An Exile's Cunning: Some Private Papers of George Gissing

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Introduction Memorandum Book

In December 1961 the Parke-Bernet Galleries offered for sale what was described in their catalogue as “a fundamental Gissing document.” The item in question was a small notebook (109 x 67 mm), containing 96 pages, bound in black paper over cardboard. The notebook was ostensibly put up for sale by an anonymous “Continental Lady”, a disguise behind which was hiding George Gissing’s younger son, Alfred Gissing (1896-1975), who, in order to eke out his meagre income, ever since the thirties had steadily been disposing of his father’s literary documents and private papers. The notebook was acquired by the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery at San Marino, California, where it has remained until now (shelf mark HM 26182). In the world of Gissing scholarship it has become known as the Huntington Memorandum Book (HMB).

Most of Gissing’s personal documents, collections of data, and papers have by now been published with the exception of the Scrapbook, currently held by the Lilly library, containing ideas for novels, stories, settings, characters, situations, localities, together with a great number of newspaper cuttings, whose substance has quite often found its way into Gissing’s works. Examination of the contents of the loose-leaved Scrapbook1 has shown that from the time he started work on Demos (late 1885)

1 Cf. George Gissing, “To Algernon,” 1 May 1890: “Little by little you will have large accumulations of material; of course you keep considerable note-books. Mine are becoming portentous.”

Also: George Gissing, “To Bertz,” 5 March 1891: “Yesterday I was looking all through my bundles of ‘notes’. Heavens! I have material for all the rest of my life.”
Gissing had become ever more conscientious in the accumulation of factual material for inclusion in his novels. His earlier novels had been prepared with scant preparation, but he was growing more and more dissatisfied with this older method. Consequently, his later approach was characterized by laborious preliminary study, involving no little research. This would often take him to particular parts of London in search of the details he needed. He was well aware that his ability to invent was “the weakest of [his] various weak points”\textsuperscript{2}, and he may have sought to compensate this weakness by the infusion of a mass of realistic detail.

Realistic details he found not only in the streets and slums of Lambeth and Clerkenwell, among the furnaces and foundries of Birmingham and Dudley, the music-halls and boarding-houses of London, but also in police reports and through visits to the police courts and finally, libraries and reading-rooms (e.g. British Museum, Exeter, and Brixton) which had always been indispensable to him as a source of verifiable data.

Gissing’s foolscap Scrapbook is the somewhat unwieldy repository of all of this disparate material, the earliest of which can be dated to 1880, while the last addition to the collection is a review from the *Athenäum*, of 22 August 1903, just four months before his death. A mere glance at the shape and volume of the material will suffice to make clear that Gissing could not have carried it about with him, whenever he set out on his journeys, abroad and at home, to inspect and collect material for use in the novels and short stories.\textsuperscript{3} For that purpose he used a simple notebook, that he could easily put into one of his pockets, and into which he jotted down, mostly in pencil, whatever he deemed promising or useful. Upon his return home he would usually


\textsuperscript{3} When Gissing travelled to England in April 1900, he specifically visited Lincoln, which, disguised as Hollingford, he wanted to use as the setting for *Our Friend the Charlatan*. In a letter to Clara Collet (4 April 1900) he writes: “I am in England for Easter. It was necessary to see certain people, & get new material for a book. From Wakefield I go next week for a few days to Lincoln—a town I am going to use.” (Cf. *Collected Letters of George Gissing*, eds. Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young, Pierre Coustillas, vol. 8 (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1996) 27.
copy what he had entered in his notebook into the Scrapbook and cross out the notebook entries once they had been transferred to the Scrapbook or any other more substantial and permanent repository. The habit of keeping such a notebook went back to the year Gissing spent in America (September 1876-September 1877), where driven by hunger he first tried his hand at writing short stories for the Chicago Tribune. The HMB in many respects resembles the so-called American Notebook, the chief difference being that very few of the entries in the American Notebook can be traced in Gissing's published work.

