

RAY WATKINSON

Shields in Manchester: The Making of an Artist

Perhaps the most improbable of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's friends were two deeply religious and unworldly artists—James Smetham and Frederic Shields—one a few years older, the other a few years younger than himself. Smetham, son of a Wesleyan Methodist minister, was for most of his mature life the teacher of drawing in the Wesleyan Normal College, which trained teachers for the Connexion's schools. Though he exhibited for years, he had little success in spite of the poetic quality of his best work, much admired by Rossetti and Ruskin. Shields, on the other hand, did, painfully, win greater recognition, and when he died in 1911, his great mural commission for the private Chapel of the Ascension in Bayswater just completed, he was as highly regarded as he is now effectively forgotten.

It was the deep religious conviction of these two, the very thing that might seem to set them most apart from him, that drew Rossetti to them as they were drawn to him. Both admired his genius and imagination: both, horrified as they may have been by what they knew of his life, saw him not only as a great artist but as a great soul to be saved. To win this genius for God would for either have been a greater triumph than any painting they might have made. And Rossetti, admiring both for their qualities as artists—Shields in particular as a fine draughtsman, Smetham as a sensitive and illuminating critic—was fascinated by their faith, their certainty of God and salvation, something that for the whole of his latter life he deeply, morbidly wished but could never reach.

Smetham passed his own last decade in a profound melancholia, darker even than Ros-

setti's. No less religious but a far tougher character, Shields lived to help Rossetti sell Smetham's pictures to aid his widow; witnessed Rossetti's last moments, and made a deathbed drawing of him; and a dozen years later also made a deathbed drawing of the man who, after Rossetti and over a longer period, was his own best friend—Ford Madox Brown.

Shields spent the first half of his long working life in Manchester, until he moved to London in January 1877, with a wife only nineteen years old—a strange, misconceived marriage. Unlike Ellen Terry, who escaped from a similar marriage at sixteen to G. F. Watts, Cissy (Matilda Booth) hemmed in by Shield's obsessive and rigid religion, stayed with him until he died. Ellen Terry and Effie Millais had better luck, stronger friends.

Shields had been born in Hartlepool, on England's northeast coast, of a Scottish father and Northumbrian mother, in 1833.¹ There is in his beginnings a pattern, not unique to him, which goes far to unfold the nature of his character and work, though it can do nothing to explain the mystery of his genius—only the frame within which it had to operate.

Round the east coast of Scotland and down into Northumberland and Durham, a large number of small harbours had for centuries sent out fishing fleets to bring in the cod, herring, and mackerel of the North Sea—sent out their small coasting traders, their collier brigs, manned by crews intimately related by work, marriage, and faith. These places were a prized training ground for the Navy, however unwilling the men; in times of war they would be harried by the press gangs. Inland,