

*The Rhymers' Club: Poets of the Tragic Generation* by Norman Alford. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1994. x, 165 pp. ISBN 0-333-63823-9.

As W.B. Yeats remarked of his outlook in the late 1880s, "I was in all things Pre-Raphaelite." When his father moved the family to London, Yeats gravitated to Hammersmith and spent evenings in the company of William Morris, briefly espousing the cause of Socialism. A few years later Yeats's commitment to communal thought and effort took another turn. Around 1890 or 1891, he and two other Celts, Ernest Rhys and T. W. Rolleston, founded the *Rhymers' Club*, a circle that met at the Cheshire Cheese to dine on beefsteaks and ale before retiring to upper chambers to read poems aloud and, within the scope allowed by courteous formality, criticize each other's work.

It is the history of this organization and its principal members that Norman Alford sets forth in *The Rhymers' Club*. Though establishing the Pre-Raphaelite foundation of the group is outside Alford's purpose, his book indicates this genealogy of the Rhymers in several instances. Like D.G. Rossetti, Yeats, and another Rhymers' Club member, Edwin J. Ellis, were interested in Blake, publishing a study of his work in 1893. Pater influenced the Rhymers' commitment to exquisite diction, analysis of emotion, poetic prose, and pursuit of intense experience. Indeed, Yeats was later to wonder whether Pater's work lay behind the disastrous excesses that led to the early deaths of Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson.

The plan of Alford's book somewhat resembles that of another book on fin-de-siecle writers, Katherine Lyon Mix's and *A Study in Yellow: The Yellow Book and Its Contributors* (1960). First narrating the Rhymers' founding and publication of the group's two anthologies of verse, Alford then details the interwoven careers of five of the twelve members – Yeats, Arthur Symons, Dowson, Johnson, and John Davidson – before examining the club's demise. One of Alford's aims is to reconstruct perspectives consistent with views in 1891-1896 rather than those presented in retrospective accounts years later, when authors had different allegiances and pliant memories that shaped reminiscences accordingly. Whereas Yeats emphasizes Dowson and Johnson in his autobiography, for example, relegating the nine other Rhymers to shadowy margins, Alford convincingly demonstrates that it was instead Symons and Johnson who initially had most influence on Yeats.

In keeping with his aim of establishing the Rhymers' contemporary milieu, Alford also liberally quotes from fin-de-siecle periodicals, including less-studied titles like the *Star* or *Daily Chronicle*; Yeats's 23 April 1892 causerie from the *Boston Pilot*, entitled "The Rhymers' Club," is reprinted in full in an appendix. Also useful is the appendix listing titles and contributors of poems published in the 1892 *Book of the Rhymers' Club* and 1894 *Second Book of the Rhymers' Club*.