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## Bio-Bibliography: William Clark Gordon (1865-1936)

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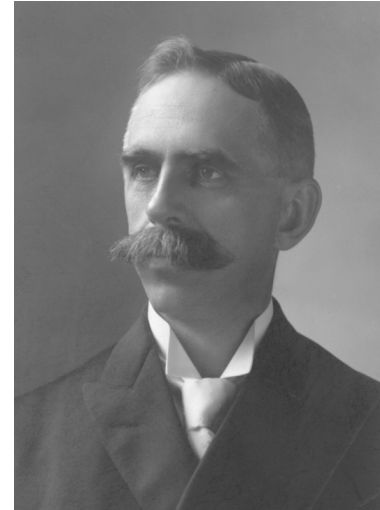
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## Bio-Bibliography: William Clark Gordon (1865-1936) <sup>1</sup>

Michael R. Hill

**W**ILLIAM CLARK GORDON was a clergyman and an early theorist of the relationships between literature and sociology. He earned a Ph.D. in the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1899 where he majored — within the School's own Department of Sociology — in social institutions. As such, he completed his doctorate during the first full decade of Chicago's pioneering sociological project — a fact noted but misattributed by Robert E. L. Faris (1967) to work in the University's Department of Sociology in the Graduate School of Arts and Literature (Hill 2005). As a practicing clergyman, Gordon's professional attentions focused on pastoral duties for many years, becoming a university professor only in later life. Although sociologically trained, there is no evidence that he ever taught a formal sociology course<sup>2</sup> or participated in the activities of the American Sociological Society.

William Clark Gordon was born in Ware, Massachusetts on February 14, 1865. He was the son of Sarah Jane Thompson and William Henry Gordon, a Methodist minister. The younger Gordon, after attending Wilbraham Academy and Wesleyan University (1884-1887), transferred to Yale University where he earned the B.A. degree in 1888. He was ordained in Worcester, Massachusetts, on April 14, 1889. Gordon subsequently



**William C. Gordon**  
*(Courtesy of United Church of Christ, 2<sup>nd</sup> Congregational, Westfield, Massachusetts).*

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<sup>1</sup> **SOCIOLOGICAL ORIGINS**, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Spring 2006): 115-120. All rights reserved. Please visit our free website ([www.sociological-origins.com](http://www.sociological-origins.com)) for additional information and other features. This short essay relies on the help of a remarkably large number of responsive and generous people. For several sources, much information and the portrait photograph included in this essay, I am especially indebted to Richard H. Baldwin (Historian, United Church of Christ, 2<sup>nd</sup> Congregational, Westfield, Massachusetts). Significant help was also provided by Jean Currie Church (Chief Librarian, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University), Julia Gardner (Reference/Instruction Librarian, Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago Library), Diane E. Kaplan (Head of Public Services, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library), Linda Lyles (The Divinity School, University of Chicago), Jennifer Smith (Archives Assistant, Mt. Holyoke College Archives), and the reference librarians of the Public Library, Michigan City, Indiana.

<sup>2</sup> He apparently taught a course in the cognate discipline of psychology, however, at Howard University during his subsequent academic appointment as Professor of Homiletics from 1922-1934.

earned the B.D. from Yale Divinity School in 1891. His first Congregational pastorate was in Anderson, Indiana, from 1891 to 1893. Gordon next filled the pulpit of the First Congregational Church of Michigan City, Indiana, from 1893-1898, during which time his sociological interests took root.

When Gordon arrived in Michigan City in August 1893, he was accompanied by his aging parents. Will's father was a former Methodist minister who had served in the New England conference for several decades, and who had wanted his son to follow in his footsteps.<sup>3</sup> As one account put it:

Upon this son [the senior] Rev. Mr. Gordon placed much hopes to succeed him in his ministrations of the gospel according to the Methodist Episcopal form, but when the son decided that his work could be best done through the medium of the Congregational church, the aged clergyman gave a hearty amen.<sup>4</sup>

The Methodist mantle was apparently hard to shake. A local paper quipped, after the younger Gordon delivered his first sermon in Michigan City: "We congratulate the Congregationalists on their selection of a pastor, and if his services are especially edifying, perhaps it can be credited to the fervor of early Methodistic training."<sup>5</sup>

Gordon and his parents moved to the greater Chicago region at an invigorating and intellectually exciting time. The University of Chicago had recently opened its doors in 1892, the World's Columbian Exposition (May 1 – October 30, 1893) was in full swing, and the Parliament of World Religions met in Chicago from September 11-27, 1893. When Will elected to pursue advanced graduate studies, it was a relatively short distance from Michigan City to the University of Chicago campus via the railroad. The convenient South Shore line of today was then several years in the future, but the Michigan Central, for example, ran ten trains a day between Michigan City and Chicago.<sup>6</sup>

