

## AN OVERLOOKED SOURCE ON OSCAR WILDE AND THE PRE-RAPHAELITES

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In the 1970s when I was studying the archives of the Mount-Temple papers, once stored in the muniment room of the family estate Broadlands, Romsey, Hampshire, but then moved temporarily to the Hampshire Record Office in Winchester (where I studied them) for eventual transfer to the Hartley Library at the University of Southampton – all of this in preparation for my book *Christmas Story: John Ruskin's Venetian Letters* (1990), I noted that among the Broadlands Estate documents, Box BR57, there were two packets of letters from Constance Wilde (wife of Oscar Wilde) to Lady Mount-Temple, dated 1889-97. I took only a few notes, this correspondence not germane to my project. Since then I have noticed that apparently neither Richard Ellmann, in what has been regarded as the definitive biography of Oscar Wilde (1988), nor Barbara Belford, in her revisionist biography of Wilde (2000), knew about these letters. Nor did Rupert Hart-Davis in his earlier *The Letters from Oscar Wilde* (1962), which includes some correspondence from Constance. The letters also escaped attention from Anne Clark Amor in her earlier *Mrs. Oscar Wilde: A Woman of Some Importance* (1983), although she does include information on the distant blood relationship of the two ladies, and their long friendship, especially after the death of Lord Mount-Temple in 1888. These letters at Southampton then are a new window on Wilde's trial of 1896 for sexual relations with Alfred Lord Douglas, his conviction, and imprisonment in Reading Gaol.

The letters also may offer new insights on Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his association with Lady Mount-Temple. This friendship had begun earlier when Rossetti persuaded the Cowper-Temples to redecorate their house in London with Morris wallpaper, and to fill the staircase window with glass by Burne-Jones (Burd 53). By 1871 the Cowper-Temples had purchased Rossetti's *Beata Beatrice* (Surtees 1:93), perhaps on Ruskin's suggestion (Ruskin 36: '1'), which would remain in the family until the death of Lord Mount-Temple when the estate passed to the next male heir, Evelyn Ashley. At this point Lady Mount-