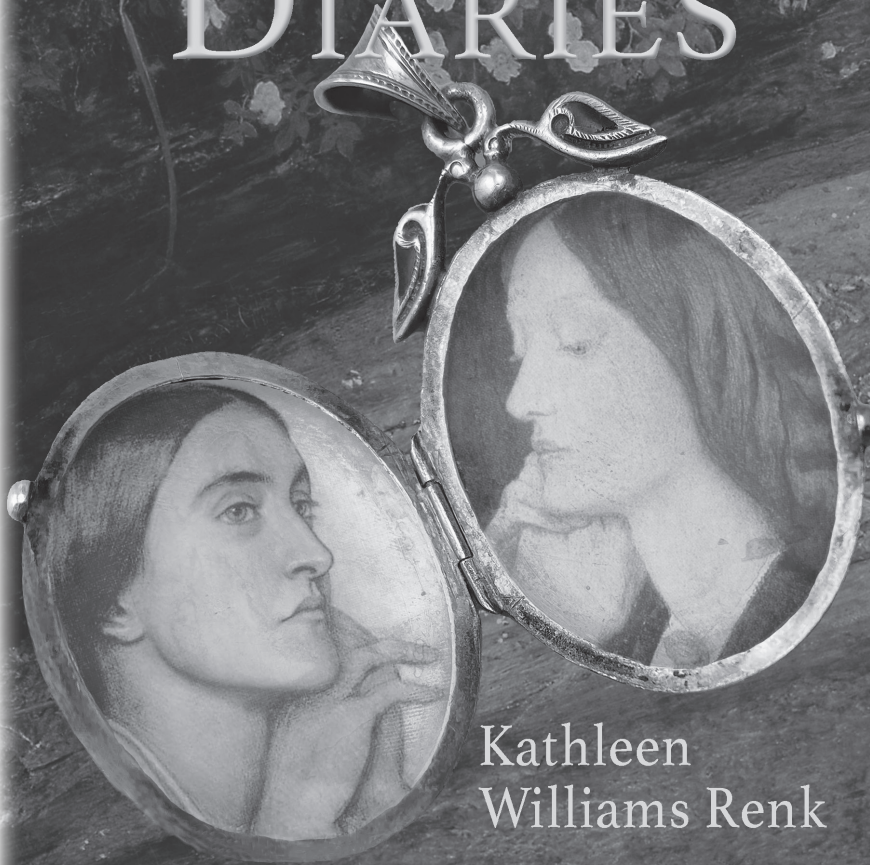


The Rossetti DIARIES



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Hastings

“I’m sorry, but you should come back tomorrow,” the old woman said perturbed, as she locked the church’s door and began to walk away. “My Reginald is waiting for his tea.”

“Might you reconsider? I’ll be ever so swift,” Maggie replied. “Please, I only set aside a short time for this research.”

Although Hastings is famous for being the place where in 1066 William the Bastard, better known as the Duke of Normandy, put an arrow through King Harold’s eye and afterwards ruled England as William the Conqueror, the historian Maggie Winegarten had never been to Hastings until now. Instead, rather than studying the Norman invasion, she specialised in the history of World War II. She’d read that after bombing London and northern industrial cities, including Manchester and her home, Sheffield, Nazi pilots, in an effort to lighten their load, dropped the remainder of their payload on Hastings. Maggie wished to investigate the Norman church, St. Clement’s, which sat atop a hill overlooking the sea in Old Town Hastings, which had been frequently bombed in 1943. Following her visit, she hoped to write an article for publication about the German attack on Hastings and the decimation of countless Norman and Anglo-Saxon buildings. Such scholarship would help advance her career, for she needed to publish more articles in order to apply for a senior lectureship at the university where she taught.

