

THE PRE-RAPHAELITES AND THE MOXON TENNYSON

By 1854 Tennyson's poems were selling so well, with Maud, In Memoriam and the 1842 collection in print, that his publisher, Edward Moxon, decided to bring out a de luxe illustrated edition. The poet was unenthusiastic about the proposal, but, needing money to purchase a house (Farringford on the Isle of Wight) and guaranteed profits of at least £2,000, he acquiesced.¹

Tennyson received his £2,000; but Moxon suffered a considerable financial loss, and after his death his heirs tried unsuccessfully to recover the sum paid to the poet by claiming that Tennyson had been the initiator of the edition and should share the loss. It could be demonstrated through Tennyson's and Moxon's correspondence, however, that the poet had entered the venture reluctantly.

That the edition was not a success is attributable to several causes: it was intended for the 1856 Christmas trade but delayed until May 1857; it was expensive (£1 11s. 6d.); and it was illustrated by eight artists whose styles were disparate. In addition to five established artists -- Daniel Maclise, who specialized in history paintings; Thomas Creswick, landscapes; William Mulready, genre; John Calcott Horsley, domestic scenes in the Dutch manner; and Clarkson Stanfield, marines and landscapes -- the illustrators included three relatively unknown Pre-Raphaelites ("some younger painters," the Athenaeum called them²): John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. How this odd amalgam came about is a matter of conjecture. George S. Layard has written: "In the choice of collaborators Moxon was mainly the moving spirit, although it is more than probable that, in pitching upon the three Pre-Raphaelites, Tennyson himself may have taken the initiative."³ It is the theory of Harold Nicolson⁴ that Tennyson, ignorant of contemporary visual arts, turned for advice to John Millais, a recent acquaintance and a recently-elected member of the Royal Academy. Millais, still loyal to his Pre-Raphaelite brothers although they had gone their separate ways since 1852, may have suggested himself, Hunt and Rossetti (the three founders, in 1848, of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood) and perhaps Arthur Hughes, an associate.

Whether or not Hughes was invited to contribute, he did not do so; nor did Edwin Landseer, the famous animal-painter, who was also considered. In May 1854, Tennyson and Moxon called upon four of the painters, as Tennyson reported in his "Letter-diary":

I called on Moxon to arrange the 'Illustrated Edition of Poems,' and we went round to the artist Creswick, a capital broad genial fellow; Mulready, an old man, was full