

HAROLD P. SIMONSON

Francis Grierson — A Biographical Sketch and Bibliography

Harold P. Simonson, chairman of the department of English at the University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, Washington, has written a full-length biography of the musician-essayist Francis Grierson and has also edited Cross Currents: A Collection of Essays from Contemporary Magazines, published in 1959 by Harper's. He has two other books scheduled for publication: Zona Gale in the "U.S. Authors Series" and Trio: Stories, Plays, and Poems, to be issued by Harper's. He received his doctorate from Northwestern University in 1958.

BURIED IN AMERICA'S literary past are some remarkable writers who received only slight attention during their lifetimes or were forgotten soon after their deaths. One of these writers, Francis Grierson, has caught the interest of literary historians in recent years. When the fifth edition of his *Valley of Shadows* (1909) appeared in 1948, Edmund Wilson gave it a full-scale review in the *New Yorker* (September 18, 1948). Theodore Spencer said in his introduction to this edition that the book was "a minor classic," and Bernard DeVoto suggested that Grierson's unusual literary power justified the deletion of Spencer's adjective. Other scholars (Roy P. Basler, Carl Sandburg, and Van Wyck Brooks, to name but three¹) have been struck by the strange career of Grierson, who, unschooled and unannounced, made his way from a log cabin in Sangamon County, Illinois, to the most elite courts and literary circles of Europe.

Grierson's real name was Benjamin Henry Jesse Francis Shepard;

1. Roy P. Basler, *The Lincoln Legend* (Boston, 1935), 46, 183-85; Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln, The Prairie Years* (New York, 1926), II: 151, 155-56; Van Wyck Brooks, *The Confident Years, 1885-1915* (New York, 1952), 258, 267-70, 432, 433, and *Scenes and Portraits: Memories of Childhood and Youth* (New York, 1954), 229-31.

he took his mother's family name when he published *Modern Mysticism* in 1899. He was born on September 18, 1848, in the town of Birkenhead, across the Mersey River from Liverpool, England. Distressed by the widespread economic depression (which by 1850 had sent nearly nineteen thousand English settlers to Illinois alone), his parents emigrated in 1849 and settled the same year in Sangamon County. His father, Joseph Shepard, was much less a farmer than he appears in *The Valley of Shadows*. Unfamiliar with agriculture, unsuccessful in a horse-selling business, constantly troubled with sore eyes while in the country, and restless to obtain a government position in St. Louis, he spent only ten years in Illinois before moving to that city. To Emily Grierson Shepard, his mother, the Illinois prairies were lonesome and monotonous, and it was not until the family moved to Chicago in 1865 that she enjoyed life in America. In several letters to her first cousin, General Benjamin H. Grierson of the Union Army, she complained about the American frontier and looked forward to returning to "civilized life" in England. "For my part," she wrote him from England in 1874, "I lost so many precious years of my life wandering in the wilderness."²

For young Grierson the sojourn in Illinois was by no means unhappy. In later years he remembered this period as a time when he could "wander about amidst a sea of wild flowers." He wrote in *The Valley of Shadows* that his cosmopolitan life in the capitals of Europe did not suffice "to alienate the romance and memory of those wonderful times." The strain of mysticism throughout his writing can be traced back to his childhood on the prairies, where close at hand were strange nightly noises of prairie birds and animals, and not far away the Mississippi River flowing "in one fixed and endless direction."

Young Grierson and his sister, Letitia, attended no school until the family moved to St. Louis when he was ten. He was, however, aware of the political excitement also close at hand. When the family lived for a time in Macoupin County, near Palmyra, their log house served as a station in the Underground Railway.

2. Francis Grierson Letters, Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield.



Francis Grierson — this photograph was taken in London in 1902.

Grierson's father several times barely avoided serious trouble with his neighbors who were strongly touched with Southern sympathies. Most memorable to the boy was the last Lincoln-Douglas debate at Alton. In language Sandburg found so compelling, Grierson wrote in *The Valley of Shadows* that on that October day in 1858 he remembered Lincoln as one standing "like some solitary pine on a lonely summit, very tall, very dark, very gaunt, and very rugged, his swarthy features stamped with a sad serenity."³

After five years in St. Louis, where he served as a page on the staff of General John C. Frémont, Grierson moved with his family first to Niagara Falls and then to Chicago. His important move came in 1869 when he set out alone for France, and as a skillful piano improvisator gained the respect of composer François Auber and many royal families in whose courts he played. During the next twenty years he traveled widely in both Europe and America, crossed the Atlantic several times, and once went to Australia. In 1887 he began writing for San Diego's *Golden Era*, a literary magazine to which Bret Harte and Mark Twain also contributed. Two

3. P. 198 of the Houghton Mifflin 1909 ed.

volumes of Grierson's essays, *Pensées et Essais* and *Essays and Pictures*, published two years later in Paris, were richly praised by Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine. During the next thirty years he published other volumes of essays which generally showed him as a belated romantic, hostile toward the new movements of literary realism, naturalism, and philosophical determinism.

Of all his published work, the one book receiving most notice was *The Valley of Shadows*, which consists of reminiscences about his early days in Illinois and Missouri. In it he pictured the antebellum days in the Midwest before industrialism and the Civil War had destroyed the old order. Grierson attempted to interpret the moods of the pioneers who saw the oncoming shadows of war and who puzzled over the symbolic meaning of the appearance of Donati's comet in 1858: one interpretation of the comet was that it prophesied that one from among the people would rise to lead them. Grierson's book is also about Abraham Lincoln; Roy P. Basler asserted in *The Lincoln Legend* (1935) that of the many interpretations of Lincoln the mystic, Grierson's is "by far the most entrancing."⁴

Grierson did not give up his music when he seriously started writing. In his concerts abroad he had held his aristocratic, cultivated audiences enrapt as he wove his piano improvisations. Hearers testified that Grierson could produce the weirdest and most powerfully emotional music they had ever known. The reaction of the famous English publisher John Lane was typical. Lane's biographer, J. Lewis May, records that Grierson played on and on as the twilight deepened. Finally in the gloom he improvised on the sinking of the *Titanic*. The treatment of the theme was so overwhelmingly impressive and had such a profound effect upon Lane that he postponed for a fortnight his departure for America, although he had arranged to sail the very next day.

Grierson's interests also included spiritualism. He conducted séances in Europe and America, using his music to set the atmosphere. At the Eddy farm in Chittenden, Vermont, in 1874, he met the two founders of Theosophy, Madame H. P. Blavatsky and

4. P. 183.

Colonel Henry Steel Olcott. Later in San Diego he persuaded two brothers, newly converted spiritualists themselves, to build him a house valued at over \$30,000 in which he held séances and recitals. Called the Villa Montezuma, the house became known as a temple of occultism. Still later, in Los Angeles, he lectured as a "World-Famous Mystic" on prophecy, vision, cosmic consciousness, and four-dimensional space. His last book, *Psycho-Phone Messages* (1921), purports to record spirit-messages he received from illustrious men and women of the past.

His final years in Los Angeles were spent with his faithful amanuensis for over forty years, Lawrence Waldemar Tonner, and with Count Michael Teliki, a refugee from Hungary and the last of a long family of magnates. Teliki and Tonner operated a small dry cleaning business, but profits were hardly sufficient to support the three of them plus Teliki's mother. Grierson repeatedly pawned souvenirs for food. A week before his death, at the age of seventy-nine, he pawned a gold watch given to him by King Edward VII. On May 29, 1927, he gave a recital for a group of close friends. After his final improvisation he slumped over the keys and died.

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