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In Defence of William Fulford: A Minor Pre-Raphaelite Poet

In retrospective accounts of the Oxford University friendships of Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris, William Fulford (1831-1897) is described by Georgiana Burne-Jones, Richard Watson Dixon and Frederic W. Macdonald as enjoying a brief celebrity as a vivacious and leading member of the "Set."¹ These published records inform us that Fulford came from Birmingham, attended the local King Edward's School, where he was some two years senior to Burne-Jones and Dixon, and went up to Pembroke College, Oxford, to be later joined there by Dixon. When at Oxford, he was a good, though compulsive, talker. Margaret Price, for example, writes (*Memorials*, I:144-145) to her brother Cormell:

We spent a very happy day. . . . Fulford was in the most noisy, quizzical humour imaginable, no one could get a word in edgeways for him, and whenever Topsy [Morris] wanted to say anything he sprang into the middle of the room and flourished his fists till Fulford was silenced. Fulford talked for quite three hours without stopping excepting for Morris' flourishes.

Having taken his BA degree in 1854 (a Third in *Literae Humaniores*), Fulford joined Burne-Jones and Morris on their long vacation tour of northern France in 1855, an occasion when, very revealingly, Morris especially wanted to see Chartres, Burne-Jones, the Louvre, and Fulford, Paris. On their return he helped coach Morris for his pass degree. The following year (1856) the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* was launched, funded by Morris, who also edited the first number. Its aim had been, as Dixon recalled (Caine, 36), to "advocate moral earnestness and purpose in literature, art, and society. It was founded much on Mr. Ruskin's teaching." Morris, however, had no taste for editorial duties, and so promptly paid Fulford a salary

of £100 a year to take over the editorship, which Fulford did until the magazine folded after its twelfth monthly issue.

Another bond linking Fulford with Burne-Jones and other contemporaries from Birmingham was their long acquaintance with the Macdonald sisters, the daughters of a Methodist minister who were the object of much male admiration in Birmingham and later in London. Fulford's attentions were later described (*Memorials*, I: 67) by one of these daughters, Georgiana:

We little girls liked and admired him very much, and he was very kind to us. He was the first person we had ever heard read poetry aloud, and admirably he did it, with his fine voice and fervent love of what he read. . . . He loved music, also, and taught us the names and some of the works of Beethoven and Mendelssohn.

Fulford was to become engaged, twice, to one of these girls, Alice, and their eventually broken engagement supplies the most probable reason why Fulford disappears from Pre-Raphaelite records after 1859. For whereas Georgiana proceeded to marry Burne-Jones in 1860, Alice went on to marry John Lockwood Kipling in 1865 (and to become the mother of Rudyard), and it is likely that the difficult emotional relationship that persisted between Fulford and Alice after 1859 would have kept him out of the way of the Burne-Joneses, and hence of their close friends, the Morrisises.

From here on Fulford's life proves sparse in established detail.² According to the conventional viewpoint (Sambrook, 14; Taylor, 46), the effervescent Fulford became very serious, entered the church and, unlike Morris and Burne-Jones, was sidelined into a routine life of earnest but dull piety. J.W. Mackail, Burne-Jones's son-in-law, did not mince matters in his analysis (I: 38) of Fulford's later career: "By the time