

The Poetry of Truth: Alfred William Hunt and the Art of Landscape by Christopher Newall, with contributions by Scott Wilcox and Colin Harrison. Oxford: Ashmolean Museum; New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2004. x, 180 pp. + 77 colour plates, 5 b/w illus. ISBN 1-85444-196-5. \$29.95; £17.95.

Twenty-five years ago, beginning in the pages of this journal, Robert Secor revealed a little of the life of the artist Alfred William Hunt (1830-96), first as the discoverer in 1870 of Catherine and Reine Dausoigne (“the Corsican sisters,” briefly “the rage of Pre-Raphaelite society”), then as a protégé of John Ruskin.¹ Having failed with Millais, Ruskin thought he could see in Hunt that blend of Turnerian vision and Pre-Raphaelite intensity of observation which would be the future path for British landscape painting. In this he was not alone: in 1871 the *Art Journal* called Hunt the “most sensitive and rapturous of our colourists,” and F.G. Stephens, writing in the *Athenaeum*, also considered him the legitimate successor of Turner.

Yet Hunt has been strangely and unfairly neglected over the last century. As a significant painter in both oil and watercolour, his work is of course known to scholars and collectors, and has been included in books and exhibitions such as Allen Staley’s *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape* (1973; rev. ed., 2001) and Tate Britain’s *Pre-Raphaelite Vision: Truth to Nature* (2004). Christopher Newall, who organized the Tate show along with Staley, has now succeeded magnificently in a mission to revive Hunt’s reputation, in an exhibition shown first at the Yale Center for British Art and then at the Ashmolean Museum, which brought together sixty of the best examples, with a superb accompanying catalogue revealing yet more about his unusual career.

For Hunt found himself occupying an uneasy place in the Victorian art world. Born and educated in Liverpool, he had an artist father who had known David Cox in Birmingham and admired Turner even before Ruskin, so it was no surprise that the young Alfred could “draw before he could write,” and “lisped in colours, for the colours came.” Precocious and serious, he gained a scholarship to Corpus Christi College, Oxford, winning the Newdigate Prize for poetry in 1851. Art triumphed over academe, however, although it was only in 1861 that he relinquished his college Fellowship on marrying Margaret Raine, a pupil of William Bell Scott; their first daughter, Violet, flowered into one of the more colourful figures in later Pre-Raphaelite circles, while Venetia (a god-daughter of Ruskin) became the wife of the metalworker W.A.S. Benson.

Hunt’s Pre-Raphaelite credentials are otherwise slight – he was a member of the Hogarth Club (Rossetti considering his work “second rate”) and was belatedly asked to contribute to the 1857-58 British Art exhibition which toured America – reflecting a certain sense of distance from the fixed tenets of