

William Cave Thomas: Pre-Raphaelite Defector or Educator?¹

In 1860 William Cave Thomas (1820–?1896) attacked the Pre-Raphaelites in a tract entitled *Pre-Raphaelitism Tested by the Principles of Christianity*,² indicating his profound dissatisfaction with the Brotherhood's emphasis on naturalism and individuality of character. Although Thomas had been a fringe member of the PRB circle and even suggested *The Germ* as the title of the PRB journal, he is barely mentioned by his fellow Pre-Raphaelites in their memoirs. There are, however, letters from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown and entries in Brown's diaries which indicate that Thomas Seddon, Rossetti and Brown remained lifelong friends of Thomas. Thomas wrote to Brown in 1874 sending his condolences on the death of Brown's son, Oliver. In 1883 Thomas wrote to F.G. Stephens reminiscing about the Brotherhood. Rossetti had great respect for Thomas's draughtsmanship, and Brown, along with Seddon, worked with Thomas at the Workingmen's College³ where Thomas was Headmaster in 1850. I shall examine the apparent contradiction between Thomas's attack and his friendships and suggest that Thomas's tract is specifically aimed at Holman Hunt (though Thomas never names Hunt) and that F.G. Stephens's book on Hunt is a response to Thomas's attack.

In spite of his attack, Thomas's later books, outlining his educational theory based on sensory development through the study of art, reveal his debt to many tenets of Pre-Raphaelitism. These later works in many ways chart the impact of Pre-Raphaelitism on conservative Victorian values. My comparison of Thomas's educational theories with those proposed by John L. Tupper, the Pre-Raphaelite critic who wrote a pseudonymous treatise on education,⁴ illuminates not only similarities and differences which exist between Thomas and other Pre-Raphaelites but also the nature of the Pre-Raphaelite contribution to aesthetic education and to the historicizing of art. As a fringe member of the Brotherhood initially attracted and later

repelled by PRB ideas concerning art and religion, Thomas represents a mixed response shared by other fringe members, such as James Collinson, Thomas Seddon, Coventry Patmore, and William Bell Scott (all of whom will be discussed further on). In their mixture of eighteenth-century philosophy, conventional wisdom, and nineteenth-century empiricism, Thomas's contradictory responses to the PRB were no doubt shared, if not always as fully articulated, by other Victorians.

A watercolor painter of genre, historical, literary and biblical subjects, Thomas studied at the Royal Academy in 1838.⁵ In 1840 he went to Munich where he fell under the influence of Peter Cornelius and the Nazarenes, who had so deeply impressed William Dyce and Madox Brown. Thomas entered the Munich Academy of Art and worked under Heinrich Maria Hess on frescoes in the Bonifazius basilika in 1842. He returned to England in 1842 and achieved modest artistic success. Prince Albert purchased two of his watercolors, both of Christ. In 1843 he won the £100 premium at the Westminster Hall Competition (itself modeled on the Nazarene revival of fresco painting) with *St. Augustine Preaching to the Saxons* and exhibited in the third exhibition at Westminster Hall. He received £400 for a cartoon of *Justice* (which was not completed owing to Thomas's ill health), and exhibited at the British Institute and the Royal Academy from 1843 to 1862. Despite requests from the Parliamentary Committee to contribute designs in 1845, Thomas never received a commission for Westminster. (He had commissions for the International Exhibition, for the South Kensington Museum, and for Christ Church, Marlyebone.) Around 1850 he was associated with Seddon and Brown in a scheme for teaching drawing and design to artisans. His subjects were conventionally Victorian ones, such as *Laura, in Avignon* (1850), *Clara, from Scott's Marmion* (1853), *Boccaccio in Naples* (1850), scenes from the lives of Christ, Savonarola,