

M. P. Shiel

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Matthew Phipps Shiel (July 21, 1865 – February 17, 1947), was a prolific British writer of genre fantasy fiction, remembered mostly for supernatural and science fiction, published as novels, short stories and as serials.

There is a 2005 biography of Shiel, written by Harold Billings.

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Caribbean background

Matthew Phipps Shiell was born on the island of Montserrat in the West Indies, and was of mixed race; his mother Priscilla Ann Blake was a mulatto, while his father Matthew Dowdy Shiell, from a partly Irish background, was probably also of mixed race. (Billings 2005) Shiell was educated at Harrison College in Barbados.

Early years in the UK

He moved to England in 1885, and changed his surname to **Shiel**. After working as a teacher and translator he broke into the fiction market with a series of short stories published in *The Strand* and other magazines. His early literary reputation was based on two collections of short stories influenced by Poe published in the Keynote series by John Lane, *Prince Zaleski* (1895) and *Shapes in the Fire* (1896), considered by some critics as the most flamboyant of the English decadent movement. His first novel was *The Rajah's Sapphire* (1896), based on a plot by William Thomas Stead, who probably hired Shiel to write the novel.

Serial publication

Shiel's popular reputation was made by another work for hire which began as a serial contracted by Peter Keary (1865-1915) of C. Arthur Pearson Ltd to capitalize on public interest in a crisis in China which became known as the Scramble for Concessions. *The Empress of the Earth* ran weekly in *Short Stories* from 5 February - 18 June 1898. The early chapters incorporated actual headline events as the crisis unfolded and proved wildly popular with the public. Pearson responded by ordering Shiel to double the length of the serial out to 150,000 words, but he cut it back by a third for the book version rushed out that July as *The Yellow Danger*. Some contemporary critics described the novel as a fictionalization of Charles Henry Pearson's *National Life and Character: A Forecast* (1893). Shiel's oriental villain, Dr. Yen How, has been cited as an influence on the better-known Dr. Fu Manchu. Yen was probably based on the Chinese revolutionary Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), who had first gained fame in England in 1896 when he was kidnapped and imprisoned at the Chinese embassy in London, until public outrage pressured the English government to demand his

release. Similar kidnaping incidents occurred in several of Shiel's subsequent novels. *The Yellow Danger* was Shiel's most successful book during his lifetime, going through numerous editions, particularly when the Boxer Rebellion of 1899-1901 seemed to confirm his fictional portrayal of Chinese hostility to the West. Shiel himself considered the novel hackwork and seemed embarrassed by its success. It was a likely influence on H. G. Wells in *The War in the Air* (1908), Jack London in *The Unparalleled Invasion* (1910), and others.

His next novel was another serial contracted by Pearson to tie into the Spanish-American War. *Contraband of War* ran in *Pearson's Weekly* 7 May - 9 July 1898, again, incorporating headline events into the serial as the war progressed. It was published as a book the following year.

Genre innovator

Around 1899-1900 Shiel conceived a loosely linked trilogy of novels which have been described as possibly the first future history series in science fiction. Each was linked by similar introductory frame purporting to show that the novels were

visions of progressively more distant (or alternative?) futures glimpsed by a clairvoyant in a trance. Notebook I of the series had been plotted at least by 1898, but would not see print until published as *The Last Miracle* (1906). Notebook II became *The Lord of the Sea* (1901), which was recognized by contemporary readers as a critique of private ownership of land based on the theories of Henry George.

Shiel's lasting literary reputation is largely based on Notebook III of the series which was serialized in *The Royal Magazine* in abridged form before book publication that fall as *The Purple Cloud* (1901). The novel tells the tale of Adam Jeffson, who, returning alone from an expedition to the North Pole, discovers that a worldwide catastrophe has left him as the last man alive. At least one modern critic has dismissed its first 30-odd pages as hammy and unimpressive, but Jeffson's return from the Pole and existence in an empty world are astonishing—partly for the convincing portrait of his growing eccentricity but above all for some of the most hypnotic and original rhythms in English prose: Shiel's writing here has been justly compared to jazz in its free-flowing persuasiveness.

Shiel had married a young Parisian-Spaniard, Carolina Garcia Gomez in 1898, who was the model for a character in *Cold Steel* (1900) and several short stories. (The Welsh author and mystic Arthur Machen was among the wedding guests.) They separated around 1903 and his daughter was taken to Spain after Lina's death around 1904. Shiel blamed the failure of the marriage on the interference of his mother-in-law, but money was at the heart of their problems. Shiel was caught between his desire to write high art and his need to produce more commercial fare. When his better efforts did not sell well, he was forced to seek more journalistic work, and began to collaborate with Louis Tracy on a series of romantic mystery novels, some published under Tracy's name, others under the pseudonyms Gordon Holmes and Robert Fraser. The last of their collaborations appeared in 1911.

