

John Wood Shortridge (1852–1921) – The Explosive Romantic

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INGREDIENTS: BACON BONES, dried beans and garlic. This recipe for Grandma Jessie's bacon and bean soup published in the *Sunday Star*, Wellington, New Zealand in July 2007 opens the door to the life of Barnsley-born artist John Wood Shortridge.

The door had been already significantly opened by Emeritus Professor Pierre Coustillas, who wrote eloquently about John Wood's life in the *Gissing Journals* of July and October 1999. John Wood was a significant person in his research, as a friend of the Wakefield-born Victorian novelist George Gissing. Pierre Coustillas is Professor of English Literature at the University of Lille and an authority on Gissing.

Without Pierre Coustillas and his researchers John Wood's life would perhaps have gone publicly unchronicled. Diaries from which Pierre Coustillas's research about John Wood is largely drawn remain with John Wood's family and perhaps one day they should be published in their own right.

John Wood's story is largely told here through the information in the Gissing journals and from his descendants.

In Barnsley cemetery there are clues to his life: memorials to Richard and Sarah Martha, his parents, and a stone commemorates the death of his brother Herbert Shortridge with the words: "In affectionate remembrance of Herbert Shortridge who died at Massa Lubrense March 18th 1890. Aged 33 years. Interred on the island of Capri."

What is the link between Barnsley and Capri? The answer is John Wood Shortridge.

The course of John Wood's life was ultimately dictated by money. He never had paid work and never seemed short of money. Perhaps if he had needed money he would now be recognised as a significant painter but never needing to sell any work meant that he could paint for pure self-satisfaction. The result is that his works, what are left of them after a fire destroyed his home in 1930, remain with his family in New Zealand and none are in collections. Some are in poor condition, having been buried during World War II in fear of a Japanese invasion of New Zealand.

John's money largely derived from his grandfather John Shortridge, born in Bewcastle, Cumberland in 1803. This extraordinary man became a Victorian industrialist on a grand scale.

Gravestones of Shortridge family,
Barnsley cemetery



Starting out as a stonemason, he went to Liverpool where he established himself as a brickmaker between 1828 and 1839. It is possible that he was engaged in the construction of the early docks in Liverpool and it was in Liverpool in 1829 that his eldest son and second child Richard, John Wood's father, was born. His eldest child, Sarah, born in Ireland in 1827 was to become the aunt that John Wood could not avoid.

In about 1840 John Shortridge moved to Glossop. He was a contractor on the Sheffield to Manchester railway line, completing seven and a half miles of the track through Longdendale, requiring a large degree of skill and ingenuity. The line was notorious for its high death rate. This was a time when the railroads were built by navvies, largely by hand, using wheelbarrows, picks and shovels

with little use of mechanised equipment. The navvies were a mobile and flexible work force whose pay was relatively good but whose general well-being was little thought of by most railway companies. The use of contractors and sub-contractors in the building of railways became the norm in the 1840s and John seized his opportunities.

