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Second Thoughts On Rossetti: Tennyson's Revised Letter of October 12, 1882

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For the different version in the *Memoir*, with manuscript details and with the later Rawnsley triplet, see my edition of the poems.

Christopher Ricks

**Second Thoughts on D. G. Rossetti: Tennyson's Revised Letter of
12 October 1882**

Although Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr. include in *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson* the incomplete draft of a letter Tennyson prepared to send William Sharp (1855-1905), the writer, poet, and friend and biographer of D. G. Rossetti, they overlook a printing of the letter as actually sent, after Tennyson revised it significantly. The draft is of interest because it bears on Rossetti's famous sketch of Tennyson reading from 'Maud' and because Tennyson expresses in it a sympathetic evaluation of Rossetti's character and a desire to have known him much better: 'Nor have I any letter from him nor do I remember his being present when I was reading the proofsheets of Maud. Indeed I would willingly have known so fine a spirit more intimately, but he kept himself so shut up that it [was] [sic] all but impossible to come at him. What you call "intimacy" never advanced much beyond acquaintance' (*Letters*, III, 232).

The text of the letter as received by Sharp appears in the two volume biography of him prepared by his wife: *William Sharp [Fiona Macleod]: A Memoir*, 2 vols. 1912 (I, 104-105). As he finally revised the letter, Tennyson slightly moderated his statement about not having any letters from Rossetti (Lang and Shannon found none), and was more emphatic in denying any recollection of Rossetti's seeing him read.

But what is especially interesting to note is Tennyson's carefully qualifying his wish to have known Rossetti better and his shift from endorsing Rossetti as a man to his praise (somewhat faint) of Rossetti as a painter:

Aldworth, Haslemere,
Oct. 12, 1882.

Dear Sir,

I have neither drawing nor painting by Rossetti. I am sorry for it, for some of his work which I have seen elsewhere I have admired very much; nor (as far as I know) have I any letter from him, nor have I the slightest recollection of his being present when I was 'reading the proof sheets of Maud.'

My acquaintance with him was in fact but an acquaintance, not an 'intimacy', though I would willingly have known something more of so accomplished an artist.

Wishing all success to your Memorial of him.

I am,

Faithfully yours,

A. Tennyson.

Sharp had no doubt written to Tennyson seeking information for his quick biography of Rossetti (*Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and A Study* [1882]) and Tennyson probably thought it prudent, upon reflection, not to seem to endorse the infamously 'fleshly' poet too warmly. Indeed, Tennyson's desire to distance himself from Rossetti is clear in even so minor a point as his choosing to put quotation marks around the words he quotes from Sharp - the occasion not being one that he wished to authenticate in his own language.

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Works Cited

Sharp, Elizabeth A. 1912. *William Sharp [Fiona Macleod]: A Memoir*. 2 vols. New York: Duffield and Company.

Tennyson, Alfred Lord. 1981-1990. *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*. 3 vols. ed. Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

The **Northeast Victorian Studies Association** will hold its twentieth Annual Meeting at New York University on April 15-17 1994. The topic is *Victorian Interiors: Domestic, Metaphysical, Narrative and Psychological*. For further information contact Earl E. Stevens at Rhode Island College, Providence, R.I. 02908; tel. (401) 456 8659.

Tennyson 1809-1892: A Centenary Celebration. Illustrated catalogue of the exhibition by Robert Woof. Lincoln: The Tennyson Society, 1992. £12.99/\$35, inc. p & p.

The Circle of the Hills. A video on the Life of Alfred, Lord Tennyson 1809-1892. Available from the Tennyson Society. £16.95 inc. p & p.

Dates of Tennyson Society Events in 1994

29 April-1 May	Weekend in Cornwall
21 May	Annual General Meeting and Annual Lecture
7 August	Annual Service at Bag Enderby
1 October	Tennyson Day in London