

The Two Forgers: A Biography of Harry Buxton Forman and Thomas James Wise by John Collins. Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1992. Pp. xiv, 317 + 67 illustrations. \$55.00. ISBN 0-85967-754-0.

John Collins's account of the Forman-Wise forgeries of one hundred Victorian pamphlets — or, if one is not entirely convinced by the prominence accorded to Forman, the Wise-Forman forgeries will be preferred — grew out of his work with Nicolas Barker on *A Sequel to An Enquiry into the Nature of Certain Nineteenth Century Pamphlets* (1983). This was a "counterpart," as they called it, to John Carter's and Graham Pollard's elegant and breathtaking exposé of 1934. Before turning to Collins's book, something must be said about the intense bibliographical activity on the forgeries between the years 1934 and 1983. Although Carter and Pollard did not name Thomas J. Wise, creator of the Ashley Library and prolific (and even popular) bibliographer, as the source of the pamphlets, their evidence pointed clearly to him. It was to be expected, therefore, that following Wise's death in 1937, reportedly a broken man but without having publicly explained or recanted, he would come in for a thorough investigation. Wilfred Partington's biography (1939, 1946), Fannie Ratchford's *Letters of Wise to John H. Wrenn* (1944) and *Between the Lines* (1945), various essays by W. B. Todd, and further installments by Carter and Pollard (1948-70) were just the most prominent publications among what William E. Fredeman reckons were twenty separate volumes, about one hundred articles, numerous reviews and exhibition, sale, and booksellers' catalogues (Review of *An Enquiry*, 2nd ed., and *A Sequel*, Review 7 [1985]: 267).

As early as 1935 Carter had been shown but was not allowed to publish the so-called Pforzheimer Document, which in addition to proving Wise's culpability, unmistakably implicated Harry Buxton Forman, the respected Shelley and Keats editor. It was not until 1972, however, when the London firm of Bernard Quaritch acquired a quantity of books and pamphlets from the library of Forman's son, Maurice, that the full extent of Forman's involvement in the forgeries could begin to be charted. Quaritch's catalogue of the material (No. 926 [1973]), with an introduction by Pollard, and Collins's "H. B. Forman and William Morris" (*Book Collector*, 1972) marked the start of an investigation that culminated in *A Sequel* and the book

under review.

As would be expected, *The Two Forgers* repeats, though in a less analytical, more anecdotal way, a great deal of information that we are already familiar with from *A Sequel*. But in expanding on the relatively brief biographies of Wise and Forman given in the latter volume, and in rearranging the material in chronological sequence, Collins admits that "some differences of interpretation" (285) resulted. Although Barker and Collins acknowledge in *A Sequel* that the questions "What did they do? How did they do it? When did it all start, or stop? Above all, whose idea was it? . . . are harder not easier to answer now than they were in 1934," their argument often seems propelled by the conviction that Forman was "not just an accomplice, but Wise's mentor, perhaps the originator of the frauds" (*Sequel*, 167, 10-11). If Collins holds less firmly to this conviction in *The Two Forgers* (though one cannot be altogether sure that this is the case), we might want to credit Professor Fredeman's superb, thirty-seven page review of *A Sequel* (referred to above), which cogently resists giving Forman primacy of place, strategically quoting at the end of the review Carter's considered opinion that "even if . . . the forgeries were the work of a ring, I shall be much surprised if Thomas J. Wise has to be dethroned from his commanding position as the master mind" (*Review*, 280).

It must be admitted that on the basis of the evidence provided by Collins, compared to Wise, Forman is the more attractive personality. An early and insightful critic of the Rossettis in *Our Living Poets* (1871), a first rate intelligence which allowed him to rise rapidly in the Post Office as a specialist in overseas post, an editor of Shelley and Keats who will certainly be classed in the front rank when the history of Victorian textual editing comes to be written, a man with even a niche in the Villon Society publishing activities of the minor Pre-Raphaelite poet John Payne: he was all these things. Yet Collins remains unimpressed, calling him "obsessive and hypochondriacal" (37) without offering much proof, and quoting the unreliable Edmund Gosse that "there was something about him not quite sympathetic" (205). William Michael Rossetti, by contrast, as shown in his diaries and correspondence (which Collins seems not to have consulted), both liked and admired Forman, even though he was aware that F. J. Furnivall, for example, considered him "too much of a dealer" (a judgement of which Collins is evidently unaware). Forman's