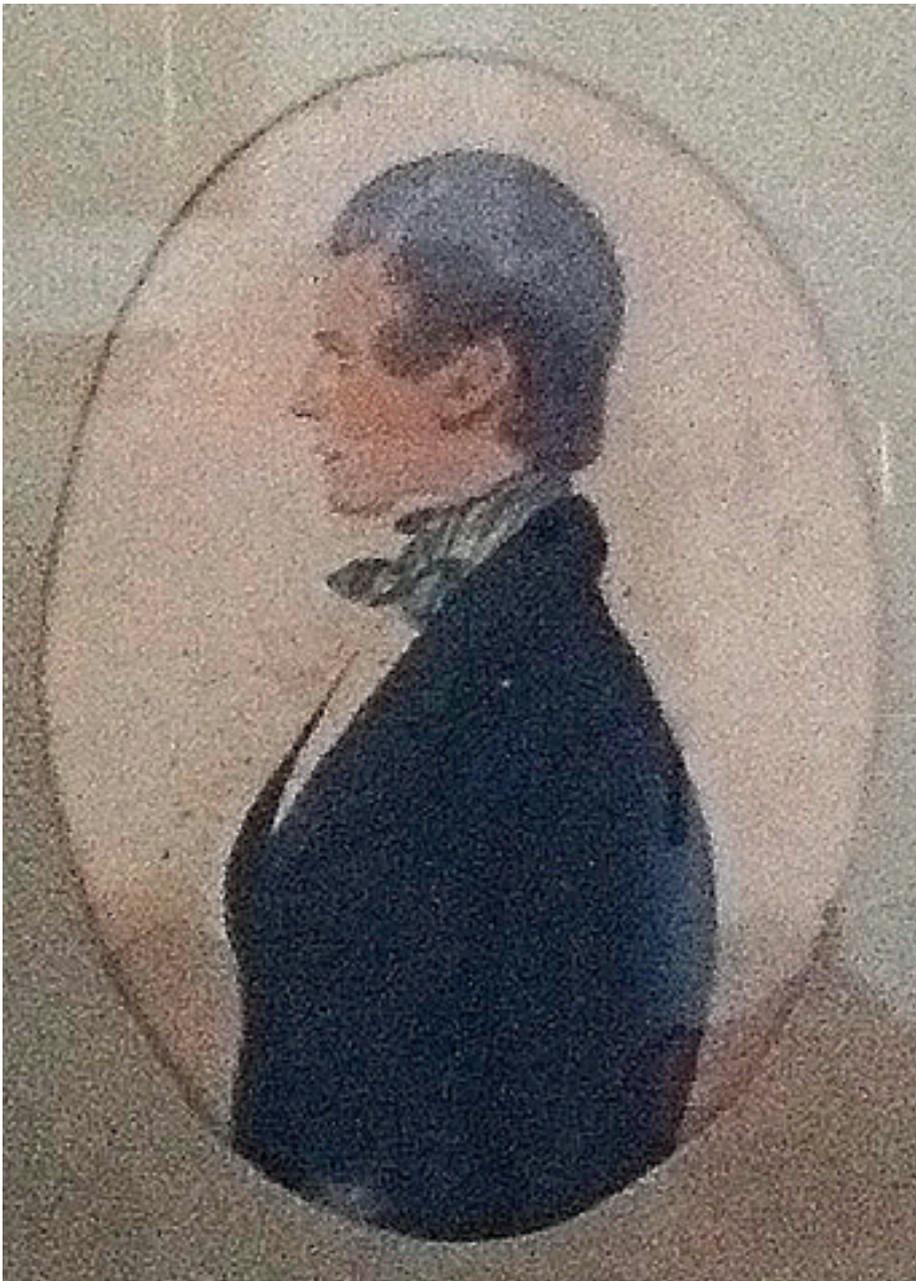
He moved to Sheffield and established the firm Miller Blackie and Shortridge who were the contractors for the Wicker viaduct in Sheffield. The viaduct was built across the Don Valley to extend the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway (MS & L) and support the Sheffield Victoria railway station. MS & L was formed from a number of railway companies including the builders of the Woodhead line through Penistone for which Joseph Locke, so long associated with Barnsley, had been the engineer.



Shortridge works, Wicker Arches,
Sheffield

There are 41 arches in the viaduct and when the last stone of the main arch across the Wicker was lowered into place in 1848 it was said that there were more cubic yards of masonry in the viaduct than in any other building, including the Houses of Parliament and our cathedrals. John was also involved in the construction of the Redmires reservoirs.

He started the steelmaking firm of Shortridge and Howell, whose offices at 48 The Wicker, built in 1853, still stand today. On the front there is a moulding of a hand, surmounted by two elephants, and the name J. Shortridge still visible. The hand no doubt representing the manual work required in civil engineering and the elephant as a symbol of beasts of burden. A good navy could move



Richard Shortridge
Courtesy of Dale Calder

up to 20 tons of earth in one day. The building became the headquarters of the Sheffield firm Samuel Osborn, steelmakers, and their Clyde works, on the dissolution of Shortridge and Howell due to a partnership dispute.

