

## WOOLNER'S AUSTRALIAN ROMANCE

Anne Neale

The Australian sojourn of Pre-Raphaelite sculptor Thomas Woolner was crucial in the development of his highly successful career. Between 1852 and 1854, in the gold-rush chaos of the antipodes, the impoverished Woolner discovered how to survive by his art: more importantly, he became determined to succeed financially as well as artistically in his chosen profession. Woolner's time in Australia used to be regarded as a marginally interesting but generally unfortunate interruption to his English life and work. More recently, the work of Australian scholars (Peers; Verrocchi; Clemente) has considerably expanded our knowledge of Woolner's Australian career. This essay establishes the critical influence wielded by a young Melbourne woman on Woolner's personal and professional life, both during and immediately after his years in Australia. Edith Howitt (1834-84) may seem an unlikely muse for a Pre-Raphaelite artist, but she was in fact the prime motivating force in Woolner's work between 1854 and 1857, the very years when he emerged from relative obscurity to achieve lasting fame.

To understand how an unknown Australian woman came to exert such an influence on Woolner, it is necessary to know something of the artist's personal circumstances in the preceding years. Before leaving England for the Victorian goldfields in July 1852, Woolner had taken more than a passing interest in Miss Emily Rosaline Orme, the eldest daughter of Charles and Eliza Orme, and niece of Mrs. Coventry Patmore. His 1851 bronze portrait medallion of Miss Orme was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1852 entitled simply "of a lady" (qtd in Rossetti, *Correspondence* 1:225n7). Whatever the extent of Woolner's attraction to Miss Orme, he was at that time in no position to propose marriage. He had lost the competition for the prestigious Wordsworth memorial in Westminster Abbey, upon which he had depended

The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, 19 (Fall 2010)