



Pierre Coustillas 1930-2018

The Gissing Journal

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

**Dedicated
to
Hélène Coustillas**

Tribute to Pierre Coustillas

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I first became aware of George Gissing's writings from reading an excerpt from *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* in a college class. I first became aware (and appreciative) of Pierre Coustillas through the Harvester Press editions of Gissing. With their splendid design, layout, and (especially) typography. And, with their editorial apparatus, notably the introductions of one Pierre Coustillas.

For me, the main interest (as it should be) is the author, not the critic. But, what was so gratifying was that Gissing's novels, most long out of print, were being reissued in handsome, expertly edited editions – beginning with a critical edition of *Isabel Clarendon* (Harvester, 1969) edited by Professor Coustillas. The book had until then been almost impossible to find.

As my interest in and appreciation of Gissing deepened, I was eager to learn more about him, both from a biographical point of view and *qua* writer:

his working methods, his influences, his evolution as a writer, the life as it pertained to the works.

I began to build up my own Gissing collection, which is not exhaustive, but contains perhaps half of his works and as many books about Gissing as I could get my hands on. My most recent purchases, besides a reprint edition of Samuel Vogt Gapp's *George Gissing: Classicist*, include Professor Coustillas's magisterial three-volume biography of Gissing.

In the rest of the space allotted to me for contributing to this commemorative issue, I would like to mention a few things that have struck me while reading Professor Coustillas's works and the works of Gissing he has edited.

The wealth of detail about Gissing which Professor Coustillas unearthed over the years is astounding and of extraordinary value. It would not, in probably ninety percent or more of the instances, have otherwise been found. See, as an illustrative example, footnote 25 on pages 337-338 in Part I of his Gissing biography, or footnote 6 on page 339. From whom else but Professor Coustillas would we have been able to learn (as he noted in the introduction to his *George Gissing: Essays & Fiction*) that when Gissing was working on chapter 12 of *The Nether World*, he spent Easter Monday of 1888 at the Crystal Palace in London, "of all places [in Coustillas's words] one of the best in which to observe the holiday-making populace"?

Such discoveries were not limited to those about Gissing's works and their composition/publishing history, nor to the facts of his life. They also included overlooked and seemingly impossible-to-locate sources. And, of course, his diligence and industry in tracking down hitherto unavailable and unpublished letters of Gissing, an effort in which his ability to form relationships with Gissing descendants and descendants of Gissing's friends was invaluable.

Unlike the writings of many literary critics and scholars, Coustillas's on Gissing are not tendentious. He was not interested in propounding theories or making a winning serve with a critical point. He was always mindful and respectful of, maintained complete fidelity to, the facts of a writer's – Gissing's – literary career: what it entailed, what it means to be a novelist.

Coustillas's dense, pithy information-packed prose satisfies. His punchy style. "Such prudence in prognostication is not always necessary," he wrote in the introduction to *George Gissing: The Definitive Bibliography*. "Fortunately the novels have since 1975 been generally read as imaginative works and no longer exclusively or mainly as sociology in fictional form[.]" he asserted in his introduction to the first volume of his Gissing biography. In his introduction to Gissing's *Diary*, he opined that "Exeter was to suit Henry Ryecroft better than it did George Gissing[.]" And he wrote: "The city, or more

accurately London, was [...] the residence best suited to his reputation. But it was evident throughout his life that he could be fully happy nowhere.”

Coustillas was a brilliant writer with an almost perfect command, to say nothing of a deep knowledge, of English. But sometimes, very rarely, his use of a word or a phrase would involve the choice of one or another word that seemed unlikely to have been made by a native speaker. Yet his coinages were ingenious and tended to fix the mind.

With his encyclopaedic knowledge of Gissing's *oeuvre* and scholarship about him, Professor Coustillas was able to clearly see limitations, omissions, or prejudices found in studies of Gissing; and biased, tendentious, unfair, or unfounded views. “Coustillas's extraordinary identification with his subject can make the tone of his tale rather defensive,” Gissing scholar Simon James wrote in a recent review of Coustillas's biography. This is a valid point worth making, but it can be fairly said that Professor Coustillas usually erred on the right side.

One should not forget as well his ability and industry as a translator of Gissing's works.