There is a record of Shortridge and Howell in the vast insurance claims which followed the great flood of Sheffield in March 1864. The firm claimed £1,016 8s 6d for damage to their Hartford works when the Dale Dyke dam collapsed, resulting in water flooding through the Loxley Valley, into Hillsboro and Attercliffe. Two hundred and thirty-eight people died.

Seeking to increase the scope of his business, in 1848 John applied for a license to make gunpowder and erect a gunpowder magazine at Worsboro, Barnsley. Permission was granted by the Barnsley magistrates' bench chaired by John Spencer Stanhope, the father of the Pre-Raphaelite artist John Roddam Spencer Stanhope. The gunpowder firm was called Shortridge and Wright. Charles Wright, born in Kent, was the expert maker of gunpowder, Kent and in particular Faversham having a long association with gunpowder. Subsequently gunpowder licenses were applied for at Toad Hole, Southey Green, Sheffield and Ashgate, Brampton, Chesterfield. The firm continued until taken over by Kynochs in the 1890s.

Perhaps wanting to keep a family eye on the business, Richard, John's son, had been dispatched to Barnsley. Aged 21 Richard married Sarah Martha Wood, aged 16, at Monk Bretton church in November 1850. Sarah was the daughter of Thomas Wood, farmer of Crigglestone. Sarah's cousin was Joseph Wood of Blacker Hall, Crigglestone. The Wood family provide the link to George Gissing and thus to John Wood Shortridge.

In 1851 Richard and Sarah were living with John Shortridge in Sheffield. Richard is described as a gunpowder manufacturer. Within the year they had moved, as John Wood, their first child, was born on 30th April 1852 at Mount



Mount Terrace, Sackville Street, Barnsley,
birthplace of John Wood Shortridge



Terrace, Sackville Street, Barnsley. In 1861 the family were living on Dodworth Road. Six more children were born to them in Barnsley. One died aged 13 but the others led more or less conventional lives.

In July 1865 Richard Shortridge, John's father died. He was 35. In May 1867 his mother, Sarah, died. She was 33. John Wood was 15.

By this time John Shortridge, John Wood's grandfather, had built in 1851 a very large house called Chipping House, fronting Abbeydale Road Sheffield, and had created the Heeley omnibus system in 1852, which operated horse drawn carriages between Heeley and other areas of Sheffield with payments by silver and copper tokens, examples of which can be found in the National Railway Museum, York.

John had to make decisions about the education and well-being of Richard's orphaned children. The immediate solution seems to have been to deposit them around various boarding schools in Sheffield and Derbyshire. The solution for John Wood was to apprentice him to the Summer Lane firm of Pigott and Farrar, (John Turner Pigott and James Farrar, boiler makers, iron founders and makers of coalmining machinery.) In November 1867 John signed John Wood up to an apprenticeship at a cost to him of £50. John Wood's earnings between 1867–1873 would be between four and 11 shillings a week and he was to be taught engineering, turning and fitting skills with one year in the drawing office. The apprenticeship proved short-term.

