

JOHN BRETT AND THE ROSSETTIS

In most of the literature concerning the Pre-Raphaelite movement John Brett is portrayed as a disciple of Ruskin who had little real contact with any members of the original Brotherhood. In this short essay I shall examine the evidence relating to the connection between Brett and members of the Rossetti family during the 1850's, and suggest that not only was this closer than has been generally realised but also that it may have had some influence upon his art. This will involve looking at the question of a possible relationship between Brett and Christina Rossetti arising from the interpretation of her poem, 'No thank you, John', written in March 1860.¹

Evidence that Dante Gabriel Rossetti came to hold a strong personal dislike for Brett is provided by an entry in Munby's diary for May 12th, 1863, following upon a visit to Rossetti's house.² To Munby's indignation, Rossetti, egged on by 'that odious prig Swinburne', launched into a violent attack on Brett both as a man and an artist, describing him as 'opinionated', 'entêté', a 'stupid literalist' and as 'having no more eye for colour than a pig'. Essentially this view of Brett seems also to have been held by the far more discreet William Michael Rossetti who, in his *Reminiscences*, described him as a man of a 'somewhat downright self-centred tone'.³ This too seems to have been the opinion of Christina Rossetti, assuming as seems probable, that the 'No, thank you, John' poem does refer to Brett. Indeed, in a pencil jotting relating to the poem, she noted that 'The original John was obnoxious because he never gave scope for 'No thank you'.⁴

Thus the Rossettis seem to have concurred in viewing Brett as an opinionated, thickskinned and rather insensitive person. Whatever the merits of this judgement, and it cannot be denied that there were certainly aspects of his character which lend weight to it, common sense would suggest that it could only have been formed on the basis of some knowledge of the person concerned. We know from Brett's own year end summary diary for 1856 that he was then on friendly enough terms with Dante Gabriel Rossetti for the latter to have taken the trouble to show the 'Glacier of Rosenlauri' to Ruskin, with whom Brett had not yet become acquainted.⁵ One must ask what might have provoked Dante Gabriel's change of attitude towards him between 1856 and 1863? Certainly there is no surviving evidence of any conflict between them during these years. It is possible that it may reflect Dante Gabriel's own growing estrangement from Ruskin, Brett being seen as the latter's protégé. However, it is doubtful whether this in itself would be enough to explain the vehemence of his remarks to Munby. One possibility is that this re-