Gordon lost little time entering the University of Chicago, enrolling as a fully accredited graduate student in the Departments of Social Science and English Literature in the Graduate School of Arts and Literature. His studies began winter quarter in January 1894 where he is recorded as a student in Charles Henderson's Seminar on Social Organizations for

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<sup>3</sup> The senior Gordon was born on June 10, 1810, in Windham, New Hampshire, and died unexpectedly on or about October 29, 1895, in Worcester, Massachusetts, while visiting his daughter. For an obituary and tribute, see *The Michigan City [Indiana] News*, October 30, 1895, pp. 1 and 8. The senior Rev. Gordon was twice married; his second wife, Sarah, was born circa 1826. According to the 1870 Census, the younger Gordon had at least one brother (Frank W.) and one sister (Carrie — possibly the Mrs. Leland of Worcester, Massachusetts, referenced in the senior Gordon's obituary notices).

<sup>4</sup> *Michigan City [Indiana] News*, October 30, 1895, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Michigan City, Indiana, *Evening News*, August 12, 1893, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Display advertisement, Michigan City, Indiana, *Evening News*, July 5, 1897.

Promoting Social Welfare. The origins of Gordon's interest in matters sociological remain unknown, but he did attend Yale during the era of William Graham Sumner.<sup>7</sup> As a commuter student, Gordon continued his Chicago studies in the Department of Social Science during the spring quarter 1894.

Later that year, Will Gordon's personal life added new dimensions with his marriage to Edith Rebecca Miller on November 1, 1894. Edith, born January 29, 1868, was the daughter of James and Julia (Lincoln) Miller, of Massachusetts. After four years of study, she graduated from Mt. Holyoke College in 1890. Edith notes trying her hand at grammar school teaching, as an assistant teacher in North Brookfield, Massachusetts, during 1893-1894. With her marriage, Edith became interested in her husband's new intellectual pursuits and joined him as a fellow student, enrolling in graduate-level sociology and literature courses at the University of Chicago during the summers, from 1895 to 1899, and full-time during the year 1898-1899. In later describing her occupational career, she reported that she had "married a Congregational minister" and was engaged in "every phase of social, literary, and religious work of the church from 1894-1922 inclusive."<sup>8</sup>



**First Congregational Church**

*(The frame structure is no longer extant. Photo from files in the Michigan City Public Library).*

The practical convergence of matters sociological and religious became evident in Gordon's ministry, such that by the spring of 1898, for example, Charles F. Weller, the district superintendent of associated charities in Chicago, was an invited speaker, at the Michigan City church, on the topic of "Social Service in Chicago."<sup>9</sup> Church announcements in local newspapers indicate that the Rev. Gordon's pastoral duties in Michigan City ended at mid year, 1898.

Together, Will and Edith moved to Chicago and commenced full-time graduate study for the 1898-1899 academic year. Rather than continue in the Graduate School of Arts and Literature, both husband and wife enrolled in the Divinity School where Charles Richmond

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<sup>7</sup> Sumner, an ordained Episcopal minister who began teaching political economy and social science courses at Yale in 1872, rose to the presidency of the American Sociological Society in 1908.

<sup>8</sup> RG 27.1 Alumnae Biographical Files (LD 7096.6), Class of 1890, Edith Miller, Mt. Holyoke College Archives.

<sup>9</sup> "Church Affairs," *Michigan City Evening News*, April 30, 1898, p. 2, cols. 1-2.

Henderson was Professor and Head of the School's own Department of Sociology. The School was then located in the newly constructed Haskell Hall, where President William Rainey Harper presided over the School as well as the University as a whole. The intellectual climate of the School is indicated by the courses Henderson offered during the year: The Family; The Labor Movement; Amelioration of Rural Life; Modern Cities; Social Institutions of Organized Christianity; Contemporary Charities; Social Treatment of Crime; and Philanthropy — and all were cross-listed in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology under the auspices of the Graduate School.<sup>10</sup> A few steps across the quadrangle, the Department of Sociology and Anthropology offered an even wider array of sociology courses. Henderson held appointments in both departments, and his sociological colleagues in the Graduate School included: Albion W. Small, Marion Talbot, Charles Zueblin, William I. Thomas, and George E. Vincent.<sup>11</sup> Graduate student sociology Fellows in residence during 1898-99 included Charles A. Ellwood and Amy Hewes.<sup>12</sup> Institutionally, ties between the departments were close. Students in the Divinity School were formally encouraged to take advantage of courses offered in the Graduate School: "All courses in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology are open to Divinity students" and "It is especially urged that they take Courses 71, 72, or 73, even if this requires a longer residence to accomplish."<sup>13</sup> Gordon completed the Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1899, writing a dissertation on *The Social Ideals of Alfred Tennyson as Related to His Time* — and it became his one known scholarly publication. As icing on his academic cake, Gordon simultaneously earned an M.A. degree by examination from Yale in 1899.