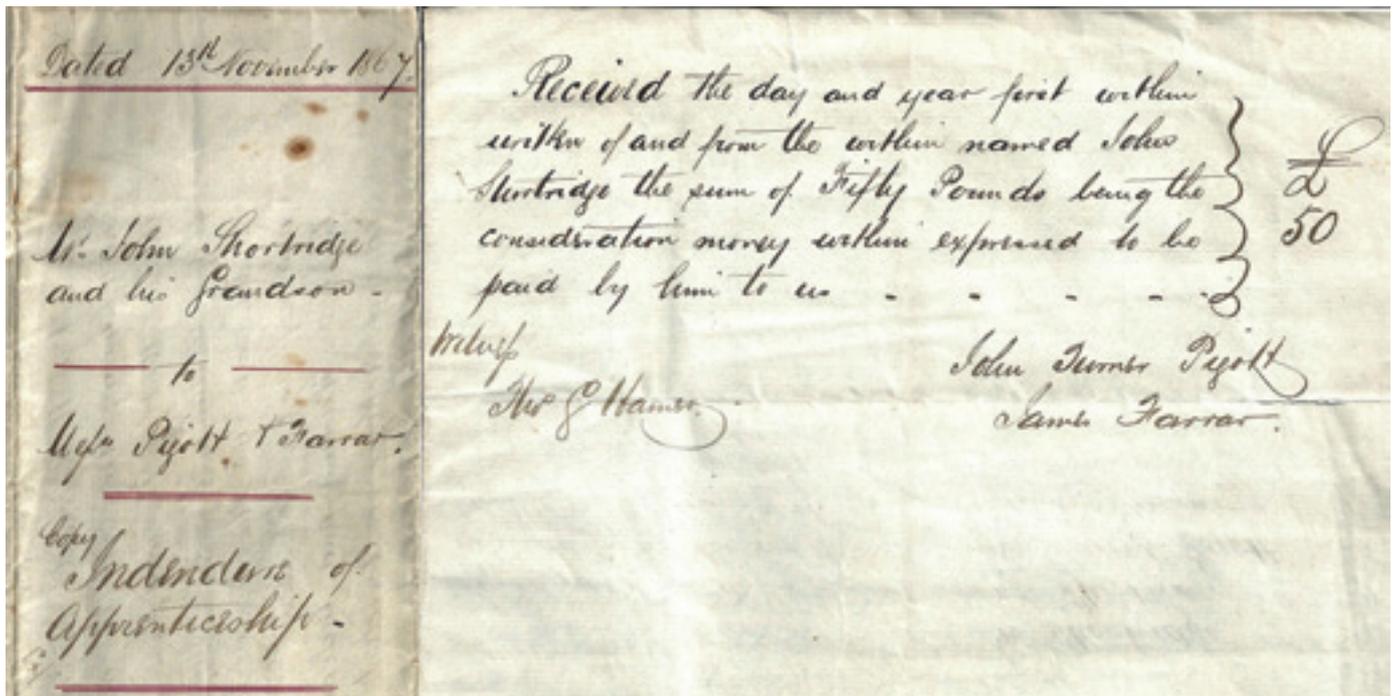
John's involvement with Richard's family ceased when he was killed in May 1869 in a carriage accident when travelling with his daughter Sarah; his horse bolted. He is buried in Heeley and his memorial, an enormous obelisk mounted on a granite plinth, dominates the churchyard.

John Wood's diary records: "I ran away from my employment at Messrs Pigot Farrars and in company with Edward Wainwright and Walter Dunstan made our way to Liverpool and set out from there to walk to Cardiff."

Like the horse, John Wood had bolted.

So begins John Wood's odyssey. At the start, he could not have known that his grandfather was to die so swiftly. So what may have started out as a youthful adventure at sea may have turned into an odyssey of a lifetime after John's death.

Springfield Place, Dodworth Road, family home of John Wood Shortridge as built and as at 2014



Extract from apprentice document 1867,
John Wood Shortridge to Pigott and
Farrar, Barnsley. Courtesy of the family

Even with the diaries it is difficult to keep a track of John Wood's travels. He sets off on the coal brig *James Curtain* to Halifax, Nova Scotia. He deserts on arrival and sets sail again on the brigantine *Regina* to Boston. For the next 18 months he travels up and down the east coast of North America, stopping to farm in Connecticut. In late 1869 he arrives at Liverpool. How much he knew about the death of his grandfather is not known. Under the terms of his grandfather's will his aunt Sarah and her second husband Alfred Sellars, a merchant of Sheffield were appointed guardians to the Richard Shortridge children. The children were not to come into their inheritance until they reached 25. Sarah and Alfred held the purse strings. John Wood remained in England for several months before leaving again in July 1870.

