

THE COUNTRY BANKER'S WIFE, THE ARTIST,  
AND THE CRITIC: JULIA RAE, DANTE GABRIEL  
ROSSETTI, AND FREDERIC GEORGE STEPHENS

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By May 1872 the successful Birkenhead banker George Rae (1817-1902) had built up an impressive art collection which included at least fourteen works by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, which he displayed on the walls of his family home on Devonshire Road, Claughton. "It is a grand thing to be the owner of more 'Rossettis' than 'any other man,'" he wrote proudly to Rossetti, "but it has its drawbacks. The number of persons who desire to see them is increasing.... Well – I think of having a catalogue printed. I must either do this, or allow my wife to be walked off her legs, or talk herself into chronic hoarseness, in performing her part of showwoman" (Rae, letter to Rossetti, 11 May 1872, U.B.C.).<sup>1</sup>

The "showwoman" he referred to was his second wife, Julia, who had married Rae in April 1855, after his first wife, Elspeth, had died suddenly in 1851, leaving three children under the age of five: George Bentham, Edward, and Alice. Julia Williams was only 20 years old when she married George Rae, then aged about 38. While her interest in Rossetti's works and her role in showing guests around the Raes' art collection has been acknowledged (see Treuherz 13-19; Macleod 114-15), little has been published on the part Julia played in influencing the actual composition and display of a number of Rossetti's works and on her regular visits to the artist's London studio with her husband to monitor and encourage its progress. In particular, her correspondence with Rossetti and later with his close friend and loyal supporter, the critic Frederic George Stephens, has remained unexplored, as has the important role she played in preserving the Rossetti collection for the nation on the death of her husband. It is these aspects of this remarkable young Welsh woman that I shall address.

Julia Williams was born in 1835 in the ancient village of Llanblethian, Glamorgan, an agricultural community situated to the west of Cardiff in south Wales, and her baptismal record states she was the daughter of Jane and John