

VIII. Sister Nivedita's Interactions with Devotees and Prominent Westerners

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Margaret Noble (the future Sister Nivedita, 1867-1911) was born in Northern Ireland. As a young journalist and educationalist, she first heard Swami Vivekananda speak at the residence of Lady Isabel Margesson on November 10, 1895 in London. Margesson's young son David (1890-1965) whom Vivekananda personally blessed later became Winston Churchill's Secretary of State for War (1940-42). Her grandson Francis (Frank) Margesson sold Ridgely Manor in New York State in the late 1990s, to a nonprofit religious organization affiliated with the Vedanta Society of Southern California.¹

Nivedita later described the event this way, "A majestic personage, clad in saffron gown and wearing a red-waist band, sat there on the floor, cross-legged. As he spoke to the company he recited Sanskrit verses in his deep, sonorous voice. His serene face, his dignified bearing and his divine voice cast a spell upon the listeners, who felt electrified by his frequent utterances of the name of 'Shiva, Shiva!'"²

Thereafter she attended many of Vivekananda's public lectures and talks in England during 1895-96 and 1899. On May 12, 1896, Sister Nivedita urged her two friends in their mid-forties, Eric Hammond and his wife Nell Hammond, to attend one of Vivekananda's classes in London. Eric worked as a journalist and poet in Wimbledon, England. The Hammonds became devoted admirers of Vivekananda, attending many of his discussions, including Abhedananda's first speech in the West in October 1896. Nell Hammond received ten letters from Nivedita during 1898-1902. Eric Hammond kept up his interest in Vedanta by publishing in the *Brahmavadin*, contributing over thirty articles in the *Prabuddha Bharata* and *Vedanta Kesari* between 1902 and 1938. In these articles he narrated stories about Vivekananda and Nivedita, and composed poems and hymns. Concerning Sister Nivedita attitude toward Vivekananda, in 1927 Hammond recalled, "Everywhere she went she hailed him as the Prophet of the age.... she spoke of him and about him unceasingly.... There is no one like him, no one to equal him, no one at all!"³

In a casual conversation Vivekananda turned to her and said, "I have plans for the women of my country in which you, I think, could be of great help to me." She revealed, "I knew that I had heard a call which would

change my life. What these plans were, I did not know.” Nivedita recorded some of Vivekananda’s teachings given in London during 1895-96, which appear in the first two chapters of her book, *The Master as I Saw Him*.⁴

Vivekananda returned to India in January 1897. Nivedita remained active aiding Swami Abhedananda in his work in London. Learning of her sincerity, Vivekananda sent eight encouraging letters to Nivedita in 1897 with inspiring statements like, “Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India. What was wanted was not a man, but a woman--a real lioness--to work for the Indians, women specially.”⁵

Sister Nivedita in India 1898-99

After much deliberation, she sailed to India and arrived in Calcutta on January 28, 1898 with Swami Vivekananda waiting at the dock to receive her. On March 17, 1898, Sister Nivedita, Sara Bull (Dhira Mata), and Josephine MacLeod (Tantine) first met Holy Mother (1853-1920) in Calcutta, and they ate a meal together. Speaking in Bengali, Holy Mother greeted each of them affectionately as “my daughter.” In a letter of May 22, 1898 to Mrs. Nell Hammond in London, Nivedita described the meeting, “She has always been terribly orthodox, but all this melted away the instant she saw the first two Westerners—Mrs. Bull and Miss MacLeod, and she tasted food with them! Fruit is always presented to us immediately, and this was naturally offered to her, and she, to the surprise of everyone, accepted it. This gave us all a dignity and made my future work possible in a way nothing else could possibly have done.” Nivedita maintained a lifelong friendship with them, writing a large number of letters to Josephine and a fair number to Sara down to 1911.⁶

Holy Mother wrote a letter to Nivedita dated May 13, 1900. It was in Bengali and translated into English by Swami Saradananda. The first paragraph reads, “May this letter carry all blessings! My dear love to you, Baby Daughter Nivedita! I am so glad to learn that you have prayed to the Lord for my eternal peace. You are a manifestation of the ever-blissful Mother. I look at your photograph which is with me, every now and then. And it seems as if you are present with me. I long for the day and the year when you shall return. May the prayers you have uttered for me from the heart of your pure virgin soul be answered! I am well and happy. I always pray to the Lord to help you in your efforts, and keep you strong and

happy. I pray too for your quick return. May He fulfill your desires about the women's home in India, and may the would-be home fulfill its mission in teaching true *dharma* to all." The former Margaret Noble received initiation into brahmacharya from Vivekananda on March 25, 1898. She received the new name of Sister Nivedita, which means "the dedicated one."⁷