Occasionally Gissing would transcribe the notebook jottings into another one of his private documents, viz. the Commonplace Book (CPB). There are in fact 15 such entries (sometimes marginally modified, abbreviated or expanded) which occur in the MSS of both books, but on the basis of chronological evidence, both internal and external, we conclude that most of these were first recorded in the HMB. In 1962 Jacob Korg pointed out the paramount importance of the CPB for the composition of The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft (PPHR). Korg went so far as to claim that the CPB alone was the actual counterpart of the fictional PPHR, at a time when he was still unaware of the existence of the HMB, so recently arrived in America.

Pierre Coustillas was the first scholar to establish, in 1966, in his introduction to his bilingual edition of Les Carnets d'Henry Ryecroft the significance of the HMB as an

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4 In the transcription of the HMB below everything crossed out by Gissing has been indicated. Although he was not always entirely consistent, occasionally omitting to cross out entries he had used, it has been possible in the large majority of cases to establish where and when the notebook entries were incorporated into his work. The crossing out was mostly done in ink, which lends additional support to the theory that Gissing would cross out the pencil-written entries he used, while actively engaged in writing at his own desk. It should not surprise us that he did not always cross out his shopping-lists, itineraries and train times.


additional source of the PPHR. However, Coustillas in his explanatory notes to the book, could only identify ten explicit links between passages from the PPHR and entries in the HMB.

A thorough study of the HMB has now revealed that its importance as a source book for the PPHR is not greatly inferior to that of the CPB. Forty-two of the HMB entries found their way straight (or only marginally modified) into the PPHR, compared to 57 items taken from the CPB. The most striking difference being the greater finesse and elaboration of subjects in the CPB, while in the HMB Gissing needed to limit himself to recording the barest outlines or ideas for an essay. A good example is the minimal HMB entry: “Brook Farm”, which in the CPB is expanded as follows: “Following sentence of Hawthorne, written at Brook Farm (American Note Books, Aug 12. 1841) is good refutation of a vulgar idealism. ‘Oh, labour is the curse of the world, & nobody can meddle with it without becoming proportionately brutified. Is it a praiseworthy matter that I have spent five golden months in providing food for cows & horses? It is not so.’” Oddly enough there is also the counter example of brevity in the CPB (“Why is it so painful to me to see even a blackguard humiliated?”) paralleled by the more expansive entry on [pp. 72-3] of the HMB.

The HMB is a good example of the kind of notebook used by Gissing when en route. Starting with the first entries, made during his Whitsuntide visit to Edward Clodd at Aldeburgh in 1895, we can date, with precision, all the other occasions and journeys undertaken—primarily, but not exclusively—with a view to collecting some of the raw material for his books. They are listed below:

1. Edward Clodd’s Whitsun party, combined with a search for suitable holiday accommodation at Yarmouth (31 May - 5 June 1895).
3. Visit to Cromer (8 August 1895).
5. Visit to Wakefield, where he leaves his son Walter in the care of his mother and sisters (8 - 13 April 1896).
7. Trip to Leeds (from Wakefield) on a (school)bookbuying expedition for his sisters (21 April 1896).

8. House hunting at Dorking (5 May 1898).


11. Holiday with Gabrielle Fleury and Mme. Fleury in Haute Savoy and Switzerland (18 July - 25 September 1899).

12. Journey to England, with visits to Wakefield, Lincoln, St Neots, London and Sandgate (2 April - 1 May 1900).


15. Stay with Mme. Saglio, Fourchambault, Nièvre (November 1901).


17. Move to St Jean de Luz (24 April 1902).

18. Trip to Paris (22 May 1902).

19. Rents flat at Boulogne-Billancourt (June 1902).

That Gissing always was and remained first and foremost Gissing the writer, whatever he did and wherever he went, comes out clearly in the letter of acceptance for the invitation from Edward Clodd in April 1895. “I shall use this opportunity to collect some east-coast ‘material’ that I am in need of, chiefly at Yarmouth,” he writes, thus demonstrating his ability to combine business with pleasure. The notes he made of his walk up the Blythe valley, he later turned to good use in the poetically evocative passage recording a wide-wandering dream of summer England in the PPHR (Winter

23). The details descriptive of the interior of an East Anglian public house jotted down in the HMB during the Whitsun holiday at Aldeburgh, were incorporated two years later into The Town Traveller to describe a small private room at an inn at Dulwich where Mr Gammon and Polly Sparkes enjoy a "coarse and plentiful" dinner.