This time he set off for India and Burma on the *Corra Linn*. He returned some months later and set off from Hull to Hamburg; he remained in Germany until 1873 enjoying himself hunting, dancing, boating, writing poetry and drawing the landscape and its people.

In 1874 he was in France. He lived frugally during his travels, recording in detail all his expenses and sketching as he went. He records visits to the Louvre, Notre Dame, Opera, Versailles, Theatre Français and many visits to the cemetery at Pere Lachaise and its mortuary. In March 1874 he travelled to Normandy.

The diaries record that money reached him from Alfred Sellars. Bank notes were cut in half and posted separately.

In October 1874 he travelled to Rome stopping off at Marseilles en route. The spirit of the people of Marseilles and Rome seemed to engage him. He started to learn Italian and throw himself, as he had in Paris, into cultural activities. He seemed keen to learn, educating himself by visits to churches, museums and galleries.

In March 1875 he was in Naples and spent time visiting the villages and areas in the region before embarking for Sicily, which he did not find to his taste, describing the men as “rascally”, then travelling back through Italy via Pisa, Florence and Venice, back to Hamburg and to England.

August 1875 finds him in London, staying firstly at Trevor Square, Kensington and then Danvers Street, Chelsea and in October attending art lessons at the South Kensington museum. Whether he truly wanted to attend classes or was obliged to do so by his guardians is a matter for conjecture. His diary records that he came to London to enter his artistic career which appears a neutral comment. By March 1876 his restlessness came again and he was on his travels. He went to Paris and Normandy but coming back to London a few months later, he found that his brother Herbert, five years his junior and with whom he had travelled in Normandy, had gone to America.

His wandering life made relations with Sarah and Alfred Sellars difficult and he writes that he was no longer welcome in Heeley – they thought him ‘un chien enragé’, or a mad dog.

So on the road he went again and by June 1877 he is in Brittany – this time spending a year there where his main occupation was trailing around the countryside sketching the landscape, architecture and the local people. He returned to England and was in College Street, Liverpool in 1877 as he placed an advertisement for his services as a multilingual clerk, stating that salary was not the object but he sought an insight into business.

He was summoned back to Heeley in May 1878 and asked to go and look for his brother Herbert in America. He set off to New York. His journey to find Herbert did not prevent him from sightseeing at Niagara Falls en route. He found Herbert and instead of bringing him home the two set off for Hartford, Connecticut and from there on foot to South Glastonbury where they stopped with friends for several months.

His next movements are tracked by reference to an album of his containing dated sketches. There are sketches of Syracuse in 1880 and one of a mandolin dated 21st August 1880 on Capri. The mandolin sketch was by Nikola Masic, a Croatian artist who spent 1880 on Capri.

By 1880 having attained 25 he was perhaps less beholden to his guardians. Part of a letter he wrote to a relative about this time, probably Alfred Sellars, concerned living accommodation on the island of Capri. It is a sensible, businesslike letter comparing the prices of purchasing a property and renting. In the letter he sketches the views from Capri and he writes:

“I have taken my rooms for a year, rent 9£ ... I have learnt a lot here this summer but have a lot to learn yet ere I turn out anything worth seeing. Am trying more oils now. As for sketch....so much bother in the post but I will send on two when Bert returns or you can plunder folios if you come over ... you might pick up something to suit you. No there are no old prints about ... my studio does not look bad as it is with what I have ... If I could get hold of a small cottage I think I would buy it for property will rise here in a few years fearfully.” (sic)

Having spent years as an itinerant artist it comes as something of a revelation to hear John Wood speak as a property developer. Perhaps he did have something of his grandfather's business acumen?