On May 11, she was part of a party headed by Swami Vivekananda that traveled from Howrah station to Almora in Northern India. It included four Western women, Nivedita, Sara Bull, Josephine MacLeod, and Marion Patterson the wife of the American Consul General appointed by U.S. President William McKinley. The party left Almora for Kashmir on June 11, returning to Calcutta on October 11 ending the five-month long journey. Her book *Notes on Some of the Wanderings* (1913) gives an insightful account of the Swamis conversations during that time. The fifth chapter in *The Master as I Saw Him* (1910) adds some descriptions of the trip.⁸

In the former book Nivedita mentions that Vivekananda spoke of Genghis Khan (1142-1227), the conqueror of Central Asia. "Yes, Napoleon (1769-1821) was cast in the same mould. And another Alexander [the Great, 356-323 B.C.]. Only those three, or perhaps one soul, manifesting itself in three different conquests." Here Vivekananda does not state, but only suggests the possibility of reincarnation in the case of these three military leaders. Both Alexander and Napoleon desired to conquer India, invading from the West side. Alexander's armies proceeded East beyond the Indus into the Punjab, but then his war-weary army revolted when they approached the Ganges River and that brought an end to the venture. During Napoleon's 1798 campaign in Egypt, he dreamt of an Indian conquest but things did not go well. In 1800, Napoleon signed a military and political alliance with the Russian Czar Paul I for the express purpose of conquering India with a joint army. The assassination of Paul in March 1801 brought an end to the venture.⁹

In the same book Nivedita points out that when Vivekananda was returning to India in January 1897, he was fifty miles from the Island of Crete and had a dream. An old and bearded man told him that at one time there was a Buddhist mission there which had an influence on early Christianity. The old man mentioned the word Therapeutae as being derived from sons of the Theras or Buddhist monks. He also pointed to a specific place on the Island stating, "The proofs are all here. Dig and you will see."¹⁰ Excavations have been performed on the small Island of Thera (35 square miles) 68 miles north of Crete, but nothing was identified as being Buddhistic. Crete is much larger at 3,219 square miles. A 3,500-

year Minoan town was discovered in Eastern Crete, so a 2,000-year-old Buddhist mission is a possibility.

Nivedita became a great admirer of Holy Mother and some of her intimate disciples. On November 13, the auspicious day of the Kali Puja, the Mother performed the ceremony for the opening of Nivedita's new school in Calcutta and offered her blessings. In the future when Holy Mother came to Calcutta, she would visit Nivedita's school and she in return visited the Mother's house. Around that time, Sara Bull arranged to have three pictures taken of Holy Mother by the English photographer Harrington. She was reluctant, but Sara told her, "I shall take the picture to America and worship it." One of the photos was of Mother and Nivedita.¹¹

Nivedita Returns to the West 1899-1901

On June 20, 1899, she accompanied Swamis Vivekananda and Turiyananda on a six-week voyage during his second visit to the West. When they stopped off at Colombo, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), they visited Marie Higgins' Buddhist Girls' School. Ms. Higgins discussed with Nivedita about the possibility of her starting a Hindu girl's school in Colombo, which Nivedita seriously thought of establishing. In some significant ways she resembled Sister Nivedita. Marie Musaeus Higgins (Sudu Amma, 1855-1926) a German born Theosophist woman moved to the United States and then answered a magazine advertisement posted by Colonel Olcott (1832-1907). She became the Principle of the school that began with only 12 students from 1893 to 1926. By 1908, they were training teachers as Head-Mistresses of Buddhist Sinhalese Girls' Schools. Higgins was held in high esteem due to her life long devotion to the cause. She compiled books on Buddhism that were part of the curriculum. Musaeus College that bears her name is a private girls' school in Colombo, now with over 5,000 girls from ages 3 to 18 managed by a Board of Trustees.¹²

They arrived in London on July 31 and Nivedita remained in England for over a month. She reached New York City on September 17, 1899 and Ridgely Manor three days later accompanied by Josephine MacLeod. In November, Sister Nivedita temporarily resided in Hull-House in Chicago, of which Jane Addams (1860-1935) and Ellen Gates Starr (1859-1940) were the cofounders. Vivekananda and Nivedita lectured at Addams residence in Chicago, and consequently his photograph is presently located on the wall of the Hull-House. In a letter Nivedita mentions her

association with Miss Jane Addams, who, she states, “is doing a great deal for me.” In 1906, Nivedita sent a letter to Addams who in return mailed her response to Sara Bull. Concerning Miss Starr, Nivedita wrote to Mrs. Belle Hale, “I love her so much. She is full of the true something, and a new face is often as stimulating to Swami as to others.” Ellen Starr, a physically small and somewhat frail woman, possessed eloquent manners and speech. For two decades she received newspaper attention for vigorously supporting labor picket lines. Jane Addams was a remarkable woman to say the least, in 1931 the first American woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, rated one of the top fifty sociologists of all time, a member of the illustrious National Women’s Hall of Fame, and The Hall of Fame for Great Americans at New York University, a supporter of fellow peacemaker Mahatma Gandhi who praised each others benevolent activities, a personal friend of Rabindranath Tagore, and an officer in the India Society of America.¹³

