

CHAPTER VIII

THE DIVINE ADVENTURE

Celtic

In the early summer of 1900 the volume entitled *The Divine Adventure: Iona: By Sundown Shores*, with a dedication to me, was published by Messrs. Chapman & Hall.

Various titles had been discarded, among others "The Reddening of the West," also "The Sun-Treader" intended for a story, projected but never written, to form a sequel to "The Herdsman." The titular essays had previously appeared in various periodicals; the two first in *The Fortnightly*. As the author explained in a letter to Mr. Macleay, Fiona's Highland champion:

"... There is a sudden departure from fiction ancient or modern in something of mine that is coming out in the November and December issues of *The Fortnightly Review*.

"'The Divine Adventure' it is called—though this spiritual essay is more 'remote,' i. e. unconventional, and in a sense more 'mys-

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tical,' than anything I have done. But it is out of my inward life. It is an essential part of a forthcoming book of spiritual and critical essays or studies in the spiritual history of the Gael, to be called *The Reddening of the West*. . . .

"A book I look forward to with singular interest is Mr. Arthur Symons' announced *Symbolist Movement in Literature*.

"This is the longest letter I have written for — well, I know not when. But, then, you are a good friend.

"Believe me, yours most sincerely,

"FIONA MACLEOD."

To Mons. Anatole Le Braz, the Breton romance-writer and folklorist, F. M. had written previously:

DEAR M. LE BRAZ,

Your letter was a great pleasure to me. It was the more welcome as coming from one who is not only an author whose writings have a constant charm for me, but as from a Celtic comrade and spiritual brother who is also the foremost living exponent of the Breton genius. It may interest you to know that I am preparing an *étude* on Contemporary Breton (i. e. Franco-Breton) Literature;

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which, however, will be largely occupied with consideration of your own high achievement in prose and verse.

It gives me sincere pleasure to send to you by this post a copy of the "popular" edition of Adamnan's *Life of St. Colum*—which please me by accepting. You will find, below these primitive and often credulous legends of Iona, a beauty of thought and a certain poignant exquisiteness of sentiment that cannot but appeal to you, a Breton of the Bretons. . . .

It seems to me that in writing the spiritual history of Iona I am writing the spiritual history of the Gael, of all our Celtic race. The lovely wonderful little island sometimes appears to me as a wistful mortal, in his eyes the pathos of infinite desires and inalienable ideals—sometimes as a woman, beautiful, wild, sacred, inviolate, clad in rags, but aureoled with the Rainbows of the west.

"Tell the story of Iona, and you go back to God, and end in God." (The first words of my "spiritual history"). . . .

But you will have already wearied of so long a letter. My excuse is . . . that you are Anatole Le Braz, and I am your far-away but true comrade,

FIONA MACLEOD.

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On the 30th Dec. W. S. wrote to Mr. Frank Rinder:

“Just a line, dear Frank, both as dear friend and literary comrade, to greet you on New Year’s morning, and to wish you health and prosperity in 1900. I would like you very much to read some of this new Fiona work, especially the opening pages of ‘Iona,’ for they contain a very deep and potent spiritual faith and hope, that has been with me ever since, as there told, as a child of seven, old Seumas Macleod (who taught me so much — was indeed the *father* of Fiona) — took me on his knees one sundown on the island of Eigg, and made me pray to ‘Her.’ I have never written anything mentally so spiritually autobiographical. Strange as it may seem it is almost all literal reproduction of actuality with only some dates and names altered.

“But enough about that troublesome F. M.! . . .”

And to Mr. Gilchrist, “It was written *de profundis*, partly because of a compelling spirit, partly to help others passionately eager to obtain some light on this most complex and intimate spiritual destiny.”

Some months previously William had writ-

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ten to an unknown correspondent, Dr. John Goodchild, poet, mystic and archeologist:

THE OUTLOOK TOWER,
EDINBURGH,
1898.

MY DEAR SIR,

I have to thank you very cordially for your book and the long and interesting letter which accompanied it. It must be to you also that I am indebted for an unrevised proof-copy of *The Light of the West*.

