

Effie: The Passionate Lives of Effie Gray, John Ruskin and John Everett Millais by Suzanne Fagence Cooper.

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 ***Effie: The Passionate Lives of Effie Gray, John Ruskin and John Everett Millais* by Suzanne Fagence Cooper (review)**

Cristina Pascu-Talbure

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Cristina Pascu-Talbure (bio)

The life of Effie Gray is defined by her two marriages, to two key figures at the centre of the Victorian art world. From 1848 to 1854 she was married to John Ruskin, arguably the most celebrated art critic of the nineteenth century. The story of this part of Effie's life—as Suzanne Fagence Cooper herself admits—has been told by Mary Lutyens, who edited Effie's letters of 1848 to 1854. Effie's marriage to Ruskin was annulled and in 1855 she married the painter John Everett Millais, one of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brothers, who later became a member, and briefly president, of the Royal Academy. In *Effie* Cooper takes over from Lutyens to reconstruct—from previously unavailable correspondence—Effie's life as Miss Gray and Mrs. Millais. Thus, Cooper not only completes the picture of an extraordinary woman's life, but also adds to our understanding of Millais's artistic trajectory, and, implicitly, clarifies wider issues concerning the aftermath of the first wave of Pre-Raphaelitism.

Cooper's book is a timely addition to the recent body of literature reassessing the social and cultural scene of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. 2011 alone saw the publication of Julian Treuhertz's *Ford Madox Brown: Pre-Raphaelite Pioneer*, Fiona MacCarthy's *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination*, and J. B. Bullen's *Rossetti: Painter and Poet*. Responding to renewed interest in Pre-Raphaelitism, *Effie* **[End Page 158]** successfully complements these other studies: the story of Millais's wife, as told by Cooper, explores the role Effie may have had in his development from rebel artist into a representative of the British artistic establishment.

Effie is most interesting when Cooper presents us with neither Ruskin's jilted bride nor the object of Millais's adulation, but with a strong-willed young, emotionally inarticulate woman; a woman who made up in social skill what she lacked in scholarship; a networker astute enough to further the interests of her artist husband without being in the least artistic herself; a tower of strength for her family who was yet susceptible to

the destabilising influence of unfounded gossip. The Effie Cooper re-creates for us comes across as a passionate flesh-and-blood heroine—first wronged, then vindicated in her own quest for happiness and fulfilment—with whom the narrator’s skill makes it impossible not to sympathise. But Effie is also presented as projections of the minds of both Ruskin and Millais, embodying “Victorian society’s fears about female sexuality and freedom” (8). The parts of the book dedicated to this kind of exploration are the most intriguing, rich in insightful interpretations of biographical fact, if at times relying too heavily on conjecture.

The great merit of Cooper’s book therefore lies in the complex re-creation of a character marginalised when not maligned, and often sketchily defined as Ruskin’s or Millais’s wife. Cooper’s portrayal is undoubtedly a success, and a great read for anyone, with or without Victorian interests. But there is also a disquieting note in the book: while Cooper seeks to tell Effie’s complete story, she also seeks to apportion blame. In the first chapter Cooper quotes W. E. Gladstone’s comment on the Ruskin-Gray-Millais affair: “There was misfortune, even tragedy: but all three were perfectly blameless.” To this Cooper adds: “It is time to find out if the Prime Minister was right” (9), and dedicates the first half of her book to convicting Ruskin.

Cooper’s unfairness to Ruskin detracts from an otherwise brilliant book. In her passion for her heroine, Cooper’s selection of biographical fact is not always objective, and often her objective claims are clothed in insidious language. For example, although the book abounds in references to Effie’s distress caused by the non-consummation of her marriage, there is no mention of the psychological difficulties Ruskin himself faced in relation to sexual intercourse, or...

talent; Tennyson loved Hallam in all his aspects. After Hallam's death, though, Tennyson's behaviour was in some ways mysterious. Despite being specifically invited by Hallam's father, Tennyson did not go to Hallam's funeral in January 1834 (whereas Milnes did go). Tennyson also indulged himself in a round of Christmas jollities in his native Lincolnshire in the winter of 1833, just a few weeks after Hallam's death.

In later life Tennyson would robustly resist the notion that his affection for Hallam was excessive. Nevertheless, questions about the extent to which *In Memoriam* records a homosexual relationship have never gone away. After its first publication Tennyson himself was nervous about possible homosexual readings of his poem and changed some of its lines for subsequent editions. Blockside confronts this topic head-on and discusses it with delicacy and discrimination, exploring carefully and accurately the way such sexuality was understood in Tennyson's lifetime. Hallam Tennyson, the poet's son, notoriously destroyed a great many letters after his father's death in 1892, and subsequently suppressed many facts in *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir* (1897). He was working in the aftermath of the Oscar Wilde scandal, and was "influenced by the emergence of the first public British literary homosexual" (275). Blockside's conclusions are as balanced and reasonable as the evidence is ever likely to permit. This is a thoroughly researched and rewarding biography and a valuable contribution to Tennyson studies.

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Effie: The Passionate Lives of Effie Gray, John Ruskin and John Everett Millais, by Suzanne Fagence Cooper; pp. xii + 276. New York: St Martin's Press, 2011, \$26.99, \$15.99 paper.

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