In April 1900, Nivedita stayed with Lydia Coonley Ward (1845-1924) in Chicago for nearly a week. She wished to donate one-hundred dollars to support Nivedita’s school in India. Remembering her association with Swami Vivekananda seven years earlier, Mrs. Ward described him as “the most interesting human being she ever met.” During her lifetime, Lydia Coonley Ward composed several popular and charming books of poetry, including a three-volume collection edition in 1921, and was President of the Chicago Women’s Club (1895-96).¹⁴

Nivedita’s school of thirty girls lacked a Permanent Fund or steady source of income. In order to procure funds for her proposed Widows’ and Girls’ Home and school in India, Nivedita formed The Ramakrishna Guild of Help in America. Mrs. Betty Leggett was the President. Its officers included Sara Bull, Josephine MacLeod, Sister Christine, Lewis Janes, and Colonel Thomas Higginson, and others. In August 1894, Colonel Thomas Higginson (1823-1911) the President of the Free Religious Association invited Vivekananda to speak before the group. Among other things during the Civil War, Colonel Higginson commanded the First South Carolina Volunteers, the first regiment of former slaves organized by the Union Army. From his wartime experience, he wrote *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1870), which is now a classic text in African-American history. Mrs. Leggett donated a contribution a thousand dollars to get the project underway.¹⁵

On the 18th of May Vivekananda wrote to Nivedita, “Enclosed find the letter of introduction to Mrs. Huntington. She can, if she likes, make your

school a fact with one stroke of her pen. May Mother make her do it!" Inspired by Vivekananda, Arabella Huntington met Nivedita in New York City and presented her with a gift of five thousand dollars (equivalent to \$145,000 in 2014) for her Girls' School in India. The immensely wealthy Arabella Huntington (1851-1924) of San Francisco was married to Collis Huntington (1821-1900) the President of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Her daughter-in-law Helen Huntington (d. 1950) later a Broadway playwright, greatly admired Vivekananda and wrote two glaring tributes to him in the *Brahmavadin* (May, November 1896). Arabella aided her second husband Henry Huntington (1850-1927) in creating the renowned Huntington library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, which, upon his death he deeded to the State of California. It is now a public center that draws many visitors each day.¹⁶

On July 6, 1900, Vivekananda's Will was witnessed in New York City. His estate was divided among five executors: Swamis Brahmananda and Saradananda, Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita), Sara Bull and Francis Leggett. Due to legal complications the Will was not admitted for probate until early 1906. Sister Nivedita lived in Calcutta at that time and empowered Sara Bull to act on her behalf.¹⁷

Nivedita listened to the Scottish sociologist, biologist, educator, and town-planner Sir Patrick Geddes (1854-1932) speak in New York in March 1900, and became interested in his unique ideas. She became his assistant in Paris, but the experiment did not work and she eventually quit. From mid-May to the end of June 1901 she lived with the Geddes family in Dundee, Scotland. At that time he invited her to speak at the Indian section of the Glasgow Exhibition. In November they met again and remained admirers and good friends throughout their life. From Geddes she learned some basic sociological concepts that Nivedita applied to her study of Indian society. In the introduction to her book *The Web of Indian Life* (1904) which she dedicated to Geddes, Nivedita acknowledged, "In sending this book out into the world, I desire to record my thanks ... to Prof. Patrick Geddes, who, by teaching me to understand a little of Europe, indirectly gave me a method by which to read my Indian experiences." Geddes later wrote, "I found no one who so rapidly and ardently seized upon the principle and delighted in every application of it as Sister Nivedita. Eager to master these evolutionary methods, and to apply them to her own studies, to Indian problems therefore above all, she settled above our home into an attic cell, which suited at once her love of wide and lofty outlooks and her ascetic care of material simplicity; and

there she worked, for strenuous weeks.... For my part, I must no less recognize how her keener vision and more sympathetic and spiritual insight carried her discernment of the rich and varied embroidery of the Indian web far beyond that simple texture of the underlying canvas, of the material conditions of life, which it was my privilege at the outset of our many conversations to help her to lay hold upon.”¹⁸