Everything connected with the study of the Celtic past has an especial and deep interest for me, and there are few if any periods more significant than that of the era of St. Columba. His personality has charmed me, in the old and right sense of the word "charm": but I have come to it, or it to me, not through books (though of course largely through Adamnan) so much as through a knowledge gained partly by reading, partly by legendary lore and hearsay, and mainly by much brooding on these, and on every known saying and record of Colum, in Iona itself. When I wrote certain of my writings (e. g. "Muime Chriosd" and "The Three Marvels of Iona") I felt, rightly or wrongly, as though I had in some measure

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become interpretative of the spirit of "Colum the White."

Again, I have long had a conviction — partly an emotion of the imagination, and partly a belief insensibly deduced through a hundred avenues of knowledge and surmise — that out of Iona is again to come a Divine Word, that Iona, the little northern isle, will be as it were the tongue in the mouth of the South.

Believe me, sincerely yours,

FIONA MACLEOD.

The House of Usna — one of three Celtic plays, on which F. M. had been working for several months, was brought out under the auspices of The Stage Society, of which William Sharp was the first Chairman. Mr. Frederick Whelen, the founder of that Society, had met my husband at Hindhead when we were staying with his uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Grant Allen, at their charming house, The Croft, built among the heather and the pines on the hill-top just by the edge of the chasm called "The Devil's Punch Bowl."

The older man was keenly interested in the project, did his utmost to help towards its realisation. *The House of Usna* was performed at the Fifth Meeting of the Society

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at the Globe Theatre, April 29th, 1900, together with two short plays by Maeterlinck, *The Interior* and *The Death of Tintagiles*. The music, composed especially for the short drama in three scenes, was by Mr. Y. M. Capel, and the play was produced under the direction of Mr. Granville Barker. According to one critic: "It had beauty and it had atmosphere, two very rare things on the stage, but I did not feel that it quite made a drama, or convince, as a drama should, by the continuous action of inner or outer forces. It was, rather, passion turning upon itself, and with no language but a cry."

The author took the greatest interest in the rehearsals, and in the performance. He thoroughly enjoyed the double play that was going on, as he moved about the theatre, and chatted to his friends during the intervals, with little heed of the risks he ran of detection of authorship. The drama itself was printed three months later in *The National Review*, and eventually published in book form in America by Mr. T. B. Mosher, in 1903.

In 1900, too, the second of these dramas, *The Immortal Hour*, appeared in the November number of *The Fortnightly Review*. It was published posthumously in England

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(Foulis) and in America (Mosher). The third play, *The Enchanted Valleys*, was never finished. It had been the author's intention to publish these dramas in book form under the third title, and to dedicate it to Mr. W. L. Courtney, who, as Editor of the *Fortnightly*, had been a good friend to Fiona Macleod.

To his unknown correspondent the dramatist wrote again:

Nov. 15, 1900.

DEAR DR. GOODCHILD,

I am glad that you have found pleasure in *The Immortal Hour*. I wonder if you interpret the myth of Midir and Etain quite differently, or if you, too, find in Midir the symbol of the voice of the other world; and what you think of Dalua, the Fool, here and elsewhere. Your earnest letter, written in spiritual comradeship, has been read by me again and again. I do not say that the warning in it is not justified, still less that it is not called for: but, on the other hand, I do not think I follow you aright. Is it something in *The Immortal Hour* (or in *The Divine Adventure* or more likely *The Dominion of Dreams*) that impelled you to write as you did: or something seemingly implied, or inferred by you? . . .

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We seldom know how or where we really stand, or the mien and aspect we unwittingly bear to the grave eyes of the gods. Is it the lust of knowledge, of Hidden Things, of the Delight of the World, of the magic of Mother-Earth, of the Flesh — to one or all — that you allude. The matter touches me intimately.

You have (I had almost said mysteriously, but why so, for it would be more mysterious if there were no secret help in spiritual comradeship) helped me at more than one juncture in my life. . . .

Most sincerely,
FIONA MACLEOD,

Dr. Goodchild replied:

BORDIGHERA,
Nov. 29, 1900.

MY DEAR MISS MACLEOD,

I left one or two of your questions unanswered in my last. I am no Celtic scholar. It was your "Prayer of the Women" which suggested to me first how far you might feel for your sisters, and how far you might journey to find succour. . . .