But, while in Hastings, she also wished to gaze at the sea to soothe her spirit. She and her partner Bethany had had a falling out, for Bethany, a Victorian literary scholar and professor, disliked the fact that Maggie, who had studied art before turning to history, had recently started painting again after visiting the David Hockney exhibit in Saltaire Village near Bradford. Of late, she spent most of her free time mixing colours while trying to capture the shades of green that saturated the landscape of the Northern fells in Yorkshire. Bent on achieving international fame for herself, Bethany thought painting a whimsical, foolish occupation that would never help Maggie achieve the teaching rank that Bethany desired for her. But painting was Maggie’s first love above all else.

When Bethany tried to dissuade Maggie from heading out once more to try to capture on canvas what she saw in and on the fells, Maggie

announced, as she grabbed her easel and paints, “You don’t understand. I’m an artist. I need to create. It’s who I am. If I don’t paint or draw, I don’t feel fully alive. I’ve neglected part of myself for too long.” But then Bethany snidely reminded Maggie that Maggie’s art teachers insisted that she was no Vanessa Bell, Dora Carrington, *or* David Hockney; her art was inferior to the works of these British artists. As she walked out the door, Maggie couldn’t hide her hurt feelings and she angrily replied, “Beth, how could you? That was low. You claim to love me, but what you just said was belittling and contemptuous. And you’ve no right to dictate how I spend my time. I’ll work on my scholarship when I wish to, not when you think I should. You’re not in charge of my life.” That evening, after Maggie returned, she and Bethany did not speak and for the first time in their seven-year relationship, they slept in separate beds. In the morning, Maggie boarded the train to Hastings.

But, for now, Maggie tried not to think about that row and the rift between her and her lover. She’d visit the church to gather facts for her research and then she’d descend to the shore to study the sea. She would put off thinking about Bethany’s offensive remark, her orders about how to live and thrive. Instead, Maggie would observe the way the sunlight danced on the waves. She would try to mimic nature and paint what she saw before the sun hid its face for the night. There would be time later to sort out her relationship with Bethany.

“If you promise to be quick, I’ll let you in; my Reginald is not a patient man,” the caretaker replied gruffly, as she turned back toward the church.

“Oh, thank you so much. I promise I’ll be brief.”

As she pointed her cane toward an exterior wall, the old woman spoke in a more congenial but authoritative manner. “You might be interested to note that there’s still a cannonball left in the building from one of the countless French attacks over the centuries.”

“Indeed. I’ll be sure to take a look after I see the interior. Why *was* the cannonball left in place?”

“I’m sure the town fathers wished to remember our troubled history with the French who live straight across the channel,” the caretaker remarked as she placed a large skeleton key in the lock. “Who knows when they’ll return to try to decimate us once more.”

The heavy oak door groaned as the caretaker struggled to open it. Maggie immediately saw that St. Clement’s resembled countless Anglican churches in England. The baptismal font in the back, the choral pews perpendicular

to the altar, the magnificent and elaborate arched stained glass behind it that depicted the crucified Christ.

As they walked down the right aisle, the caretaker related the church's history. "The original church washed away, for it was foolishly constructed too close to the sea. This edifice was built in 1286; even so the French ransacked the town and destroyed the church in 1339 and 1377, so the townspeople rebuilt it in 1380." Maggie thought about this woman's particular disdain for the French, which was not unusual for people of her generation. Youngsters during World War II, they were influenced by their parents, who often considered the French cowards and enemies, even though they were allies at the time.

Maggie nodded to acknowledge the caretaker's words, but then looked up at the ceiling and was overcome by the beauty above her. The dome resembled the sky itself. Painted a robin's egg blue and dotted with wispy white clouds, in each corner the virtues of Faith, Hope, Charity, and Fortitude were allegorically depicted as graceful maidens holding flowers; "Fortitude" grasped yellow poppies. No doubt the architect placed those figures there to remind parishioners over the centuries which virtues were most important, if one sought heavenly salvation from the perpetual miseries of earthly life. Then Maggie turned toward the wall and glanced at the unadorned, clear glass that graced each arched window.

