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Dante Gabriel Rossetti

His Family-Letters

VOLUME 1

EDITED BY

WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI



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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108052054

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2012

This edition first published 1895

This digitally printed version 2012

ISBN 978-1-108-05205-4 Paperback

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

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By Himself.

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1855.

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HIS FAMILY-LETTERS

WITH A MEMOIR

BY

WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI

MANUS ANIMAM PINXIT

VOL. I.

LONDON

ELLIS AND ELVEY

1895

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Printed by Hazell, Watson, & Viney, Ltd., London and Aylesbury.

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DEDICATED TO
MY FOUR CHILDREN
WITH A FATHER'S HOPE
THAT RELATIVES OF
DANTE AND CHRISTINA ROSSETTI
AND DESCENDANTS OF
GABRIELE AND FRANCES ROSSETTI
WILL UPHOLD THE CREDIT OF
THEIR PATRONYMIC.

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P R E F A C E.

I N his *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (1882) Mr. Hall Caine has informed us: "It was always known to be Rossetti's wish that, if at any moment after his death it should appear that the story of his life required to be written, the one friend who, during many of his later years, knew him most intimately, and to whom he unlocked the most sacred secrets of his heart, Mr. Theodore Watts, should write it, unless indeed it were undertaken by his brother William."

Dante Rossetti died on 9 April 1882; and after the lapse of a few months I decided to put his Family-Letters into shape for early publication. Mr. Watts acquiesced in the wish which I then entertained, and which I should still entertain, that he, rather than myself, should be the biographer, writing a Memoir to accompany the Letters. Doubtless he saw reason for not producing his Memoir so soon as I had been expecting it; therefore, after a rather long interval of years, I resolved in July 1894 that the Letters must now come out, and, as they could not be unlinked with a Memoir, that I myself would write it. The result is before the reader. If he would have preferred a Memoir from Mr. Watts, I sympathize with him, but the option had ceased to be mine. There are several reasons why a brother neither is nor can be the best biographer. Feeling this, I had always intended

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not to write a Life of Dante Rossetti. But circumstances have proved too strong for me, and I submit to their dictate.

Had the book been published towards 1883, the Letters would have extended very little beyond those addressed to my Mother and to myself. There were then also a couple to my Father, and a very few to my Sister Christina. I am now enabled to add some to my Grandfather Gaetano Polidori, my Uncle Henry Francis Polydore, my Aunt Charlotte Lydia Polidori, and my Wife Lucy Madox Rossetti; also some others to Christina which, as they contain expressions of approval with regard to her writings, she had herself with-held. No letters to other members of the family appear to be in existence, though several must have been written.

The technical arrangement of the printed correspondence can easily be understood. The letters are all thrown into a single sequence, according to the order of date: they are lettered from A to H, for the persons respectively addressed, and each sub-division is progressively numbered within its own limits. In every case where a letter seems to require any explanatory note or observation, I have supplied this in a few preliminary words. The dates, when not written by my brother himself, were in most cases jotted down at the time by the recipient: in a few instances, where this was omitted, the dates now given are approximate. Addresses are also frequently inserted in like manner. I have preserved (and must ask the reader to pardon my mentioning so minute a point) one instance of each form of subscribed name; and have also reproduced the name in other cases where it seems more apposite to do so. In contrary instances I omit both the name and the words of subscription which precede it. Some other Family-Letters exist, addressed to the same

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persons ; but these are such as even a brother cannot suppose to be of any public interest. From those here collected some passages are omitted which, on one ground or another, are considered to be unsuited for printing ; but on the whole I have been sparing of excisions. Of the items admitted, several are indeed short and scrappy ; I have not however included anything which appears to me to be entirely uninteresting to persons interested in Dante Rossetti. Some letters, otherwise slight, fix the date of a picture or poem ; others show some trait of character, or contain some pointed or diverting expression.

The letters, such as they are, shall be left to speak mainly for themselves. Their language is constantly unadorned, often colloquial ; the tone of mind in them, concentrated ; the feeling, while solid and sincere, uneffusive. Their subject-matter is very generally personal to the writer, without discursiveness of outlook, or eloquent or picturesque description ; yet the spirit is not egotistical or self-assertive. If I am wrong in these opinions, the reader will decide the point for himself.

My brother was a rapid letter-writer, and on occasion a very prompt one, but not negligent or haphazard. He always wrote to the point, without amplification, or any effort after the major or minor graces of diction or rhetoric. Multitudes of his letters must still presumably be extant in private hands : a representative collection of them might be found to confirm the impression which I should like to ensue from the present series—that as a correspondent he was straightforward, pleasant, and noticeably free from any calculated self-display. “Disinvolto” would be the Italian word.

Some persons may approve, others will disapprove, of the publication of these Family-Letters. I print them because the doing so commends itself to my own mind. At a very

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childish age I was familiar with the old apologue of the Man and his Son and the Donkey : it impressed me as equally true and practical. I have always been conscious that opinions will be as numerous as readers, and prefer to suit the opinions of those who happen to agree with myself.

Recently I have had a painful reason for realizing to myself a very pleasurable fact—that of the high estimation in which my brother, himself no less than his work, is now publicly held, some thirteen years after he passed away. The death of my beloved sister Christina, on 29 December 1894, called forth a flood of not undeserved but assuredly very fervent praise ; and in the eulogies of her were intermixed many warm tributes to my brother — I might say, without a dissentient voice.

As regards my Memoir, I, having large knowledge and numerous materials, have not consulted a single person except Christina, who, during the earlier weeks of my undertaking, gave me orally the benefit of many reminiscences relating chiefly to years of childhood, and often kept me right upon details as to which I should have stumbled. On her bed of pain and rapidly approaching death she preserved a singularly clear recollection of olden facts, and was cheered in going over them with me.

Some readers of the Memoir may be inclined to ask me—“ Have you told everything, of a substantial kind, that you know about your deceased brother ? ”—My answer shall be given beforehand, and without disguise : “ No ; I have told what I choose to tell, and have left untold what I do not choose to tell ; if you want more, be pleased to consult some other informant.”

One word in conclusion. In case the present book should find favour with the public, I should be disposed to rummage

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among my ample stock of materials, and produce a number of details relating not only to my brother, but also to other members or connexions of the family. But at the age of sixty-five a man finds the horizon of his work narrowed, and rapidly narrowing ; and possibly this will not be.

W. M. ROSSETTI.

ST. EDMUND'S TERRACE, LONDON.

April 1895.

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