Vivekananda and Geddes had formerly met in Chicago. They became well acquainted in August 1900, and each morning Vivekananda would walk and converse with Geddes on their way to the Paris Exposition. In September, they came together again at a party thrown by the Leggett’s in Paris. According to Geddes’ biographer Philip Boardman, as a result of his encounter with Vivekananda, “The eastern discipline of body and mind made such a lasting impression on both Anna (Geddes’ wife) and Patrick that they later handed on to their young children the simple Raja Yoga exercises for control of the inner nature.” These experiences deepened Geddes’ interest in the land and soul of India. Among other things, Geddes wrote a Preface to the French translation of Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga* (1910). In 1914, he undertook a diagnosis-and-treatment survey of fifty Indian urban areas. He concluded that the traditional strategy of British planners in slum clearance disrupted community neighborhood life and destroyed indigenous customs. The *Prabuddha Bharata* (May 1917) praised Geddes’ efforts stating, “He has distinguished himself not only by his expert knowledge in town-planning, but also by his profound learning in all subjects connected with the betterment of human life on earth, and his selfless devotion to that cause.” He was the first Professor of Sociology and Civics at the University of Bombay (1919-24). In cooperation with his friend Rabindranath Tagore, he worked on plans for an international university in India. Geddes authored *The Life and Work of Sir Jagadis C. Bose* (1920), the famous physicist, and also made contact with Mahatma Gandhi and Annie Besant.¹⁹

Swami Vivekananda left for Paris in August 1900, where he spoke at the Paris Congress of the History of Religions. He was introduced to the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), as was Sister Nivedita. She held long discussions with him at that time and again in London in 1908. Nivedita liked his emphasis on mutual aid and peaceful methods to bring about political-social change. After escaping from Russia for his opposition to the czarist government, Kropotkin was expelled from Switzerland, jailed in France, and finally settled in England in 1886. For Kropotkin the “fittest” in the phrase “survival of the fittest” are those

who replaced struggle with co-operation resulting in the development of intellectual and moral faculties that enhance human survival.²⁰

Jamsetji Tata (1839-1904) offered a gift 200,000 pounds to promote higher education in India desiring to obtain advice on the subject from learned people. So Nivedita mailed out a “statement of opinion” that she wanted to be signed, stating among other things that the project would be “guided by the best-educated natives as distinguished from European opinion.” One respondent was the famous Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James (1842-1910). He signed her statement and on January 3, 1901, dispatched a letter to Nivedita (as Miss Noble) stating on this issue he favored Native education over the Anglo-Saxon. He also referred to her and Mrs. Bull, implying that he was with them in Paris back in August 1900. In 1901, Nivedita and Sara Bull again met William James, this time on a train from London to Edinburgh. In a letter of May 15, James described Sister Nivedita as possessing, “an extraordinary fine character and mind,” to be “a most deliberate and balanced person,” “who has Hinduized herself (converted by Vivekananda to his philosophy) and now lives for the Hindu people.”²¹

Nivedita in India 1902-07

Accompanied by Sara Bull and R. C. Dutt, Nivedita reached Madras on February 3, 1902. There attending a public celebration before a large audience she gave a forceful speech advocating that in social matters Indians should decide what kind of society they desire and not be under foreign domination, while praising the lofty character of Indian women. In order to properly instruct her students at Nivedita Girls’ School, she learned the Bengali language. German born Miss Christine Greenstidel (Sister Christine, 1866-1930) arrived from the United States to be a manager and teacher at the school, allowing Nivedita more opportunity to write and lecture. Nivedita wrote, “It was to Sister Christine and her faithfulness that the school owes its success up to the present.”²²

Sister Nivedita wrote a very friendly letter to Spence Burton (1881-1966) who was about to become an Anglican monastic member of the Society of St. John the Evangelist. She invited him to India and addressed him as “your faithful friend.” He later became the first American to be consecrated a Bishop in the Church of England at Haiti and the Dominican Republic (1939-42) and then at Nassau (1942-62).²³

In 1902, Nivedita first visited the Government School of Art, Calcutta,

a group of Indian pupils under the direction of the British Principle E(rnest) B(infield) Havel (1861-1934) from 1896 to 1905. They met again in England after she returned in 1907. The two held long discussions and she explained to Havel the basic principles of Indian ascetics and philosophy of art. Their goal along with Abanindranath Tagore and Ananda Coomaraswamy was to revitalize Indian art rather than copy Western methods, which later led to the foundation of the Bengal School of Art. Havel sought to propagate a truer picture in the West of Indian cultural heritage and to discourage young Indians from appreciating the immoral and uninspiring aspects of Western art. Havel authored thirteen books on Indian art and history. Nivedita became the art critic for the Calcutta based *Modern Review* from its beginning in 1907. In time, Sister Nivedita was introduced by the artist Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) to Sir John Woodroffe (1865-1936) at a party of the Art Society held at Justice Homewood's house. Woodroffe gave full support to Abanindranath's School of Art.²⁴ Woodroffe authored forty-five articles in the *Prabuddha Bharata* and *Vedanta Kesari* (1915-29), was the President of the Vivekananda Society of Calcutta (1917-18), initiated by Shivkali Bhattacharya was the leading Western authority on Tantra and Kundalini yoga (sometimes writing under the pseudonym Arthur Avalon), served as the Chief Justice of Bengal's High Court (after 1915), and a Reader in Indian law at Oxford University (1923-30).²⁵