Artists have been drawn to Capri over many years. It is a place of history, imagination and architecture, and was included by many on the itinerary of their grand tour. In 1878 John Singer Sargent, renowned as an American portrait painter, went to Anacapri for a year and painted Rosina, a girl from Capri. Her exotic beauty captivated artists. Caprese and Neapolitan women were renowned for their beauty. On the island about that time was the Englishman Frank Hyde, born in 1849, a portrait and figure painter. An example of his work on Capri can be seen at the Maidstone Museum.

Sophie and Walter Anderson, both artists, lived on Capri between about 1870 and 1890. Sophie's work 'Capri girl with flowers' is at the Russell-Cotes Museum, Bournemouth. She was associated with the Pre-Raphaelite movement and exhibited at the Royal Academy, Grosvenor Gallery and the British Institution.

Relatives of John Wood own work by Adriano Bonifazi (1858–1914) who was a friend of John Wood and who worked in Rome and Capri. The Victoria and Albert Museum has a work by Bonifazi, 'Head of an Italian Boy'. He painted girls and boys, often in rustic dress and often painted in pairs. He exhibited at Suffolk Street in 1876 and at the British Institution in 1874. A painting, 'The Guitar Player', sold at Christie's in 1878 for £28.

Capri, playground of Roman Emperor Tiberius, is a four-mile long and three-mile wide island on the south side of the Bay of Naples. With its rugged limestone cliffs and spectacular scenery it was to become the first permanent home of John Wood. His house at Marina Piccola on the south side of the island was in the 1880s two houses, one in ruins and comprising also of a 'fortino' which John Wood bought. After John Wood left the island the fortino was owned by Emil von Behring, the German bacteriologist, who devised the immunity for tetanus and diphtheria. After his death the fortino was owned by the Marchese Adolfo Patrizi. In 1933 the fortino was bought by Gracie Fields who had a long association with the island.

Capri by John Wood Shortridge. Courtesy of the family





'Portrait of Carmela' by John Wood Shortridge. Courtesy of the family

By November 1881 John Wood was a father. Jessie, whose recipe opens this article was born. Her mother was Carmela Esposito, the daughter of a local sea faring man. She was a beautiful girl and the family story is that they met when John was lodging with Carmela's family. On departure he left a bag of gold coins under his pillow. Carmela found it and chased after him to return the coins. He was both impressed by her honesty in such a poor area and by her looks.

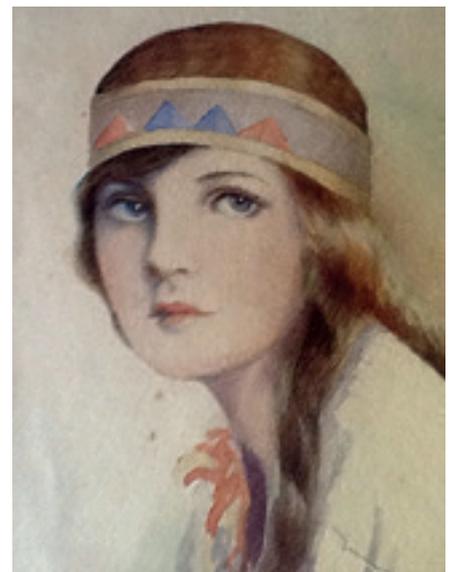
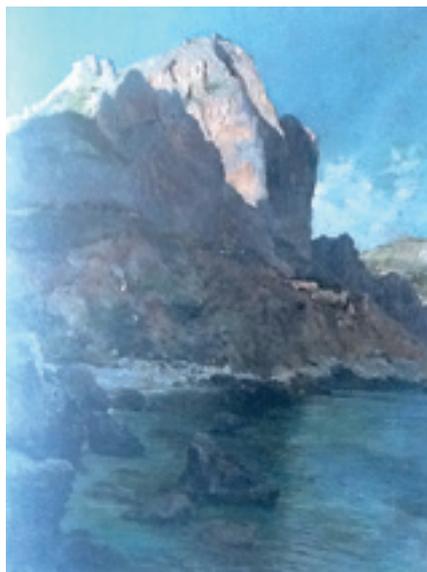
As idyllic as the island was, amenities were scarce. There was an outbreak of typhus which must have been worrying for the new parents and baby. The growing tourist industry predicted by John Wood in his assessment of house prices meant that facilities were however improving.

