

“THE MOUTH PIECE OF ROSSETTI”: DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI’S LITERARY AFTERLIFE AND THEODORE WATTS-DUNTON’S *AYLWIN* (1898)

Published in 1898 when Watts-Dunton was in his sixty-sixth year and was “bewildered and staggered” by its overwhelming success, *Aylwin* was in its twenty-sixth edition and had sold over one hundred thousand copies by the time of its author’s death in 1914. Despite its contemporary popularity and resulting critical predictions that *Aylwin* was “sure to take a high and permanent place in our literature”, the novel has received virtually no attention since the early twentieth century. This paper traces the publication and reception history of a forgotten Victorian literary sensation to suggest that it has been historically obscured by the very phenomenon which had ensured, at least in part, its success: the literary afterlife of Watts-Dunton’s close friend, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Rossetti left more of a literary legacy than his poems and paintings. His life story inspired at least thirty-five texts which offer insight not only into the cumulative process of myth creation, but to the ongoing cultural obsession with the life story of the Pre-Raphaelite poet-painter. *Aylwin* was among the first few fictional reimaginings of Rossetti, and was certainly the first fictional representation by an intimate of Rossetti who was highly protective of his late friend’s reputation. Where other contemporary fictionalisations of the Pre-Raphaelite circle focused on lampooning Rossetti and his aesthetic circle, *Aylwin* became Watts-Dunton’s tribute to his late friend: an homage carefully constructed to enable Watts-Dunton’s reply to criticisms of Rossetti whilst evading sensitive issues that a traditional biography would have required. This paper evaluates the nineteenth-century literary afterlife of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and, in doing so, explains why the most popular fictionalisation of Rossetti’s life is now also the most forgotten.

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