During the 1902-07 period, Samuel Kerkham Ratcliffe (1868-1958), a journalist and lecturer, was the assistant and then the acting editor of the *Statesman*, the foremost English newspaper in Calcutta. He edited the *Sociological Review* during the period 1910-17, and, in 1915, received appointment to be a Lecturer at the South Place Ethical Society in London, later writing a history of that organization. A prolific lecturer in India and England, he favored the cause of Indian self-government. When he lived in Calcutta, Ratcliffe held great admiration for the work Sister Nivedita was doing, and they met again in England. From her he gained a far better understanding of the Indian culture and psyche. Nivedita wrote a number of letters to him and his wife from September 25, 1902 down to the time of her passing. In the *Sociological Review* of 1913, he composed a two-page tribute of Swami Vivekananda.²⁶

Ratcliffe wrote a twenty-four page "In Memoriam" concerning Nivedita found in the Preface of *Studies From an Eastern Home* (1913) where he stated in part:

She was then entirely accepted by her Hindu neighbours. All their doors were open to her. In the bazaars and lanes and by the riverside everybody knew her, and she would be saluted as she passed with an affectionate reverence which was beautiful and touching to see.... Her house was a wonderful rendezvous. Not often did one meet a Western visitor, save at those times when an English or American friend would be making a stay in Calcutta; but nowhere else, so far as my experience went, was there an opportunity of making acquaintance with so many interesting types of the Indian world. There would come members of Council and leaders in the public affairs of Bengal; Indian artists, men of letters, men of science; orators, teachers, journalists, students; frequently a travelled member of the Order of Ramakrishna, occasionally a wandering scholar, not seldom a public man or leader of religion from a far province. The experience was beyond expression delightful, and its influence, you knew, was to be felt along many lines....

I heard her speak: to groups of students, or in the Calcutta Town Hall before a great audience, on her one absorbing theme--the religion of Nationalism; to English gatherings in hall or church or drawing-room. And I have thought, and still think, that her gift of speech was something which, when fully exercised, I have never known surpassed--so fine and sure was it in form, so deeply impassioned, of such flashing and undaunted sincerity.... Her dominant notes were clarity and sincerity and an incomparable vitality. She was, of all the men and women one has known, the most vividly alive.... At all times she toiled with an absolute concentration; her inner life was intense, austere, and deeply controlled. Yet never was anyone more wholly and exquisitely human, more lovely and spontaneous in the sharing of daily services and joys....

And those to whom she gave the ennobling gift of her friendship knew her as the most perfect of comrades, while they hold the memory of that gift as this world's highest benediction. They think of her years of sustained and intense endeavour, of her open-eyed and impassioned search for truth, of the courage that never quailed, the noble compassionate heart; they think of her tending the victims of famine and plague, or ministering day by day among the humble folk with whom her lot was cast: putting heart into the helpless and defeated, showing to the young and perplexed the star of a glowing faith and purpose, royally spending all the powers of a rich intelligence and an overflowing humanity for all who called upon her in their need. And some among them count it an honour beyond all price that they were permitted to

share, in however imperfect a measure, the mind and confidence of this radiant child of God.²⁷

Scottish born A(ndrew) J(ames) Fraser Blair (1872-1935) is listed as the editor of the *Englishman* newspaper (1898-1906), then the editor and managing director of *The Empire Commerce* and *The Empire Gazette*, and then the assistant editor of the *Statesman*, all published in Calcutta. As a book writer he authored three novels under the pen name Hamish Blair. He first came face to face with Nivedita on Christmas day 1902 in Calcutta as a guest of Mr. and Mrs. Ratcliffe. A couple of years later he heard her lecture at the in the Town Hall of Calcutta. After her passing Blair described Nivedita in the *Empire*, “A vehement champion of the East in all its aspects against the West.... A tall, robust woman in the very prime of life. Her face in repose was almost plain. The cheekbones were high and the jaws were square. The face at the first glance expressed energy and determination, but you would hardly have looked at it again but for the forehead and the eyes. The eyes were a calm, deep blue, and literally lit up the whole countenance. The forehead was broad rather than high, and was surmounted by a semi-Indian Sari, fastened to the abundant brown hair. In animation the face and expression were transfigured, in sympathy with the rich, musical voice.... To be admitted to her friendship was to establish a claim upon an inexhaustible gold mine. She gave herself without reserve. She lived for her friends and her work. For them she would pour out all her wondrous eloquence, and her vast and curious knowledge, she would travel any distance and would incur any labour and anxiety. Whatever she did, she did with all her might, and she never did anything for herself.... No kinder-hearted woman ever breathed. Her influence over Young Bengal was greater than most people have ever suspected.... To those who loved her it is difficult to realise that this vivid, brave, and gifted personality has vanished from our sphere.”²⁸