The caretaker noticed that Maggie's gaze had shifted and said, "You're probably wondering about the clear glass. In 1943, when the German devils mercilessly bombed this area, all of the stained glass shattered from the blasts that destroyed the building next door, the Old Swan Inn. Afterwards, the congregation thought it prudent to install plain glass in the windows, but they did commission the artist Philip Cole to design and create the glass behind the altar."

"Oh, I see. That makes perfect sense," Maggie remarked as she turned toward the altar. "The altar glass is extraordinary. I like how the artist used bold colours, reds and yellows, to depict the disciples and onlookers, but Christ is dressed in pure white, as if He were already resurrected."

"True enough," the caretaker said and then paused. "You seem attracted to art. Perhaps you'll wish to look in this direction." She pointed toward a painting Maggie instantly recognized. It was one of the earliest of the Pre-Raphaelite paintings, painted by Dante Rossetti. It was his *The Annunciation*, later called *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (Behold the handmaiden of the Lord), where Rossetti posed his prepubescent sister Christina as the Virgin, and his brother William as Angel Gabriel. Christina seems surprised and fearful, nearly cowering in the presence of the angel. She appears hesitant to accept

her role as a handmaiden of the Lord, much like Jesus's reluctance to do God's will. Maggie recalled from her Art History course that some Victorian art critics denounced the painting for being too earthy and sensual. The child Mary is in her bed, perhaps awakened from sleep by a male angel who has snuck into her bed chamber. The wingless angel has flames at his feet, and he's handing a lily to Mary, but she is not reaching out to accept it. The angel is also rather scandalous, for his bare skin can be easily seen through his gossamer clothing.

"Oh, my! Why does the church own a Rossetti painting? Were the Rossettis parishioners here? Did they live here at any time?"

"Heavens no. But Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal frequently sojourned in Hastings, and Elizabeth often painted in Old Town. Most importantly, I suppose, is the fact that Dante Rossetti and Miss Siddal were married here in 1860. In fact, last May 23rd they were married here one hundred and fifty-nine years ago," she proudly replied. "We've been told that the painting, which is a copy, was a gift from the family in 1928 on the centenary of Dante's birth. During that time, the church community created a memorial to the Rossettis, including, of course, Dante's wife, Elizabeth. Did you know that she was also an artist?"

Maggie had no idea that this old church exhibited a famous Rossetti painting, well, a copy of one. And she wondered why this particular painting was given to the church and not one of Lizzie Siddal, who Maggie knew was Dante's favourite subject who mysteriously died of a laudanum overdose. Whether a suicide or an accident no one really knew. "How unexpected it is to have this painting of Christina as the Virgin adorning the wall of this church," she said as she gazed into Christina's frightened eyes. "Yes, I've heard that Elizabeth drew and painted, but I've never studied any of her work. By any chance, do you know why this painting was bestowed on the church and not another, perhaps one of Elizabeth Siddal, who was Dante's almost exclusive subject. He frequently painted her as the Italian Beatrice, the mediaeval Dante Alighieri's 'beloved.'"

"Yes, I'm aware of Dante's preference for Elizabeth as his subject and his obsession with Dante Alighieri. It seems Rossetti somehow thought that he was the new Dante, the Victorian one, I suppose. I can't say why the family gave the church this painting of Christina," the caretaker replied. "But I suppose it's because Christina was a devout Anglican who attended this church when she visited Hastings."

"I see." Maggie turned away from Christina's fearful face. "I wonder what Christina was thinking as her brother posed her as the girl that God impregnated."

The caretaker blushed. "You're a bold one. I'm sure Christina considered it an honour, after all she was devoted to God."

"Did the Rossetti family leave any documents that relate to the gift? Perhaps they'd explain Dante's interest in this subject, this Annunciation, this announcement that Mary will give birth to God. If so, I'd love to see them."

The caretaker hesitated. "Are you a literary critic? We don't allow such people to study our archives. The vicar thinks they perhaps misconstrue such papers."

