



Winter 1986

# Memorials of a Friendship: Six Letters from Ford Madox Brown

Joseph H. Gardner  
*University of Kentucky*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review>

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

**Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.**

## Recommended Citation

Gardner, Joseph H. (1986) "Memorials of a Friendship: Six Letters from Ford Madox Brown," *The Kentucky Review*: Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol6/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Kentucky Libraries at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Kentucky Review by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact [UKnowledge@sv.uky.edu](mailto:UKnowledge@sv.uky.edu).

## Library Notes

### Memorials of a Friendship: Six Letters from Ford Madox Brown

---

*Joseph H. Gardner*

Ironically, it rained all day in Manchester on 15 September 1857; ironically because that Tuesday was one of the few bright days in Frederic Shields's otherwise gloomy life. He had been born in Hartlepool, 14 March 1833, the son of a bookbinder father and a dressmaker mother who moved to the neighborhood of St. Clement Danes, London, shortly after his birth. There his mother opened a small shop while his father attempted to improve the family fortunes by enlisting as a mercenary in aid of Queen Isabella against the Carlist revolutionaries. After nearly a year in various Spanish prisons, he returned to England broken in health, spirit, and pocket. Young Frederic helped his mother in the shop days and at night taught himself to draw by copying the theatrical prints so popular at the time. At fourteen he was apprenticed to a lithographer and at sixteen migrated to Manchester where he designed and printed advertising tickets for five shillings a week. This he supplemented by selling sketches door to door and by wandering from public-house to public-house, offering to draw profiles of the patrons for a penny apiece. He nearly starved.

His father died in 1850; his mother three years later, leaving him responsible for two younger brothers. A fellow lithographer remembered him as always looking "half-heckled" because of his emaciation, his shabby clothes and unbarbered hair. He also remembered that "he had no liking for chaff and an aversion to women." For Shields had already developed that tendency toward religious melancholia and extreme—even by Victorian standards—scrupulousness of conscience that later made him so unlikely a friend to such a free and easy agnostic as Dante Gabriel Rossetti. When, for example, the elder of his two brothers ran away,

Shields was, he wrote, "at a loss to conceive why, except it be my prohibition of such cups of iniquity as *Reynolds Miscellany*." "I would have you beware," he continued, "of that dangerous and unrestrained tendency to wit which neither makes us wiser nor happier, nay is positively suicidal." Nor was he any easier on himself. A diary entry from around the same time begins with the formulaic letters "WPBB" (for Wash, Prayer, Bible, Breakfast) and continues to record an unusual fleshly failing and a characteristic self-punishment. After working from six to six, he "got out Thackeray's *Esmond*, had tea. Tried to read Bible, but fell asleep twice. I should not have done that over *Esmond*. Shame. Paragoric and gruel. Ipecachuanha [ipecac], hot water, mustard, Thomas a Kempis."

He was twenty-four, still barely supporting himself by lithography and the sale of small watercolor vignettes of rustic subjects, when he set out that rainy Tuesday for what was advertised as an "Art Treasures Exhibition." There he experienced a kind of revelation, "a marvellous, unparalleled gathering of beauty," he called it in his diary, his first glimpse of major works by those revolutionary artists known as "Pre-Raphaelites." Many of the best-known works of the movement were there, including Holman Hunt's *The Hireling Shepherd*, *Claudio and Isabella*, and *Our English Coast*; Arthur Hughes's poignant *April Love*, and J.E. Millais's brilliant *The Return of the Dove to the Ark*. But what most caught Shields's eye was a large canvas "skied," up near the ceiling, Ford Madox Brown's *Christ Washing Peter's Feet*. "It held me riveted," Shields later recalled; "large and simple in the composition of its masses as Giotto, brilliant and forcible, yet true and refined in its colour and lighting, and wonderful for its grasp of human character and passion, [it] brought me to seal my first impression that, among all the English pictures of sacred subjects there, this only was worthy to rank with the great Italians on the walls of the opposite galleries."

Its creator's life had scarcely been easier than his own. Grandson of the notorious Dr. John Brown—whose portrait had been etched by William Blake—Ford Madox Brown was born 16 April 1821, in Calais, where his impoverished father, a purser in the Royal Navy, had retired on half-pay after the Napoleonic Wars. His earliest memory was of watching an elderly gentleman walk a bulldog along the Calais battlements. "C'est le grand M. Brummell," his awestruck nurse told him, "l'ami du roi

d'Angleterre." He began his art studies in Bruges when he was fourteen; three years later he migrated to Antwerp to become the pupil of the then renowned Gustaf, Baron Wagners. His first major oil, *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*, is painted on a bituminous ground and coated with asphaltum in the dark, heavy manner of the Belgium school. At nineteen he was in the Paris of Ingres, Delacroix, and Delaroche, where, influenced perhaps by the Barbizon school, he conceived the revolutionary idea of abandoning the studio (and the dogma that every picture must be two-thirds shadow) to paint outdoors, in natural light.