Not always did Gissing allow so much time to lapse before he made use of his notes. Most of the material he collected during his trip to Wales in the spring of 1896, was worked into The Whirlpool only five weeks afterwards, thus emphasizing perhaps the somewhat desperate need for realistic detail in order to get on with the book that he had been seriously working on from the early months of that year. However, the first fleeting glimpses of the central theme of his new novel can be traced to the HMB entries dating from the summer of 1895 when Gissing, cooped up with Edith and his son Walter in the Gorleston boarding-house, inevitably came to face and ponder his responsibilities as a father and Edith's as a mother, as never before. There cannot be any doubt that in the brief entry: "Duty of understanding children", we have the kernel of The Whirlpool.

The transformation of this at first sight unpromising note into Gissing's last great novel, may serve to renew our sense of awe and wonder at the ways of the novelist's imagination. Notwithstanding all our attempts to establish significant links between the material world and experience of the author and his creations, the exact workings of the shaping spirit of his imagination may always remain largely mysterious.

In June 1901, Gissing asked Gabrielle Fleury to send him from Paris the three "MS books (cahiers)"10 which he needed to begin the revision of An Author at Grass11, during his stay in the sanatorium at Nayland. The identification of two of these three books has not been a problem since Jacob Korg published the CPB in 1962 and the publication

by Coustillas and Bridgwater of Extracts from My Reading, another notebook kept by Gissing, covering the years 1880-1895, and exclusively consisting of literary quotations, from authors ancient and modern. Out of a total of 166 quotations a mere four found their way into either An Author at Grass or PPHR, which is a measure of the relative influence of this second notebook. This leaves us with the question of the third cahier.

In 1966, in his bilingual edition of the PPHR, Pierre Coustillas tentatively identified the HMB as one of the source books for the PPHR, pointing out in the same breath, however, that its size required us to think of it as a carnets rather than a cahier. By 1988 this early reservation had become a growing conviction that the HMB could no longer be considered to be one of the three original cahiers. By way of an alternative explanation Coustillas put forward the theory that Gabrielle Fleury destroyed the third cahier, because it may have contained observations, remarks and entries that she found offensive to her sense of national identity and personal pride. In support of this thesis Coustillas has argued that the first (unpublished) version of “An Author at Grass” indeed revealed a distinct anti-French bias. Coustillas further claimed that Gabrielle’s inexcusable intervention was, however, curiously balanced by her decision to preserve at least some of the material from the third cahier that she deemed innocuous and uncontroversial enough. To that end she copied 31 entries from the lost book for inclusion in the CPB, under the heading “Some Remarks of G.G.” As thirteen of these entries formed the basis for as many of Ryecroft’s reflections, it is perfectly obvious that Gissing needed the cahier that was later to be destroyed by his wife.

How does this plausible argument affect the function and status of the HMB? If one accepts Coustillas’ theory, it follows that the HMB never was one of the three original cahiers. Its small size had argued against that view from the start. To any Frenchman or Frenchwoman, the HMB would be a carnets, not a cahier. But this conclusion does not in any way detract from the importance of the HMB as a portable

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notebook, whose jottings would sooner or later be transferred to the more spacious and bulky receptacles such as the Scrapbook, the CPB, or the third cahier, now presumed lost.

It is remarkable that in their introduction of George Gissing at Work, the editors repeat Coustillas' conviction—first expressed in 196614—that the CPB is the source for the majority of the essays in the PPHR, thereby continuing to underestimate the weight and variety of the subjects taken from the HMB. It is hoped that the notes to this edition of the HMB may serve not only to trace the use to which Gissing put the observations, memories and anecdotes entered into it, but also in so doing achieve an upgrading of its importance for Gissing's writings.

