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William Michael Rossetti and the Siddalls

Jan Marsh's *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* and Deborah Cherry's and Griselda Pollock's "Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature" have drawn attention to the version of Elizabeth Siddall found in the writings of William Michael Rossetti.¹ About his brother's wife he wrote with coolness and superiority occasionally verging on disapproval. After reading his *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters With a Memoir* (1895), Swinburne vigorously countered in a letter to Rossetti that "Except Lady Trevelyan, I never knew so brilliant and appreciative a woman."² Rossetti's ambivalent attitude towards Elizabeth Siddall was the product of class consciousness, the superior status which he assigned to people with a literary or artistic pedigree, and the elusive personality of the woman herself, who, Rossetti admitted, never felt comfortable in his presence.

A letter that Rossetti wrote to the Sheffield local historian, William Thomas Freemantle (1849-1931), on 22 September 1911 can serve as a convenient starting point for an exploration of the relationship between Rossetti and the Siddall family.³ Freemantle had recently sent Rossetti a copy of his *Bibliography of Sheffield and Vicinity* (1911).

Dear Sir,

Please accept my sincere thanks for your handsome book on Sheffield. I have as yet barely had time to turn over its pages, but am sure to find matter of interest in it.

With regard to the points wh. you raise respecting the Siddalls I may say as follows.

1—I don't know anything as to the family's going back as far as 1697. I recollect that several

years ago I saw a newspaper-paragraph saying that Miss. S. came in one way of gentle blood: I think the name thus notified was Eyre.

2—I don't know one way or the other whether Miss S's father was named Charles.

3—Henry Siddall died 2 or 3 years ago. He was always weak-minded, and in his closing years was in a Workhouse (perhaps Kennington).⁴ He had always been affectionately looked after by his brother James. The latter carried on the cutlery-business in Old Kent Road, S.E., until some years back, say 1900, when he with Henry had to go into the Workhouse. I made him an allowance, and got both brothers out. After a while however they were compelled to return to the Workhouse. When Henry died I found myself able to renew an allowance to James: on this he left the Workhouse, and subsisted up to Jany. last, when he obtained the old-age pension, which I continue to supplement. He lives with some relatives at 6 Cator Street, St. George's Road, Peckham, S.E.

4—Either Clara or Lydia Siddall (I think Clara) married a Mr. Wheeler.⁵ A daughter of the couple married a Mr. Higgins, & they had a son, George Porter Higgins, whom I know to some extent. he is a Photographer, living at 258 King's Road, Chelsea, S.W.⁶

5—I don't remember—probably never knew—the Christian name of Miss Siddall's Mother.

Yours very faithfully,
Wm. M. Rossetti

Mrs. Wheeler, I understand, died not very long ago. I cannot say anything as to her sister (Lydia?).

For a man who had long been regarded, and regarded himself, as the repository of the facts about the Rossetti family and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, and who earlier had tirelessly investigated the lives of Shelley and Blake, Rossetti's lack of interest in Eliz-