Married at nineteen—he looked so young the clergyman officiating kept asking, with some asperity, "Where is the bridegroom?"—he was a widower at twenty-three when he took up permanent residence in London. His career was remarkably unsuccessful. The cartoons he submitted to the competition for the frescoes in the new Houses of Parliament were not even mentioned in the report of the Royal Commissioners. His first major attempt at capturing the effect of outdoor light, *Manfred on the Jungfrau*, was a failure: "glaciers," he noted later, "not having formed part of my scheme of study." Although two canvases from this period, *Chaucer at the Court of Edward III* and *Wycliffe Reading His Translation of the Bible* were later recognized as landmarks of Victorian painting, his work was rejected by the academicians and ignored by the critics. Hence his surprise at receiving a letter full of effusive praise for his pictures and expressing the author's desire to become his student. It was signed Gabriel Charles Rossetti. The episode is one of the best known in the annals of British art. Brown, always somewhat crusty and morbidly sensitive, was convinced the letter was the prank of some waggish student. Storming over to the Portland Place address given on the letter, he refused the servant's invitation to enter the drawing room and stood in the hall, stick in hand, ready to give the writer the thrashing his impertinence deserved. To his amazement, the letter turned out to be genuine. Putting down his stick, he offered his hand.

It was through Rossetti that Shields and Brown first met. In May 1864 Shields came up to London to sketch in the National Gallery and attend the studio sale, at Christie's, of William "Birds' Nests" Hunt, the celebrated watercolorist who had died a few weeks earlier. He stayed with an acquaintance named George Butterworth, a former carpenter who had attended Ruskin's classes

at the Working Men's College and had been, briefly, Rossetti's studio assistant. Butterworth was busy painting landscapes which he implored Shields to enliven by putting in some cows and random human figures. Shields agreed, but only on the condition that Butterworth take him to call on his former employer. Shields's record of the occasion in his diary was brief: "To Rossetti's studio. He painting his David. A great day for me, to be praised by him." Later he recalled the meeting in more detail:

Rossetti's graciousness of manner abides vividly with me. He left a small group of friends and drew me into an embrasure of the long room that was his studio, looking out upon the spacious back garden. Face to face, I felt such a sense of littleness as I have never experienced in contact with any man but himself. This, through the long years of intimacy that followed, never diminished but increased. With trembling I showed him a few designs, he expressing admiration that made me wonder. He accompanied me to the street door, and as we parted, I said something to the effect of the incompetency of my strivings—never can I forget the impulsive generosity that responded—"Tut, tut, you design better than any of us, but cultivate your imagination."

Two days later, Rossetti took him to meet Brown. Shields brought along the same designs for Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* that Rossetti had already admired. Brown, more reserved with strangers, was less enthusiastic than Rossetti had been. "He said little of my work," Shields noted in his diary, "and that wholesomely corrective of any feeling of elation."

Despite—or perhaps because of—the disparity in their backgrounds, temperaments, and outlooks, the friendship between Brown, Shields, and Rossetti was to last their lifetimes, the closest any of the three was ever to form. Rossetti, whose ability to lose friends was as great as his ease in making them, quarrelled often with both Shields and Brown, and they with each other, but the deep bonds between them were never broken. Devoted to different styles, goals, and subjects, they nevertheless worked together easily. They shared costumes, helped each other arrange lay figures, and felt no qualms, Rossetti especially, about dipping into each other's color boxes when the need arose. When Rossetti wanted a calf for his painting *Found*, Brown not only located one

at a dairy near his Hampstead cottage, but also allowed Rossetti to sleep on his parlor floor until the beast was painted. The episode provides a telling glimpse into the nature of each and of their relationship. Rossetti approached the project with glee: "As for the calf," he wrote a friend in Ireland, "he kicks and fights all the time he remains tied up, which is five or six hours daily, and the view of life induced at his early age by experience in art appears to be so melancholy that he punctually attempts suicide by hanging himself daily at 3 1/2 P.M. At these times I have to cut him down and then shake him up and lick him like blazes." Brown was less amused. "Saw Gabriel's calf," he growled into his diary, "very beautiful but takes a long time. Endless emendations, no perceptible [sic] progress from day to day, & all the time wearing my great coat which I need & a pair of my breeches, beside food & an unlimited supply of turpentine." Years later, when Rossetti was rendered largely housebound by paralysis and paranoia, Shields became his willing errand boy. "I must have a rose tree with leaves," says a typical note, "if without trouble to yourself I should be glad of a tree on Tuesday." Unable once to find the apple blossoms he needed in the London flower markets, he wrote to Shields, who happened to be staying in the country. Shields dutifully sent a carefully drawn and stunningly colored portfolio of apple boughs by the next day's mail.

