

*The Rossettis in Wonderland: A Victorian Family History* by Dinah Roe. London: Haus Publishing, 2011. xx, 412 pp. + 8 colour, 14 b/w illus. ISBN 978-1-907822-01-8. £17.99.

On 7 October 1863, Lewis Carroll photographed the Rossetti family, then in its most accomplished phase of life, in the garden of Tudor House; 25 years later, Christina recalled Tudor House and its environs as “a sort of wonderland.” By uniting Carroll’s photographic session with Christina’s later reflection, Dinah Roe introduces “wonderland” as the thematic and structural heart of her Rossetti family history. Aptly extending Christina’s nostalgic assessment of Tudor House to the entire family’s sense of London as “a place of transformation, excitement and infinite possibility,” Roe also casts Rossettian imagination or artistic ambition as a “wonderland,” whether magical, medieval, whimsical, melancholic, unruly, or holy. She follows Christina’s cue also in placing the 1860s at the centre of her history, with preceding chapters narrating the family’s determined, sometimes rivalrous struggle towards these wonderland years, and succeeding chapters charting the decline of the collective family powers, notwithstanding individual achievements. Lively, informative, and even-handed not only about the immediate Rossetti family but also in relation to its relatives, social networks, and Victorian cultural contexts, this biography deserves wide reading.

The opening two chapters centre on parents Gabriele and Frances, respectively: Gabriele as gregarious Italian ex-patriot in London, Frances as divided between Romantic imagination and common sense. Chapter 1 depicts Gabriele’s enthusiasm for London in the context of wider relationships between the English and the Italians during the Italian revolutionary decades. While his “lack of self-knowledge” and fixation on a connection between Dante Alighieri and Freemasonry would eventually hamper him as a poet and critic, initially Gabriele enjoyed a Romantic hero’s welcome in London and charmed all the right social circles to advance his status and procure tutoring positions. He also charmed Frances Polidori, who married him in a “love-match” that also promised her “the opportunity to live a life of the mind.” Chapter 2 details how Gabriele’s and (especially) Frances’s commitments to such a life informed the upbringing of their four children. Frances desired from the start that they should be “true Artists.” With her well-educated sisters as supports and models, she raised Gabriel and William “to consider women their intellectual equals,” and trained Maria and Christina to be scholars as well as domestic managers (though, in keeping with general attitudes of the day, “character flaws were tolerated in the male children, but were corrected in the sisters”). Roe reveals an indulged Gabriel, a reliable Maria, a pliable William, and a stormy Christina: personalities that resulted in Maria