

ROGER PEATTIE

“Pain to Surviving Relatives”: Another Defence of Effie Millais

“Albert Gray” and “Albert Gray again,” William Michael Rossetti noted unhelpfully in his diary on 24 May and 7 June, 1904.¹ Readers of Rossetti’s largely unpublished diaries will be familiar with his infuriating habit of recording cryptically whenever he faced particularly thorny problems or, even more frustrating, giving up his diary altogether during periods of crisis such as his brother’s breakdown in 1872. By 19 June Rossetti considered that he had the problem sufficiently under control to enter a brief account of what was undoubtedly the most troublesome controversy of his thirty years as chronicler of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement. That the controversy turned on the veracity of Charles Augustus Howell, about whom he had earlier observed in his diary, on hearing of Howell’s death, that he was “a man whom I certainly did not esteem, but did none the less to a certain extent like” (28 April 1880), made the task of placating Gray all the more unpalatable.

Sun. June 19. Albert Gray—This gentleman, a son of Gray the Father of Lady Millais, wrote to me late in May, objecting to 2 statements publ. in R. [*Rossetti Papers*, 1903], to the effect that Ruskin had made a regular allowance to Mr. and Mrs. Gray, and that Lady M. retained £40,000 settled upon her at the date of her marriage to Ruskin. These 2 statements were given by me as coming from Howell. Mr. A. G. asserts them to be absolute fictions. I offered to him that I wd. write a letter to the *Athenaeum* withdrawing the statements: & today I wrote such letter, & posted it to Gray in order that (whatever may result as to the Ath.) he may know that I have fulfilled my offer.

A fuller account of this episode is now made possible by bringing together both sides of

the correspondence: Rossetti’s letters are among the papers given to the Bodleian Library in 1938 following the death of Gray’s widow and Gray’s letters in the Angeli-Dennis Papers.

Albert Gray (1850-1928; knighted in 1919), the second last of George and Sophia Gray’s fifteen children, makes only an occasional appearance in accounts of the relationship between Ruskin, Millais, and the Grays.² Effie was in the third year of her marriage to Ruskin when Albert was born in October 1850. Her presence at Bowerswell for his birth prompted her much-quoted letter to Rawdon Brown in which she surmised that “if I had children my health might be quite restored.”³

As a youth Albert made himself agreeable to Millais, who wrote to Effie in 1867: “I am quite delighted that Albert is here. He is a very companionable, capital fellow.”⁴ After a period in the Ceylon Civil Service, he was called to the Bar at the Inner Temple in 1879 and from 1896 to 1922 was Counsel to the Chairman of Committees in the House of Lords, thereby adding to what his nephew, Admiral Sir William James, has called the “long line of Scottish legal luminaries” from which he descended.⁵ But it is as the defender of his sister’s reputation following her death in 1897 that Albert Gray is usually remembered. Along with Effie’s daughters, Mary Millais and Lady Stuart of Wortley, he devoted himself to “buying letters which without the context might damage her memory, and overtaking false statements after publication” (James 4). His most notable action was the purchase in 1924 of the statement about his marriage that Ruskin made to his proctor on