

The following review of *The Dove Upon Her Branch: A Novel Portrait of Christina Rossetti* by D. M. Denton featured in the summer issue of the PRS Review magazine, XXII, Number 2, Summer 2024

‘Melancholy helps me find my joy.’

So says Christina Rossetti in *The Dove Upon Her Branch*, D.M. Denton’s thorough and expressive novel-portrait of the celebrated author’s life. It is an incisive comment, one which the readers of Rossetti will quickly recognise in her poetry. Anyone who has read ‘When I am dead, my dearest’ cannot fail to be moved by its aching finality, and its heart-felt simplicity. And yet, in reading Denton’s well-researched volume, it becomes ever clearer that we must not reduce Rossetti merely to a Victorian stereotype, a wistful and longing woman with only melancholy to express. Rather, Denton’s portrait depicts a person in their entirety: their joys, triumphs, disappointments, and trials.

Denton’s novel is very evidently a labour of love, meticulously researched and crafted, which brings together academic research and creative reconstruction. It offers not only an insight into Rossetti’s life, but more broadly into the interior workings of the Pre Raphaelite Brotherhood and their acquaintances. The interconnectedness of the Victorian radical art scene becomes apparent from very early on; Christina Rossetti’s entanglements with the artists and poets outside of her immediate family have a very evident impact on her development as a poet in her own right. Denton writes convincingly about the literary circles of the time: from Christina’s encounters with Charles Dodgson to the artistic community which built up around the Rossettis’ various houses –notably 56 Euston Square which played host to gatherings that included Julia Margaret Cameron. The discussions and debates are tenderly drawn, and even characters who appear infrequently have distinctive and vivid voices.

Yet the most well-drawn characters must certainly be the Rossettis themselves, with Christina Rossetti at the heart. Denton provides an exploration of the unconventional life of the family, from its establishment in England through the lives of its artistic, and wildly different, offspring. The closeness of the family, particularly of Christina and her mother, is highlighted, and at times feels almost claustrophobic. Denton depicts the joys of family life with humour but does not shy away from the practicalities of Victorian life, realities like having enough coal for the fire. And while the relationship between the siblings is warm and supportive, there is still a hint of jealousy, particularly regarding their poetic endeavours. 51 *The Dove Upon Her Branch*, although superficially the story of Christina Rossetti, actually goes beyond that: it is a story of a family, a saga.

In doing so, however, Denton does not neglect her key focus. She interweaves primary source material, most often poetry, into her narrative in order to give a real sense that we are witnessing Christina’s innermost thoughts and emotions. This is most powerful at moments of vulnerability, especially Christina’s frequent periods of illness and moments of grief. Her relationships, and sometimes regrets at ending them, provide much inspiration for her poetry, and the blending of poetry and story highlight this beautifully. Moreover, Denton delves into the complexities of Rossetti’s character in an effort to avoid reducing her to a fragile, two-dimensional Victorian stereotype. Christina ‘wasn’t comfortable with ambition but wasn’t immune to it’; she was ‘impeded’ by her prettiness and stoically endured its loss after several health battles; she was intensely charitable and despaired at seeing ‘a child swallowed by this monster’ at the gates of a

workhouse. Denton's portrait is of a multifaceted woman: sometimes fragile and vulnerable, sometimes strong and demanding, sometimes caring and maternal to those around her.

Some of the most memorable parts of this impressive novel-portrait, however, are the humorous and vivid portrayals of the chaos of bohemian Victorian life. Nowhere is this more comically evident than in the description of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's menagerie, an 'animal hoard' that included owls, a parrot, and a wombat. The quirks and habits of Christina herself are also sometimes written with a wry smile, and the reader will not struggle to imagine Rossetti pasting paper over the salubrious lines in Swinburne's poetry or demolishing a room in a violent fit of youthful temper.

The final pieces of the tapestry of research and imagination that makes up this novel are Denton's own illustrations which begin each part of the narrative. These monochrome pencil sketches bring to life Denton's Christina: as a toddling child, a beautiful young woman surrounded by nature, a thoughtful older writer. In much the same vein as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's ekphrastic portraits with sonnets written on the frames, Denton's prose and illustrations work beautifully together, blending art and word, image, and text in a memorable way. *The Dove Upon Her Branch* is a true labour of love, and an honest, moving portrait of one of the Victorian era's most intriguing figures.

Sian Mitchell, Pre-Raphaelite Society reviewer