At the Sister Nivedita Memorial Meeting at Calcutta on March 23, 1912, Blair added, “We are gathered to do honour to the memory of one of the noblest women God ever made—a woman who gave up a most precious life in India and for India—a woman who by her record of courage, self-sacrifice and love, no less than by her radiant personality and her intellectual power, broke down for us the barriers of time and space, and took us back to the spacious days of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.... Her great book *The Web of Indian Life* represents the highest point yet reached by any Western writer in the study and interpretation of the East.

If there were time one might go on for hours expatiating upon the wondrous diversity of her gifts—her eloquence, the acuteness of her perceptions, the firmness of her intellectual grasp, the dazzling purity of her mind, the whole-souled devotion which she was ever ready to pour out upon the cause and the friends, she had made her own.”²⁹

Nivedita contributed to the London based *Review of Reviews* founded and edited by William T. Stead. He became a personal friend and invited her to become his Indian correspondent in London. Because of her commitment to India she could not accept his offer. He sent a letter to her on January 1, 1903 and she to him on September 20, 1904. William T. Stead (1849-1912) who died on the Titanic was one of the most influential journalists of his day. He supported world peace, child welfare, social reform legislation, and was an ardent spiritualist.³⁰

As a patriot Nivedita actively supported the Indian nationalist movement in many ways, such as going on a lecture tour throughout India to rouse the national consciousness of the people. She established friendship with Indian political and social leaders like Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, G. K. Gokhale, and others; and through her writings she authored a number of books that are still well read. While in India she made some contact with prominent Westerners including Annie Besant around the beginning of 1906. She held a cordial relationship with Annie Besant greatly approving of her support for the Indian political and social cause, but had little if any interest in Theosophy.³¹ In an April 11, 1906 letter to Josephine MacLeod, Nivedita made her famous prophecy, “You see, when we who understood Vivekananda and remembered him are dead, there will come a long period of obscurity and silence, for the work that he did. It will seem to be forgotten, until, suddenly, in 150 or 200 years, it will be found to have transformed the West.”³²

During the winter of 1907, Swami Abhedananda sent a letter to William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925) mentioning among other things, “Our friend Sister Nivedita spoke to me about your visit to her girls’ school in Calcutta.” She had “a particularly joyous breakfast” with Bryan and his wife at the Bagh Bazaar. Bryan a three-time United States Presidential candidate and Secretary of State under Woodrow Wilson, in 1899 wrote an article criticizing “British Rule in India.” In 1906, he decided to go to India and check things out for himself. At Allahabad he made an earnest appeal for free education for all classes of Indians. Upon his return to the United States, Bryan published the pamphlet “British Rule in India” (1906)

favoring Indian independence.³³

Back to the West 1907-09

On September 6, 1907, Nivedita returned to England where she would meet with her old friends, and make new contacts among the intellectual class. The English cleric, Thomas Kelly Cheyne (1841-1915) was the Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Christian Scripture at Oxford University between 1885 and 1908. Being the initiator of the “higher criticism” of the *Bible* theological movement in England, he published over twenty books dealing with his interpretation of the *Biblical Old Testament*. T. K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland Black edited the esteemed four volume, 2800-plus-page *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (1899-1903). Sister Nivedita sent twenty-two letters to her good friend T. K. Cheyne, from November 25, 1907 up until the time of her passing away in 1911. During her visit to England in 1908 and in 1911, she conversed with Cheyne and her other friends. He later wrote of her, “The beautiful character of Sister Nivedita is well known to her friends, but needs to be brought before outsiders, especially those of the younger generation. She was like a star, if we should not rather say, like a sun, and it would be sad if this sun should altogether set.”