In July 1883 John Wood married Carmela on Capri and a second child Nina was born on the island in September 1883.

By August 1885 John Wood became the father of three girls when Kate was born. The previous year there had been an outbreak of cholera in Naples which had resulted in the island being closed off, another scare for the family.

John Wood's love for his three girls was expressed in a letter addressed to them of 3rd May 1886:

"To my Bonnie affectionate little Nannie. Fast asleep at my side in the large salon in the old fort at Capri ... know ye how I love thee little one? ... mother



on the rocks fishing. All quiet around us. Salutations to all three my children from your father.”

The diaries reveal something of his financial position at this time. It seems that he would draw from the estate £1,000 a year. He seems to have handled large sums of money and lent money too at an interest rate of six per cent.

By about 1886 John Wood had moved from Capri to Massa Lubrense and the Villa Cozzolino. Massa Lubrense is across the water from Capri, a distance of some three miles. It is three miles from Sorrento and 21 miles from Pompeii.

It was at the Albergo del Sole Pompeii on 20th November 1888 that John Wood first met the novelist George Gissing and by the 23rd November Gissing was staying at the Villa Cozzolino. By this time Herbert, the younger brother of John Wood, was living with the family and was suffering with consumption.

Various works of John Wood Shortridge:
‘Jessie’, two Capri views, ‘Vatican Guard’,
‘Woman with headdress’
Courtesy of the family



John Wood Shortridge and Carmela
Courtesy of the family

Gissing, born in Wakefield in 1857 the son of a chemist, was an English novelist and short story writer whose own life was beset with personal, literary and financial struggles. He was very well regarded at the end of the 19th century and compared with Thomas Hardy and George Meredith. In his novel *The Emancipated* he describes his meeting with John Wood as a meeting with Clifford March, an artist. The basis of the friendship is unclear but they shared a common knowledge of Wakefield families, both their lives had been affected by the early deaths of their fathers and 16 was a turning point in both their lives. John Wood

had run away to sea and Gissing had an affair with a woman, the consequences of which landed him in jail for theft. They both had issues with money but from different perspectives. They pursued romantic ideals and neither chose the obvious course, always seemingly making their lives more difficult than they need have been.

Gissing was at the Villa Cozzolino again in 1889. A son Jack had been born but had died of meningitis which, combined with having in the household the very sick Herbert, made life difficult for all. Herbert died in 1890 and is buried on Capri adding to John Wood's woes. Carmela was a chaotic housekeeper and there was a great deal of friction between husband and wife. Carmela was untutored in the arts but was a strong influence on her children.

Gissing comments on John Wood's art in his diary 2nd January 1890: "He showed me a large number of his watercolour drawings. Some are excellent. The man is a born artist."

After this meeting their lives went in different directions. Restless again, in the mid-1890s the family increased with the arrival of sons John (Jock) and Rolf,

'Self-portrait', John Wood Shortridge,
1880. Courtesy of the family



moved to England. John Wood is listed in *Kelly's Directory of Cornwall 1897* as living at Tregatreath, Mylor Bridge. Mylor Bridge, now known for its boatyard, is approximately five miles north of Falmouth. A daughter, Nora, was born in Falmouth. Apart from the draw of the water which may have been something Carmela and John Wood did have in common, it is not known why they settled there. Local newspaper items show that the girls took part in concerts in aid of the Transvaal War Fund, playing mandolins in Italian dress.