For most of his books written and/or published during the period covered by the HMB (The Paying Guest (1896), The Whirlpool (1897), Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (1898), The Town Traveller (1898), The Crown of Life (1899), Our Friend the Charlatan (1901), The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft (1903), Veranilda (1904) and Will Warburton (1905)) Gissing turned to these notes for ideas, characters, phrases, settings or just a name. The single work that was written without any reference at all to the HMB, was By the Ionian Sea (1901), which was largely a revision and expansion of the extended entries in the Diary15 recording Gissing's second visit to Italy in the autumn of 1897. In view of the absence of any reference to that trip, we may safely conclude that Gissing had left his little notebook at home and relied on his Diary instead.

If the number of entries from the HMB is minimal in The Paying Guest (3) and The Crown of Life (2), at the other end of the scale we find The Whirlpool with thirty and the PPHR with over forty "borrowings." Our Friend the Charlatan, with eight borrowings, occupies a respectable place in the middle. But any attempt to chart the relative importance of the HMB for any of the novels, cannot stop at a mere number count. It is the nature of the borrowing that is equally significant. E.g. the surname Sparkes for Polly, the dashing and fiery heroine from The Town Traveller, could not be more

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appropriate. Yet the original (Janet) Sparkes, who worked as a domestic servant of the Gissing family in November 1895, one day after her arrival at Epsom was diagnosed by Gissing to be an “entire & hopeless failure”\textsuperscript{16}, an opinion which remained substantially unchanged by the end of her month’s service, when he dismissed her as “[t]he useless idiot woman named Sparkes.”\textsuperscript{17} What prompted him to hark back to this infuriating episode we shall never know, but the most likely explanation must be the suggestive potentialities of her surname, as preserved in the HMB. By the time his imagination had finished “processing” the mere name into the character of his novel, there was a wide chasm separating the idiotic Janet Sparkes from the immensely vital, clever and attractive Miss Polly Sparkes.

Another illustration of the importance of the nature of the borrowings may be found in the realization that it was Gissing’s own experiences at Nefyn that were given—with hardly any imaginative modification—to Harvey Rolfe in The Whirlpool. Though the point that Patrick Parrinder made in his edition\textsuperscript{18} of the book—that the reader should resist the temptation to identify Harvey Rolfe with Gissing himself—needs to be made again and again, it is as necessary, without becoming unduly reductionist, to insist on the legitimacy and frequency of an author’s using his characters (at least in part) either as mouthpieces for his own views or as actors acting out his own unsolved dilemmas.

The importance of the HMB for the PPHR has already been set out above. The seeds for many of Ryecroft’s reflections were stored in it and it is fascinating to follow the transformation of a minimal entry (e.g. “The Eng. Sunday”) into the lyrical celebration of the blessings of the English Sunday in the PPHR, Summer 4. Or, to see the riddling succinctness of “Perhaps the play I love best” turned into a paean of Shakespeare’s unsurpassable mastery of the English tongue (PPHR, Summer 27). At other


times the workings of the imagination upon the material entered into the notebook are as effective as they are suggestive, e.g. the purely descriptive phrase “Tettered bark of young wych elm”, which is transmuted, through the addition of the simile, into the much more evocative and symbolical image of “a bush of wych elm; its tettered bark, overlined as if with the character of some unknown tongue” (PPHR, Spring 3).

Besides being a record of his professional concerns, the HMB documents—albeit discreetly—Gissing’s domestic and personal circumstances in the years from 1895 to 1902. This period was overshadowed by the growing discontentment with the state of his marriage to Edith Underwood, finally culminating in its breakup after not quite seven years in September 1897. After spending a productive autumn and winter in Italy, where he wrote Charles Dickens: A Critical Study and collected the material for his book of travel, By the Ionian Sea, Gissing returned to England in the spring of 1898, settling at Dorking where he took a house for a year. In July of that year he met the woman with whom he was to spend the last years of his life, a time of relative stability and happiness, but always clouded by serious worries about his health.

