

Effie: The Passionate Lives of Effie Gray, John Ruskin and John Everett Millais by Suzanne Fagence Cooper. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010. 276 pp. + 10 colour plates, 24 b/w illus. ISBN 978-1-250-01625-6. \$15.99.

Effie: The Passionate Lives of Effie Gray, John Ruskin and John Everett Millais by Suzanne Fagence Cooper is a beautifully written account of the life of Euphemia Chalmers Gray, wife to two figureheads of the Victorian art scene. Cooper's biography is a compelling page-turner that evokes not simply the world of art and art criticism, but also the experiences of women at the vanguard of social change in the nineteenth century, by means of Effie's refreshing perspective. Extremely candid about the more sensational questions regarding sexuality, impotence, and annulment associated with Effie's first marriage to John Ruskin, Cooper's biography contextualizes Ruskin's early life with Effie and then moves on to an analysis of her relationship with John Everett Millais (Everett, as he is called in the biography). Somewhat disappointingly, Ruskin recedes into the background midway through the text, as Effie's second marriage sees her endorsing the art establishment as opposed to the artistic avant-garde that Ruskin once epitomized.

Cooper's new perspective on Effie Gray comes from a treasure-trove of letters, written by Effie to her family members and friends, that have until recently remained cloistered in the archives. Previously, readers accessed Effie's thoughts in a selection of letters edited and published by Mary Lutyens in 1967 and 1972. In January 2009, at Cooper's request, Sir Geoffroy Millais agreed to lend a substantial portion of the family's papers to the Tate Gallery Archive. For the first time in a century, Effie's letters from her father and her mother, her sisters, and her children could be read by someone outside the family. Fifteen bulging brown-paper packages were turned over to Cooper, packages that contained thousands of letters dating from Effie's schooldays right up to her death. Piecing these letters together like a giant jigsaw puzzle, Cooper has produced a vision of this extremely compelling Victorian woman and the fascinating nineteenth-century past.

Beginning on Tuesday, 25 April 1854 – the day that Effie said goodbye to her husband, Ruskin, for the last time – Cooper's triangularized biography addresses the drama at the heart of this famous and later infamous Victorian relationship. Cooper celebrates Effie's heroism in her choice to seek an annulment and face a court case, not to mention the indignities of being examined by doctors to prove that she was still a virgin after six years of marriage, rather than remain in an unfulfilling union. For Cooper, Effie "is not just a witness; she is also an agent of change. Her own actions in leaving Ruskin mark her out as a woman who is willing to defy expectations. She helps to reshape Victorian femininity."