By 1901 the family were in the Isle of Man at Lower Ballacottier in the parish of Andreas. The Isle of Man years were the last time that the family would be united. Another child Eric was said to be born there. He would never live with his father. Newspaper articles recount the girls playing the mandolin and zither in concerts on the island. But family life changed.

In September 1903, the year of Gissing's death, John Wood went to Terrace Road, Tideswell, where three of the children, Rolf, John and Nora were baptised. He then departed for New Zealand without Carmela, Eric or Ruth. He left them in Sheffield.

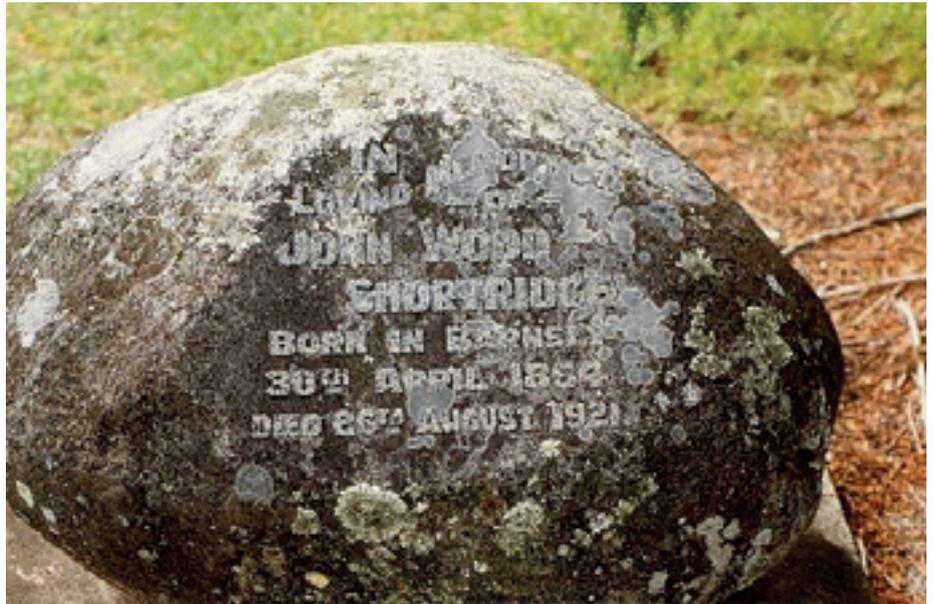
What exactly caused the split is not known. Family stories recount Carmela's temper and their religious backgrounds differed. There was a gulf of intellect between them but leaving Carmela in industrial and land-locked Sheffield, a town she had never visited previously, hardly speaking English is difficult to comprehend. Two houses were acquired, one for Carmela to live in and one so she could derive letting income. A few years later John Wood collected Ruth but Carmela and Eric did not join the rest of the family in New Zealand until December 1925.

John Wood had first settled in Birkenhead, a suburb of Auckland. In about 1913 he moved to Opuia in the Bay of Islands north of Auckland where he bought a large estate which he farmed with his two sons Jock and Rolf. Access



Farmhouse, New Zealand
Courtesy of the family

Headstone of John Wood Shortridge,
New Zealand. Courtesy of the family



to the estate was by an inlet. He lived in a wooden house which, by the greatest of ironies, burnt down destroying much of his work, when a cannonball (from the Maori wars) filled with gunpowder and left on his hearth, exploded.

John died in August 1921 and is buried at Christ Church, Russell, near Opuā. He had suffered a stroke in about 1918 and had been in ill health. Carmela died in November 1941 in Auckland Hospital and is buried in Waikumete cemetery, Auckland.

In 1975 Rolf sold his portion of the estate to F Hundertwasser, the renowned Austrian artist and architect, who had fallen in love with this area of New Zealand.

The last words of this article belong to Pierre Coustillas. In the *Gissing Journal* of October 1999, he says that John Wood did not actually work on the farm but supervised the work as “he remained to the end first and foremost an artist.”

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