

Poems and Drawings of Elizabeth Siddal, edited by Roger C. Lewis and Mark Samuels-Lasner (Wolfville, Nova Scotia, Canada: The Wombat Press, 1978; £17.50).

What we know of Elizabeth Siddal's life comes to us mainly by way of anecdotes about her husband and through histories of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. The general effect communicated is that she was a vague adjunct to the action. Even so insistent a book as Violet Hunt's The Wife of Rossetti (1932) underscores the degree to which Miss Siddal's claim to fame rests upon her marriage. However, William Michael Rossetti had devoted an appreciative chapter of his Reminiscences to Elizabeth Siddal, and paid his sister-in-law the compliment of publishing her poetry for the first time in the Memoir of Dante Rossetti. Lizzie seemed to William Michael possessed of a talent "truly noteworthy in a person who had grown up to womanhood outside of artistic or literary influences."¹ In fact, he thought her work quite original. "Gabriel's influence and example," he wrote, were "not more perceptible than her own independence and freshness of inspiration."²

We are fortunate at last in being able to judge for ourselves the merits of Elizabeth Siddal's creative talents, based on a more comprehensive selection of her work, both pictorial and poetic, than has been available. The Poems and Drawings of Elizabeth Siddal, edited by Roger C. Lewis and Mark Samuels-Lasner, includes a detailed chronology of Siddal's life, sixteen authoritatively annotated poems, and sixteen drawings and paintings in excellent reproductions. The volume is slim, but handsomely designed and printed. Its attractiveness is fortified by the painstaking scholarship of the editors. With regard to Miss Siddal's poetry, Lewis and Samuels-Lasner have in every instance based their text on her manuscript, thereby providing what may be considered the definitive version of her work. Moreover, the pictorial examples they have chosen display the range of Siddal's talent, which compares not unfavorably with that of other Pre-Raphaelites and sheds interesting light on the aesthetics of Pre-Raphaelitism.

To say that Siddal's poetry is derivative is perhaps unfair, but she seems to have been an unconscious parodist. Her experiments in verse were generally confined to simple hymn or ballad forms. As much of Christina Rossetti's work demonstrates, this does not in itself spell disaster. Lizzie, however, lacked the spark of true genius which illuminated Christina's work, and her morbid poems, with titles such as "Early Death," "Lord May I Come?," "Dead Love," "Gone," and "At Last," and a tendency to jingly monosyllabic rhymes -- boon/swoon; tune/June; go/woe; dead/red; cold/mould -- fall flat on the ear and short of the mark. The most appealing of these is "Love and Hate,"