In January 1911, in the *Hibbert Journal*, T. K. Cheyne came out with a review of Nivedita’s work on Vivekananda, *The Master as I Saw Him* (1910). This article might have been the first attempt by a Western scholar to interpret and explain the teachings of Vivekananda.³⁴

In the *Modern Review*, Calcutta (February 1912) T. K. Cheyne disclosed, “It was *The Web of Indian Life* which brought us spiritually together. The book fascinated me. I had never before seen India described from the inside. I wrote to her as warmly as I felt, at the same time drawing her attention to the criticisms which some dryasdust professor had brought against her views of history. She replied in glowing terms, at the same time answering my inquiry as to the best sources of information for Hindu religion in its noblest form. She pointed me to the *Bhagavad Gita* and the lectures of the Swami Vivekananda. This produced a revolution in my view of the capacity of Hindu religion for adapting itself progressively to the spiritual needs of Indians, and for contributing elements of enormous value to the purification, enrichment, and reinterpretation of Christianity.... Sister Nivedita was well aware that I looked for help to the Aryan East, and especially to her and her Master, and this may have been the chief reason why she paid me in the dazzling coin of affection,

reverence, and gratitude for the sympathy which I delighted to express to her.”³⁵

During this time Nivedita made the acquaintance of Sir Henry John Stedman Cotton (1845-1915), who had been the Chief Commissioner of Assam (1896-1902) and a friend of Vivekananda. He served as President of the Indian National Congress (1904) since he favored Indian Home Rule, and later was a Liberal party member of the British Parliament (1906-10).³⁶ Her friends in England also included: V. H. Rutherford later the author of *Commonwealth or Empire?* (1917) and *Modern India* (1927); Kier Hardie (1856-1915) a Scottish socialist, the first Labour member of the British Parliament, and a campaigner for Self-Rule for India; Swift MacNeill (1849-1926) an Irish Protestant Nationalist who served in the House of Commons (1887-1918) and a Professor of Constitutional and Criminal Law at the King’s Inns, Dublin, Ireland; and a young William Redmond (1886-1932) an Irish nationalist politician who was a member of the House of Commons.³⁷

Nivedita also conversed with an old friend Henry Nevinson (1856-1941). In the 1880s, Nevinson became a socialist and befriended Peter Kropotkin and Edward Carpenter. He was a British newspaper war correspondent during the Greco-Turkish War (1897), Spanish-American War (1898), Second Boer War (1899-1902), Russian revolution (1905), and World War I being wounded at Gallipoli. A campaigning journalist and political commentator he uncovered and exposed the practice of extremely harsh slavery by Europeans in Angola, West Africa (1904-05). He was a cofounder of the Men’s League for Women’s Suffrage (1907). During 1907 Nevinson spent four months traveling throughout India to “discover the causes of the present discontent and to report, without prejudice, the opinion of leading Indians as well as officials” following the Partition of Bengal in 1905. He was impressed by Tilak, Gokhale, and R. Tagore; and described Sri Aurobindo in glowing terms.³⁸

Henry Nevinson wrote of Nivedita, “There was, indeed, something flame-like about her, and not only her language but her whole vital personality often reminded me of fire.... But of all nobly sympathetic natures she was among the finest. She identified herself with the Indians among whom she lived as barely half a dozen men or women from these islands have done before. I do not mean merely by her adoption of Hindu symbolism for thought, nor by her purified form of Hindu worship.... But her readiness to accept and interpret what was clearest and highest in Hindu thought, her capacity not merely for understanding Indian life, but

for discovering and so intensifying the ideal in its customs, and the indignant revolt kindled in her by the insolence, degradation, and maiming restriction to which every subject race is necessarily exposed--from such imaginative sympathy, I think, arose the extraordinary power which she exercised over the more thoughtful and active of the Indian patriots around her.... Her greatest book, *The Web of Indian Life*, reveals the ideal of the Indian spirit with great beauty, and in it there is a passage which seems to illustrate the contrast between the ordinary Anglo-Indian woman's aspect of India and her own."³⁹

Sister Nivedita decided to return to the United States arriving in Boston on October 5, 1908. She took up residence with Sara Bull and met old acquaintances like Sarah Farmer, Emma Thursby, and Madam Calve. That year Frank J. Alexander (d. 1917) had an interview with Sister Nivedita in 1908, at Grand Central Station in New York City. They conversed for about three quarters of an hour and Frank's reaction was, "During my journalistic experience of five or six years, during which time I have interviewed all types of people from United States Senators to interesting hod-carriers and from famous artists to turbulent leaders of labour, I have never met a personality which impressed me in less than an hour's time with being possessed of such a synthetic mind and cyclonic personal energy." Inspired by the writing of Vivekananda, Alexander set sail for India and arrived at the Belur Math in 1911. He offered an invaluable service in bringing out the four-volume, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples* (1912-18), but since it was a joint venture the extent of his contribution is not known. Later editions of this work proved to be an invaluable source for Marie Louise Burke and others as a foundation for their historical research. In addition, between 1911 and 1913, Frank authored at least twenty-seven articles for the *Prabuddha Bharata*.⁴⁰

Reverend Jabez Sunderland (1842-1936) became acquainted with Sister Nivedita during her visit to the United States. He came to India in 1895-96 and again in 1913-14, being the first American to speak at a meeting of the Indian National Congress in Poona. For decades Sunderland was the leading American spokesman supporting the freedom of India. His 529-page *India in Bondage, Her Right to Freedom and a Place among Nations* (1928), was referred to by the patriots as the "Bible of Indian Struggle for Freedom."⁴¹

Nivedita left America for England in January 1909 to be with her mother during her last days.