A woman who gazes into Connla's Well and sees how the bubbles burst on its surface, needs all her own wisdom lest she be dizzy, and a hand held out from the opposite

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side of the spring may help her to gaze more steadily. *Midir*, I believe to be the same as the oriental *Mithra*, the Recipient of Light, and its translator in the *Midhc-Myth*, A voice from the "Otherworld" as you say, but the wearer of the *Miter*, speaking not from the *Underworld*, but the *Upperworld*, i. e., he is a High Priest speaking in the full light of the Sun.

Etain is difficult, and my own ideas by no means formulated. I merely suggest that ere your *Etain* was born, her name typified the strong hope of the singer, his immortality, his knowledge that the Sun not merely creates but re-creates in renewed beauty.

If you remember *Cairbre*, the son of *Etain*, you may also remember those other *Ethaim* who sung before the Ark in a far country. The Father is put on one side for the Mother, by the singer, the Mother for the Bride. Even Milton, puritan though he was, must invoke a woman to the aid of "adventurous song" and is careful not to change the sex when in the Muse of Sinai and Siloa is seen the Spirit of the Creator.

As regards *Dalua*, I know nothing of him by name except what you yourself have written. Is there any connection between the name and *Dala* (the Celtic) which is some-

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times found in company with Brat and Death, in your Celtic genealogies?

At the same time I have dimly guessed all my life how folly might be better than the wisdom of wise men, and remembering dimly how much wiser I was myself as a child than after I had grown up, I have incessantly desired a return to that state of childish thought, and tried to learn from children, when I had the chance, the secrets of their folly which carried them so near to divinity, if they were not hurried away from their vision by those about them.

J. A. G.

The Essay entitled "Celtic" had originally appeared in the *Contemporary Review* a few weeks before the publication of the new volume, and had aroused considerable comment. In Britain it was regarded as a clear statement of the aims and ideas of the so-called Celtic Revival — (a term which "F. M." greatly disliked). It was otherwise in Ireland, and naturally so, considering the different conditions on both sides of the Irish channel out of which the movement had grown. On this side political considerations had not touched the question; it was mainly concerned with the preservation of the old language,

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with racial characteristic feelings, and their expression in literature. On the other side of the water, the workers had many more issues at heart than in the Highlands. So the Highland Celt and the Irish Celts did not quite understand one another; an animated correspondence ensued in private and in the press. The Irish press was divided in its opinion on "Celtic," because the writers were not of one mind among themselves in their methods of working towards the one end all Celts have at heart. There were those who, being ardent Nationalists, regarded the Celtic literary movement as one with the political, or as greatly coloured by it. This factor gave a special element to the Irish phase of the movement which sharply differentiated it from the movement in Scotland, Wales or Brittany. Other workers were interested in the movement as a whole, in each of the "six Celtic Nations," and "The Celtic Association" was formed, with Lord Castletown at its head, with a view of keeping each of the six branches of the movement in touch with each other: the Irish, Scots, Welsh, Manx, Breton, and Cornish or British. This Society desired to make a Federation of these working sections an actuality, and to that end decided to hold a Pan Celtic Congress every

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three years. The first of these was held in Dublin, and to it my husband subscribed as W. S. and as F. M., though, as an obvious precaution against detection, he did not attend it.

Opinion in Ireland was divided as to the value of such a Federation; certain of the enthusiasts believed that working for it drew strength and work away from the central needs in Ireland. Another point of dispute was the question of language; as to what did or would constitute an Irish Literature — works written in the Erse only; or all work, either in the Erse or the English tongue that gave expression to and made vital the Celtic spirit and aspirations. "F. M." deplored the uniting of the political element to the movement — and naturally had no inclination towards any such feeling.

William Sharp's great desire was that the Celtic spirit should be kept alive, and be a moulding influence towards the expression of the racial approach to and yearning after spiritual beauty, whether expressed in Gaelic or in the English tongue. He knew that there is a tendency, with the young of those people in Scotland at least, to put aside the beautiful old thoughts, or at all events their outward expression, with the disuse of the older

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language which had clothed those thoughts; he feared that to put silence upon them would be to lose them after a generation or two. Therefore it was his great hope that the genius of the race would prove strong enough to express itself in either language; and he realised that its influence would be more potent and widespread if also it found expression in the English language. Thus a misunderstanding arose; one of approach to the subject rather than in essentials.