Of all the entries in his Diary, it is the one for 9 August 1896 that is the most revealing in its merciless analysis of the relationship with his wife and son Walter, respectively. In the privacy of his Diary he admits that “no wise and strong could have got into [this situation]. Talk of morals! What a terrible lesson is the existence of this child, born of a loveless and utterly unsuitable marriage.” His strong sense of guilt and remorse must have been compounded by the tragic realization that only seven months had passed since Edith had given birth to their second son Alfred. In a later note on the inside of the back-cover of the Diary he reminds himself (or his future editor?) that this passage must be deleted. He must have found the idea unbearable to acknowledge to the world at large, this, the gravest of all faults.

However, at about the same time, Gissing, in his typical fashion, seeks to compensate the failure of his second marriage, through the creation of Harvey Rolfe, the long enduring model father in The Whirlpool. In a key passage Rolfe takes comfort from the

\[19\text{ Cf. Diary, 418.}\]
fact that “he had not committed the most woful of all blunders”, and expresses his “joy that he was not guilty of that crime of crimes, the begetting of children by a worthless mother.” Thus Gissing seems to have vicariously shifted his own sense of guilt and worthlessness squarely onto Edith alone. In the words of one Gissing critic writing The Whirlpool was “a way of feeling that he had gained control over the awkward subject by nailing it between the boards of a book.” He must have known full well the disastrous consequences of such a deceptive and fallacious feeling.

The growing disenchantment with Edith is chronicled sporadically in the pages of the HMB. Examples of female savagery, ignorance, vulgar speech and stupidity are recorded, but—without exception—these traits are attributed to a nameless “She”. Even while his suffering has become quite unendurable, Gissing makes an effort to create a sufficient distance between it and his registering consciousness, in order to turn these painful experiences into the promising raw material of his art. It was a solution that had been tried and tested by Osmond Waymark, another early alter ego of Gissing’s, in The Unclassed (1884), thirteen years before the actual collapse of Gissing’s second marriage.

That Gissing did not always look to art for compensation of his marital unhappiness, becomes apparent from the entry dating from the disastrous summer holiday at Yarmouth/Gorleston in 1895, when the drawn-out miseries of his life with Edith apparently led him to look with almost voyeuristic delight at more attractive women. The vivid and charming impression of a young girl on the beach at Gorleston is rendered with a strongly sexual excitement, which anticipates Joyce’s equally suggestive portrait of Gerty MacDowell on Sandymount beach in Ulysses.

There are glimpses too in the HMB of Gissing, the dutiful brother, buying school-books at Leeds that his sisters need for the boys’ school they had set up at Wakefield. Gissing, the long-suffering patient, worried about his health, keeping a precise record of his weight after leaving the sanatorium at Nayland. Gissing, the “born exile” and restless traveller, copying the details of itineraries and time-tables, ever in

20 Cf. Whirlpool, 336.

search of health, at Muralto, Arcachon, St Honoré, and St Jean de Luz. There is the penny-pinching Gissing, who keeps an exact account of his holiday expenses in Switzerland, so that he may charge a third of the cost to his mother-in-law.

We are impressed again by Gissing's virtues as a loyal correspondent, writing to friends old and new, in the new world(s) (Elson, Dr Zakrzewska, Champion) and the old (Roberts, Hick, Meredith, Wells and Clodd). On the domestic front we learn the brand of tea he preferred (souchong), his surprising partiality for silk handkerchiefs and his use of a cane. And, finally, there is a never-ending stream of new titles: books to be read and/or bought.

Above anything else a detailed examination of the HMB reveals that Gissing's life was lived for and through his books. His courage and determination to continue writing in spite of his steadily deteriorating health are illustrative of the victorious power of his imagination over adverse material circumstances. This edition seeks to celebrate and commemorate, however modestly, these qualities by drawing attention to Gissing's painstaking literary preparations.