

LIVES AND HEARTS IN PRE-RAPHAELITE ENGLAND:  
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVELS OF VIOLET HUNT

Today Violet Hunt (1862-1942) is probably best known for the company she kept -- particularly for her relationship with Ford Madox Ford, with whom she lived during the decade preceding World War I. "The last Pre-Raphaelite," she and others called Ford,<sup>1</sup> whose grandfather was Ford Madox Brown and whose aunt married William Rossetti. Violet Hunt herself, however, could more appropriately lay claim to the title.

Violet Hunt's father, Alfred William Hunt, was a successful landscape painter on the edges of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. He was championed by Ruskin and admired by the younger Pre-Raphaelite painters. (E. Burne-Jones remembered coming across Alfred W. Hunt at art dealers when an Oxford Undergraduate: "We used to be allowed to look at Alfred Hunt passing through the shop -- it would have been too great an honour to be allowed to speak to him."<sup>2</sup>) Her mother, Margaret Hunt, wrote popular three-decker novels. Like her daughter after her, Margaret Hunt was an impressive social figure who brought the world of artistic London into her drawing room. When she died in 1912, The London Times commented: "As a talker and wit Mrs. Hunt was regarded by literary and artistic circles of the 'seventies' and 'eighties' as being one of the most brilliant of those years. Her friendships were many and various, including those of Ruskin, Rossetti, Wilde, Mr. Chamberlain, Sir Charles Dilke, and Ford Madox Brown."

As a young girl, Violet Hunt followed her father on his visits to the studios of his Pre-Raphaelite friends, and she listened to the talk of the prominent artists and writers who came into her home. Fascinated by the world of celebrities which surrounded her, Hunt asked questions of those who could tell her more. "I visited Lady Simon and Mrs. Virtue Tebbs and begged them to tell me all about Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, which they obligingly did, doctoring ugly incidents a little for my young ears. But those I got from my mother later." Her unpublished papers also record conversations with Holman Hunt, who told her: "There were only three P.R.B's, Rossetti, Millais, and [my]self."<sup>3</sup> With her auburn hair, large eyes, and expressive, melancholy mouth, Violet was pleased when others saw her as a budding Pre-Raphaelite beauty. She notes in her diary, for example, that when she met Ellen Terry at a party, the famous actress exclaimed: "Out of Botticelli by Burne-Jones."

While still in her teens, and with the Pre-Raphaelites as her models, Violet herself studied painting at the Kensington Art School and began writing poetry and fiction. As late as 1931, when she contributed to an exhibition of author-artists at the Foyle Art Gallery, newspaper reviewers noted the Pre-Raphaelite influence on her work.