The Irish Press was divided in opinion concerning "Celtic," especially *The Irish Independent*, *Freeman's Journal* and *All Ireland Review*. In the latter a correspondence began. One writer welcomed the Essay as coming from one "possessed, as no other writer of our time is possessed, with a sense of the faculty and mission of the Celt, and shows not only deep intuition but the power to see life steadily and to see it as a whole."

"A. E.," however, was of another opinion. He considered the essay to be out of place "in a book otherwise inspired by the artist's desire to shape in a beautiful way"; to be semi-political and inaccurate as an expression of the passionate aims of the Irish Celt; and he took exception to the expression of belief, "there is no racial road to beauty."

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F. M. replied and endeavoured to make more clear her position; but without success, as a subsequent letter from the Irish poet proved. Another writer showed that there was obviously a confusion of two ideas between the disputants — and Mr. T. W. Rolleston closed the discussion with a letter in which he quietly pointed out the misapprehensions on both sides and concluded with the generous admission: “Fiona Macleod is most emphatically a helper, not a hinderer in this work, and one of the most potent we have. For my own part I think her essay ‘Celtic’ indicates the lines on which we may most successfully work.” William Sharp realised that since his essay had given rise to misapprehension of his aims and ideas, it would be well to further elucidate them; that moreover, as F. M. wrote to Mr. Russell, “a truer understanding has come to me in one or two points where we have been at issue.” He, therefore, revised and enlarged his essay, and, with an added Foreword of explanation, had it published separately in America by Mr. T. B. Mosher, and, finally, he included it in *The Winged Destiny*.

In the early autumn the following letter came to my husband from overseas:

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BRONXVILLE, N. Y.,
Sept. 26, 1900.

MY DEAREST GUILIELMO,

In this last year of *my* Century, among my little and exceptional attempts to celebrate my coming birthday—I wish that you, the most leal and loved of our English friends, may receive for once a word from me before its sun goes down. Probably you are in some Lodge of the lake of your Northern Night, or off for the Mountains of the Moon. Still, even your restless and untamed spirit must by this time have been satisfied of wandering; at any rate, I doubt not this will in the end find you somewhere, and then you will know that my heart began to go out to you as I neared another milestone. . . . It has suffered enough and lost enough to make it yearn fondly for the frank face and dear words of a kindred, though fresher heart like yours. I have a few devoted sons, and you are one of them. . . .

My remembrances to Mrs. Sharp and to Fiona McL——, whether she be real or hypothetical. If I could have spared the means, and had had the strength, I would have completed my recovery by a voyage to you and England last summer. . . .

Ever devotedly yours,
E. C. STEDMAN.

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The "restless spirit" was by no means tired of wandering. Partly owing to the insistence of circumstance, partly from choice, we began that autumn a series of wanderings that brought us back to London and to Scotland for a few weeks only each summer. The climate of England proved too severe; my husband had been seriously ill in the New Year. Despite his appearance of great vitality, his extraordinary power of recuperation after every illness — which in a measure was due to his buoyant nature, to his deliberate turning of his mind away from suffering or from failure and "looking sunwise," and to his endeavour to get the best out of whatever conditions he had to meet — we realised that a home in England was no longer a possibility, that it would be wise to make various experiments abroad rather than attempt to settle anywhere permanently. Indeed, we were both glad to have no plans, but to wander again how and where inclination and possibilities dictated. Early in October he wrote to Mr. Murray Gilchrist from London.

MY DEAR ROBERT,

A little ago, on sitting down in my club to answer some urgent notes (and whence I now write) my heart leapt with pleasure, and

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an undeserving stranger received Part I of a beaming welcome—for the waiter announced that “Mr. Gilchrist would like to see you, Sir.” Alas, it was no dear Peaklander, but only a confounded interviewer about the Stage Society! . . .

Elizabeth and I leave England on the morning of the 12th—and go first to the South of Provence, near Marseilles: after Yule-tide we’ll go on to Italy, perhaps first to Shelley’s Spezzia or to Pegli of the Orange Groves near Genoa: and there we await you, or at furthest a little later, say in Florence. We shall be away till the end of March.

Meanwhile ’tis all unpleasantness and incertitude: much to do and little pleasure in the doing: a restlessness too great to be salved short of departure, and the longed for mental and nervous rest far away.

