

W.H. Deverell: Some Observations and a Checklist

The anecdotal quality of Walter Howell Deverell's life (1827-1854) had made him one of the more recognizable of the minor Pre-Raphaelites; yet it has also overshadowed his significance as a painter and a contributor to the goals of the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

Deverell was an ever-present name in the early annals of Pre-Raphaelitism until his career was cut short by his premature death at age twenty-six. His working years as an artist were relatively few, and Deverell left behind only a small selection of drawings and paintings, many of which have been destroyed or whose present whereabouts are unknown. And although he was an active member of the Cyclographic Society—a forerunner of the P.R.B.—and a popular comrade of the youthful artistic community grouped around Rossetti, Hunt and Millais, Deverell was not, as Mary Lutyens concludes in her recent essay on the artist's life,¹ a formally elected member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. But this is of small importance; what matters are his ties to the Brotherhood and how the Pre-Raphaelite core viewed his position.

Surprisingly, Deverell's name was never mentioned as possible member in contemporary documents concerning the selection of the original Brotherhood. It has been suggested that Deverell himself was opposed to his election on the ground that membership in a militant artistic organization might jeopardize his recently assumed position as Assistant Master at the Government School of Design,² but as Deverell continued to associate with the group and paint in the style popularly described as "Pre-Raphaelite" this seems unlikely. Surely in terms of his professional standing mere association could have been just as damning as election to the group; yet no one at the Government School seems to have disapproved of Deverell's style of painting.³

There is no evidence that Deverell was disappointed by his exclusion from the Brotherhood. Nor was Deverell, who could always be

counted on as a willing conspirator, excluded from P.R.B. activities. When the Brothers needed money to finance their unsuccessful foray into literature, *The Germ*, they turned to the gainfully employed Deverell to provide funds as well as literary and artistic contributions. He was asked to join Rossetti, Hunt and Stephens in the leasing of a studio in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, the door knocker of which was to bear the initials "P.R.B." or "Please Ring Bell" to the uninitiated. And although the idea was eventually abandoned because of the expense,⁴ the venture does imply that Deverell was aware of the real meaning of the supposedly secret initials "P.R.B." But Deverell's most significant contribution to the history of the P.R.B., and the one he is best remembered for, must be his accidental discovery of Elizabeth Siddal in a milliner's shop off Leicester Square.⁵ Deverell was most interested in her potential as a model for the figure of Viola in his current painting *Twelfth Night*. But the enthusiasm which prompted his friend Rossetti to attend the sitting changed the course of the latter's life and art.

When *Twelfth Night* was unveiled alongside Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini* at the National Institution exhibition of 1850, Deverell's Pre-Raphaelite status was confirmed by the popular press. The fine points of election did not save him from the accusation of "aping the imperfections with the earnestness of art on its revival after the middle ages,"⁶ or condemnation as "a careful worker" whose "mannerism is more conspicuous than his genius."⁷ The real Brothers fared no better and they reacted in a variety of ways to the negative reception of their paintings, ranging from Rossetti's vow never to exhibit again to James Collinson's formal resignation from the P.R.B.

Collinson's departure again raised the question of election, and Deverell was the obvious heir apparent to the empty seat. There is some suggestion that the Brothers may have been planning to include Deverell of-