounds," *Chicago Journal*, May 19, 1877.
13. "Joseph Yates' Temptation," *Chicago Post*, June 2, 1877.
14. "Dead and Alive," *Chicago Tribune*, July 14, 1877.
15. "Brownie," *Chicago Tribune*, July 29, 1877.
16. "An English Coast Picture," *Appletons' Journal*, N.Y. July, 1877, New Series, Volume III, pp.73-78 (signed G. R. Gresham).

Reprints:

5. "The Sins of the Fathers," *Troy Times*, Troy, N.Y., July 14, 1877.
- 1 and 2. Hopkinson, Sir Alfred, ed., *A Selection of Verses from the Manchester University Magazine, 1868-1912*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1913.
- 5, 6, 7 & 11. *Sins of the Fathers and Other Tales*, Covici, Chicago, 1924.
1. Gissing, A. C. (editor) *Selections, Autobiographical and Imaginative*, Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, N.Y., 1929, pp. 176-184.
- 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14 and 15. *Brownie*, Columbia University Press, N.Y., 1931.

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George Gissing and Some Well-Known Works of Reference.

P. F. Kropholler
Paris

The Reader's Encyclopedia edited by W. R. Benét first appeared in 1948. The second edition came out in 1965. A comparison shows that the latter devotes considerably more attention to Gissing and that some inaccuracies have been removed. In 1948 he was described as a novelist, in 1965 this had been replaced by "novelist, critic, essayist." The first edition stated that Gissing was influenced by his study of Schopenhauer in Germany. This was replaced by a reference to Gissing's love of classics. The episode of Gissing's first wife is described in some detail in the later edition. Altogether the amount of space devoted to Gissing was doubled. Two works are described in detail. The entry on *New Grub Street* appears almost unchanged, except that Milvain, who was referred to as a critic in 1948, appeared as an essayist in 1965. *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* is discussed more accurately in the 1965 edition. The first edition described *Ryecroft* as dealing with the problems of a struggling author. This was replaced by a remark on the "reflections or *pensées* on the human condition." Curiously enough *Ryecroft* is referred to as a "novel" in both editions.

The Oxford Companion to English Literature came out in a revised edition a few months ago. The entry on Gissing remains unaltered. It repeats the assertion that Gissing studied philosophy at Jena, an astonishing inaccuracy in a generally excellent reference book.

The New Century Handbook of English Literature, edited by Clarence L. Barnhart, 1956, in its reference to *The Whirlpool* calls it a book which “may almost be called an English *Madame Bovary*.”

W. Freeman, *Dictionary of Fictional Characters*, 1963, refers to the characters in two of Gissing’s works, viz. *The House of Cobwebs* and *The Town Traveller*, surely a somewhat odd choice.

British Authors of the 19th Century, edited by Stanley J. Kunitz in 1936 contains a detailed biography of Gissing, including the statement that “Somehow he found his way to Jena for a few precious months of study.”

An older English work of reference, E. Baker & J. Packman, *A Guide to the Best Fiction* published in 1932 contains very brief references to most of the novels. However, it misses the point when it says that “the unclassed” in the novel of that name are “daughters of joy,” two girls who “are rescued or rescue themselves and live an honest and womanly life.” The two men, Osmond Waymark and Julian Casti, are undoubtedly “unclassed”, however.

Finally a remark on two well-known French reference books. The *Nouveau Petit Larousse* ignored Gissing, but he receives one and a half lines in the *Dictionnaire Usuel Quillet-Flammarion*, which mentions *Démos* and *Les Bas-Fonds*.

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Recent Publications

Pierre Coustillas

Anonymous. *Review of Collected Articles on George Gissing*, *British Book News*, September, 1968. p.700.

Badolato, Francesco. Review of *The Letters of George Gissing to Gabrielle Fleury*. “Shorter Notice,” *The Use of English*, Vol. XIX, No. 4, p. 376.

Coustillas, Pierre. “The Stormy Publication of Gissing’s *Veranilda*,” *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*. Vol. LXXII, No.9, pp. 588-610.

— — , “George Gissing, Bohème Bourgeois,” *Annales de l’Université de Madagascar* (Série Lettres et Science Humaines), No.8, 1968, pp. 41-52.

Gissing, George. *Notes on Social Democracy*. Edited by Jacob Korg, Enitharmon Press, London, 1968.

Hutchison, B. Review of *Collected Articles on George Gissing*, *Book Collecting and Library Monthly*, October 1968, pp. 184-185.

Schulz, H. C. “English Literary Manuscripts in the Huntington Library,” *Huntington Library*

Quarterly, May, 1968. According to this checklist (p. 271) the Huntington possesses the manuscript of eight novels, eight letters and a memorandum book by Gissing.

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