Completed in 1899, *The Social Ideals of Alfred Tennyson* was formally published in 1906 by the University of Chicago Press.<sup>14</sup> The Press distributed some fifty copies of the work

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<sup>10</sup> University of Chicago, *Annual Register*, July 1897 - July 1898, pp. 210-211; 349-350

<sup>11</sup> For comparative profiles of Henderson, Small, Zueblin, Thomas, and Vincent, see Mary Jo Deegan, *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892-1918* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1988, pp. 71-104; 121-132; 177-186; 196-208). For a sketch of Talbot, see M.J. Deegan, "Marion Talbot," in *Women in Sociology*, edited by M.J. Deegan (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991, pp. 391-399).

<sup>12</sup> For a sketch on Ellwood, see Mary Cramblitt, "Ellwood, Charles A." in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, (Vol. 5), edited by David L. Sills (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1968, pp. 31-33). For Hewes, see M.J. Deegan, "Amy Hewes," in *Women in Sociology*, edited by M.J. Deegan (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991, pp. 164-171).

<sup>13</sup> University of Chicago, *Annual Register*, July 1897 - July 1898, p. 349. Courses 71, 72, and 73 were, respectively: An Introduction to the Study of Society; An Introduction to Sociology; and The Theory of the Social Mind.

<sup>14</sup> A complete digital copy of *The Social Ideals of Alfred Tennyson as Related to His Time* is included on the CD Supplement to this issue of **SOCIOLOGICAL ORIGINS**.

to journals and newspapers for review, resulting in at least twenty published critiques.<sup>15</sup> It is instructive to note that Gordon, in his preface to *The Social Ideals of Alfred Tennyson as Related to His Time*, took pride in relating that the work had been originally written as a doctoral dissertation. This was as a strategic error, as virtually every negative critic jumped on the fact. By announcing the work as a graduate dissertation, Gordon predisposed several reviewers to anticipate an abstract, pedantic manuscript and they used the “dissertation” label to explain Gordon’s apparent (to them) lack of “charm” and literary style. In fact, Gordon’s dissertation exemplifies the difficulty of writing for cross-disciplinary audiences: sociologists, on the one hand, and literary critics, on the other.

Upon completion of his Chicago doctorate, Gordon accepted the invitation of the Second Congregational Church in Westfield, Massachusetts (now The United Church of Christ, Second Congregational), serving from 1899 to 1908. He subsequently resigned to “accept the call to the church in Auburndale, Mass., where there seems to be a needed work to be done, and where I shall be able to take certain graduate studies at Harvard University which I greatly desire to pursue.” Gordon served the Auburndale congregation from 1908 to 1917, availing himself of summer courses at Harvard.

During World War I, Gordon served as YMCA secretary in France from November 1917 to March 1919. After returning to the U.S., he continued with the YMCA in Boston until June, 1919, and then worked as a field agent for the Pilgrim Memorial Fund until 1920, when he took a pulpit of the East Congregational Church in his birthplace of Ware, Massachusetts, serving from 1920 to 1922.

During the last segment of his career, Gordon entered the classroom as Professor of Homiletics in the Theological Department at Howard University, serving from 1922 to 1934 (Dyson 1941: 215) where he also taught at least one course on psychology.

William Clark Gordon died in Peekskill, New York, on June 5, 1936, while in route to his summer home in Brookfield, Massachusetts. Edith Gordon, his wife, later died on October 26, 1956, in Washington, DC. They had no children.

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<sup>15</sup> “Gordon, William Clark,” Box 209, Folder 1, University of Chicago Press Records, Special Collections Research Center, the University of Chicago Library. The texts of these reviews are appended to the digital copy of *The Social Ideals of Alfred Tennyson as Related to His Time* included on the CD Supplement to this issue of **SOCIOLOGICAL ORIGINS**.

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<sup>16</sup> For the complete texts of several published reviews of Gordon's major work on Tennyson, see the Appendix to the digital copy of *The Social Ideals of Alfred Tennyson as Related to His Time* included on the CD Supplement to this issue of **SOCIOLOGICAL ORIGINS**.