Nivedita's Final Two Years 1909-11

Nivedita returned to India reaching Bombay on July 16, 1909. Henry Nevinson presented Ramsay MacDonald (1866-1937) with a letter of introduction for Nivedita when he came to Calcutta in November 1909. After meeting her on more than one occasion, he was impressed with her intelligence and personality when she explained to him about Indian ideals and philosophy.⁴² At a later date MacDonald was Great Britain's first Labor Party Prime Minister (1929-35).

Lady Minto was the wife of the Earl of Minto (1845-1914), the Viceroy and Governor-General of India (1905-10). On March 2, 1910, the day before Lady Minto held a discussion with Swami Shivananda at the Belur Math, she paid a visit to Sister Nivedita and her girls' school. Lady Minto commented, "I told her I was the Viceroy's wife, which surprised her greatly. She has a charming face, with a very intelligent expression, and we made friends." A few days later, at Nivedita's request, Lady Minto accompanied her to the Dakshineswar Temple, where Sri Ramakrishna had lived for many years. She toured the grounds and was taken to the Master's bedroom. Before leaving Lady Minto advised Nivedita to continue writing, and invited her to tea privately at the Government House on March 18. The following year after Nivedita's sudden passing away, Lady Minto wrote a letter of consolation to Sister Christine, saying, "It is with very real regret that I read in the newspapers of the sad loss that has been sustained in the death of Sister Nivedita. I cannot resist sending you a few lines of very deep sympathy, and not only for yourself but for all the Indian community for whom she was working. Sister Nivedita had a wonderful personality, and as I look back to the few meetings I had with her with pleasure, and with real admiration for her enthusiasm and single-minded desire to assist others. The world is the poorer for her loss, and for you her constant companion and helper the blank she leaves must be irreparable."⁴³

Sara Bull's health was failing and she requested Nivedita to be at her bedside. So Nivedita returned to America reaching Cambridge in Boston on November 15, 1910. Sara passed away on January 18, 1911 and in her will she bequeath \$30,000 (equivalent to \$770,000 in 2015) to Sister Nivedita.⁴⁴

The daughter of the famous American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-82), Miss Alice Mary Longfellow (1850-1928) corresponded with Nivedita. They first met in 1900 at the Free Religious

Association meetings in Boston where Nivedita delivered a lecture. After Sara Bull's passing in January 1911, Nivedita went to stay with Alice Longfellow in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When Nivedita passed away, she contributed a eulogy to the *Boston Evening Transcript* of June 29, 1911 praising her. She wrote in part, "Her bright, intelligent face, her earnest manner and attractive personality, enhanced by the simple white habit of her order, made a strong impression on the audience." In a 1911 letter written to Josephine MacLeod, Miss Longfellow indicated, "I love to think of Margot's [Nivedita's] alert, alive face, and the way she grappled with conversation. It made all of the rest of us seem only half alive—and now she must be more alive than then." Alice was one of the founders of Radcliffe College, where on May 8, 1894 Vivekananda spoke on "Hinduism." At Radcliffe, she held the position of manager, treasurer, and a member of the Executive Committee.⁴⁵

On April 7, 1911, Nivedita was back in India and soon spoke to Holy Mother. In the fall, Nivedita had an attack of blood dysentery and passed away on October 13. At the end, Nivedita chanted from the *Upanishads*, "Lead us from the unreal to the Real. Lead us from darkness to light. Lead us from death to Immortality," and breathed her last.⁴⁶

Nivedita's funeral procession was the largest that Darjeeling ever witnessed. Her cremation ceremony was attended by an Anglo-Indian lady, Miss Mary Henrietta Pigot (b. 1837). She had previously witnessed Sri Ramakrishna in samadhi, while on a steam launch up the river to Dakshineswar on February 23, 1882. In 1870, Miss Pigot became the lady Superintendent of the Female Mission of the Scottish Ladies' Association in Calcutta. It was under the control of the Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, with headquarters in Edinburgh. After 1884, she was the headmistress of Victoria College, a girls' school.⁴⁷

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