"No, certainly not. I'm not a whimsical person. I'm Dr. Maggie Winegarden, an historian in Sheffield, but I study painting as my avocation. I've seen the Pre-Raphaelites' paintings at the Tate. Unfortunately, my Victorian Art History course only focused on the Pre-Raphaelite male painters." Maggie not only thought about her own attraction to these painters but also about Bethany's interest in and knowledge of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the painters and writers who referred to themselves as the PRB and who shook up the Victorian art world when they challenged the style of the time. Instead of painting, as the Royal Academy painters did, banal portraits of Queen Victoria's spaniels and ponies or a herd of cows grazing in a bucolic pasture, the PRB painted stunning portraits of long-haired, lithesome women, often portrayed as mediaeval maidens. The most famous painting and the one most reproduced was John Everett Millais's *Ophelia*, a painting that Lizzie Siddal modelled for in a cold bath that was supposed to mimic the stream that Ophelia floated down and drowned in after Hamlet rejected her. Maggie recalled that Lizzie herself nearly died from lying in that bath after the candles resting below the bath blew out with a gust of wind. Bethany wasn't as fascinated as Maggie was by the paintings, for Bethany claimed she couldn't comprehend art; she had no head for it, but she had written numerous articles about the poetry, especially Dante Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel" about a dead lover looking down from heaven with longing for her living partner.

The caretaker nodded and seemed reassured. "Well, in that case, we do have a large chest full of papers that the Rossetti family buried in our catacomb for safekeeping. I don't think anyone has glanced at the papers in years. According to the vicar, Reverend Mr. Carson, they're rather a jumble, if you know what I mean, and quite old and delicate. If you come back tomorrow, you may look at them, if you assure me that you'll take care as you handle them. You'll need to wear gloves. She placed her finger on her chin as if considering something. "The vicar's on holiday, but I think he'd allow you to take a peep at them, since you're no literary sleuth. You may look around

a bit more, but I must lock up soon. I must get my Reginald his tea or he'll be beside himself, wondering where I am. He'll think that I stumbled and fell down the hill and may try to come find me."

"Oh, dear. I hope your Reginald stays put. I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"I'm Mrs. Reginald Highclere."

"Yes, thank you kindly, Mrs. Highclere. I've seen enough for today," Maggie replied. "I don't need to look around, but I would like to return in the morning if it isn't too much trouble. What time is best?"

"Be here at eight sharp. I'll have fed my Reginald by then."

"Oh, I'll be here early," Maggie said, as the caretaker locked the door and ambled down the path, gingerly placing her cane on each stone step.

Maggie didn't pause to observe the cannonball left behind by the French. She knew that her research plans had changed. She would not travel to London tomorrow nor return to Sheffield the day after. She felt exhilarated at the thought that there might be a treasure trove of Rossetti writings that no one had perused. Perhaps they'd provide a hint about Christina's attitude toward being cast as the Virgin or about Lizzie Siddal's sudden death, something Maggie had long wondered about. She considered what Bethany would think of such a literary cache; surely, if genuine, such a find might change all that we know about Dante Rossetti, his art, and the women associated with him. And Maggie speculated about what Bethany would do with it if she got her hands on such treasure. Surely, such a find would give Bethany fame and fortune, the two aspirations she most desired.

Maggie stood on the hill and felt the sun warm her face. She looked down the path toward the sea, watching the sunlight sparkling on the water. She felt excited as she started to descend the path, recalling that the Pre-Raphaelites painted from nature. So, today she would work like a Pre-Raphaelite artist. She would study the light on the sea and paint until the sun sank in the sky, and then in the evening she would spend time on her laptop learning more about Elizabeth Siddal. She hoped that the inn she was staying at had a strong Wi-Fi connection; otherwise, the evening's research would be futile, and she would have to try to imagine what it was like to be Lizzie Siddal.

29 September 2019

Hastings

Mrs. Highclere was waiting for Maggie in the church vestibule.

"Please forgive my tardiness, Mrs. Highclere. I set my alarm for half seven, but it failed to ring," Maggie said. "Perhaps I accidentally turned it off