Edwardian times

In 1902 Shiel turned away from the more dramatic future war and science fiction themes which had dominated his early serial novels and began a series which have been described as his middle

period romantic novels. The most interesting was the first, serialized as *In Love's Whirlpool* in *Cassell's Saturday Journal*, 14 May - 3 Sept 1902, and published in book form as *The Weird o' It* (1902). Shiel later described it as a "true Bible or Holy Book" for modern times, in which he had attempted to represent "Christianity in a radical way." This novel was far from hackwork, and besides apparent autobiographical elements (including a minor character based on Ernest Dowson with whom Shiel is rumored to have roomed briefly in the 1890s), contains some of his finest writing, but it was not reprinted in England, nor formally published in America.

Shiel returned to contemporary themes in *The Yellow Wave* (1905), an historical novel about the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. The novel was a recasting of Romeo and Juliet into the on-going war with leading families of the two nations standing in for the feuding Capulets and Montagues of Shakespeare's play. Shiel modeled his hero on Yoshio Markino (1874-1956), the Japanese artist and author who lived in London from 1897-1942. In February 1904 Shiel had offered to Peter Keary to go to the front as a war correspondent with letters of introduction from Markino. He may have met Markino through

Arthur Ransome who dedicated *Bohemia In London* (1907) to Shiel and used him as the model for the chapter on "The Novelist."

Faced with declining sales of his books, Shiel tried to recapture the success of *The Yellow Danger* when China and Sun Yat-sen returned to the headlines during the Chinese Revolution of 1911-1912. Though a better novel in most respects, *The Dragon* (1913), serialized earlier that year as *To Arms!* and revised in 1929 as *The Yellow Peril*, failed to catch the public's interest. As the hero of the story had oddly predicted, Shiel turned away from novels for ten years.

Georgian times

Over the next decade Shiel wrote five plays, dabbled in radical politics and translated at least one, though probably more, pamphlets for the Workers Socialist Federation. In 1919 he married his second wife, Esther Lydia Furley (1872-1942). They traveled in Italy in the early 1920s, probably living largely off her income, and separated amicably around 1929, but do not seem to have divorced.

He returned to writing around 1922 and between 1923 and 1937 published a further ten or so books, as well as thorough revisions of five of his older novels. Shiel spent most of his last decade working on a "truer" translation of the Gospel of Luke with extensive commentary. He finished it, but half of the final draft was lost after his death in Chichester.

In 1931 Shiel met a young poet and bibliophile, John Gawsworth, who befriended him, and helped him obtain a Civil List Pension. Gawsworth talked Shiel into allowing him to complete several old story fragments, sometimes roping literary friends like Oswald Blakeston into helping. The results were rather poor stuff, but Gawsworth used them as filler in various anthologies with his name prominently listed as co-author.

Publications

Excluding the collaborations with Tracy, Shiel published over 30 books, including 25 novels and various collections of short stories, essays and poems. Arkham House issued two collections, *Prince Zaleski and Cummings King Monk* (1977)

and *Xelucha and Others* (1975). *The Purple Cloud* remains his most famous and often reprinted novel. It has been variously described as both a neglected masterpiece, and the best of all Last Man novels. (It was also credited as the loose inspiration for the 1959 MGM film, *The World, the Flesh and the Devil*, starring Harry Belafonte, Inger Stevens, and Mel Ferrer.) Stephen King has also been quoted saying it served in part as inspiration for his novel "The Stand."

A number of the short stories continue to be reprinted, but many of his other novels, including the middle period romantics, have been nearly forgotten.

Redonda: the legend of the kingdom

As **King Felipe**, Shiel was purportedly the second king of Redonda, a small uninhabited rocky island in the West Indies, situated a short distance northwest of the island of Montserrat, where Shiel was born.

The Redonda legend was probably created by Shiel, and was first mentioned publicly in a 1929

booklet advertising the reissue of four of his novels by Victor Gollancz. According to the story Shiel told, he was crowned King of Redonda on his 15th birthday in 1880. However, there is little evidence that Shiel took these claims seriously, and his biographer, Harold Billings, speculates that the story may have been an intentional hoax foisted on the gullible press. At this late date, proving or completely discrediting the story may turn out to be impossible either way.

On his death Gawsworth became both his literary executor and his appointed heir to the "kingdom". Gawsworth took the legend of Redonda to heart. He never lost an opportunity to further elaborate the tale and spread the story to the press. Today the press is clearly following the old John Ford adage: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

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See also

- A. Reynolds Morse & Eleanor R. Morse

External links

- Bibliography
- Biography
- Genealogy
- *"L'Abri"*, Malcolm Ferguson

Shiel's works online

- Works by M. P. Shiel at Project Gutenberg
 - *Prince Zaleski*, available at Project Gutenberg.
 - *The Purple Cloud*, available at Project Gutenberg.
 - *The Lord of the Sea*, available at Project Gutenberg.
- *Xelucha*

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