I have just returned from a flying visit to Dorset, and saw Thomas Hardy. He is well, and at work: the two happiest boons of fortune for all our kinship—and therein I hope *you* are at one with him. I wish you could run up and see our first Stage Society production this week-end (Sunday) when we bring out a short play by Hardy and R. L. Stevenson and Henley’s “Macaire.” (I resigned my Chairmanship but was re-

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elected: and so am extra busy before I go.)
Your loving friend,

WILL.

P. S. Miss Macleod's drama *The Immortal Hour* is in the November *Fortnightly*, also her article "The Gael and His Heritage" in the November *Nineteenth Century*.

And in addition to these a study on the Dramas of Gabriele d'Annunzio appeared in *The Fortnightly*, in September, signed "W. S."

To Mr. Macleay he sent an account of the work he had on hand:

AIX-EN-PROVENCE,
30th Nov., 1900.

DEAR MR. MACLEAY,

Your friendly note has reached me here, where I have been some time, this being my best centre in Provence at this season for my special studies in Provençal literature and history. My wife and I expect to remain here till about Christmas time, and then to go on to Italy.

Pressure of urgent work — chiefly a lengthy volume on the Evolution of the Fine Arts in the Nineteenth Century, primarily for transatlantic publication — prevented my being much in Scotland this autumn. I was a

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brief while in Galloway visiting friends, and for a week or so at Portpatrick, and a few days in Edinburgh — c'est tout.

At one time there was a chance that I might be near Taynuilt, and I looked forward greatly to see Mr. Alexander Carmichael again. He is a splendid type of the true Highlander, and of a nature incomparably sweet and refined — and I have the greatest admiration of him in all ways. . . .

A remarkable family, and I would to Heaven there were more such families in the Highlands now. Yes, *what* a book *Carmina Gadelica* is! It ought to become as precious to the Scottish Gael as the Greek Anthology to all who love the Hellenic ideal, but with a more poignant, a more personal appeal. . . . I can't tell you about Miss Macleod's historical romance for the good reason that I don't know anything about its present prospects myself. Personally I regret the long postponement, as I think (judging from what I have seen) that it would be a success as a romance of history. Miss Macleod, however, became dissatisfied with what she had done, or its atmosphere, or both, and has not touched it again for some months past — though the last time she spoke of the subject she said she hoped it would be ready

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by midsummer. . . . I am myself heavily engaged in work, including many commissions. I've finished an essay on "Impressionism" ("The Impressionist" I call it) for the forthcoming new monthly, *The North Liberal Review*, and am now in the throes of a long *Quarterly* article. Then I have a Provencal book on hand, and (interlusive) a Provencal romance.

You will, of course, keep all I have said of myself and doings, and still more importantly of Miss Macleod, to yourself. I don't think she wants anyone save friends and acquaintances to know that she is abroad, and for her health. And above all needing rest as she is, she dreads the slightest addition to a correspondence already beyond her capacities.

Before I left London I read with deep interest the opening instalments of Neil Munro's new book *Doom Castle*. It promises I think, to be his *chef-d'œuvre*.

Write to me again soon, with news of your doings and prospects.

Yours sincerely,

WILLIAM SHARP.

The Provencal romance that he was mentally projecting—the never written *Gypsy*

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Trail — was in part to have dealt with his early gypsy experiences. One among other things which revived this strain of memory was our near vicinage to Les Sainte-Maries, in Provence, where the bones of Sarah, the gypsy servant of, "les Maries," are enshrined; also he had recently read the vivid description of the gathering of the gypsy tribes at that Shrine on her Feast day, written by the Provençal novelist Jean Aicard, in his *Le Roi des Camargues*.

During my husband's first visit to Provence he had been much interested in meeting certain members of Les Félibres, the Provençal literary and linguistic Nationalists. He visited Frederick Mistral in his charming country home and noticed the similarity of physical type shared by the Provençal and himself. I, also, was struck by the likeness between the two men and thought that Mistral might easily have passed for elder brother of his Scots *confrère*. At Avignon we saw Madame Roumanille, the sister of Felix Gras, and widow of one of the founders of Les Félibres, and her poet-daughter, Térèse, who inherited her father's gift. At Aix we met Mistral's god-daughter, Madame Marie Gasquet, daughter of the poet M. Gerard, another of the original group of workers in the old

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Langue d'Œuil. Madame Gasquet was the wife of the young poet, Joachim Gasquet, between whom and my husband there grew up a warm friendship.