They shared models, and, when times were hard, saved a little by posing for each other. Rossetti appears in Brown's canvases as everyone from Geoffrey Chaucer to one of the Twelve Apostles; less incongruous is Shields's appearance as Wycliffe in the Manchester Town Hall frescoes. They collaborated in other ways as well. When, for example, Shields made a monochrome drawing of William Blake's workroom, Rossetti wrote a sonnet to accompany it. Shields later returned the gesture by helping Rossetti revise the second edition of Alexander Gilchrist's pioneering *Life of Blake*, a book Rossetti had earlier prepared for publication after its author's premature death. Since Shields as a young man had had extensive experience with photography, it was he who supervised the photocopying of Rossetti's and Brown's works, even though he loathed the medium. For his part, Brown, who had early mastered the characteristic Pre-Raphaelite technique of painting over a moist, white ground, continually reminded the other two how to do it, both having an alarming tendency to forget the process.

Since all three lived from one financial crisis to another, each

stood willing to bail either of the others out whenever he could. A particularly fat commission might cause an unsolicited fiver or two to be sent; sometimes it was even returned. And each constantly sought means to advance the others' careers, sharing not only their "tin," as Rossetti called it, but patrons as well. It was through Shields, for example, that Rossetti was introduced to Frederick Craven and Brown to Edward Brockbank, Manchester businessmen who commissioned much of their most important work. Shields's role in Brown's acquiring the commission to do the frescoes in the Manchester Town Hall will be discussed later. Rossetti's efforts on both Brown's and Shields's behalf are well documented, as he constantly sought commissions and patrons for both.

One of the strongest links in the friendship was their shared love of animals and tendency to surround themselves with pets. Rossetti's tastes ran to peacocks, wombats, and zebu; Brown, less exotic in his preferences, kept dogs and dormice, always claiming the latter were for his children. Shields, who had a morbid aversion to noise (a barking dog would make him ill, a single organ-grinder could send him to his bed for days), kept less cuddly but more silent creatures. Visitors to his studio found themselves surrounded by an unnerving menagerie of snakes, salamanders, and lizards. Above all they shared their seriousness about art and a sense of fun about virtually everything else. Indeed, some of the most appealing aspects of the relationship are Rossetti's skill at cutting through Brown's gruffness and the ability of both to bring out the humor, the capacity for enjoyment, even the gaiety that underlaid Shields's morbidity and "sweet unreasonableness," as one contemporary calls it. Shields's puritan asceticism itself came in for considerable ribbing from the other two. When he complained of nervousness and debility, Brown was quick to recommend a cure: "Take *wine!* Begin with a glass first thing in the morning and repeat the dose throughout the day. . . . If you can't sleep *porter and biscuits*, or hot water and brandy; if you wake up with a start, more brandy." Rossetti, sending Shields a presentation copy of his 1870 volume of poems, hopes he will enjoy it, but graciously gives him permission to skip over "Jenny," a long dramatic monologue in which a young man about town muses over a sleeping prostitute. As a young man Shields had dearly loved the theatre—so much so that, characteristically, he came to fear and loathe it as a threat to his immortal soul. Therefore when Rossetti feared he was being caricatured in a now long forgotten

farce called *The Colonel*, he insisted that, of all his friends, only Shields would be suitable to attend the performance and bring him a report. The faithful Shields did so in misery and horror, while Brown and Rossetti stayed behind, savoring his suffering. When, a year or so later, Rossetti again feared he was being spoofed upon the stage, Shields was once again sent to investigate, thereby earning the distinction of being the only person in all Victorian England not to laugh during a performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*.

Brown received his share of chaff as well. When, in late 1864, he began designing advertisements for an exhibition of his works at a gallery in Picadilly, Rossetti and Shields threw themselves into the project with glee, urging Brown to send sandwich men all over London carrying boards with the cryptic caption "Work." Rossetti also offered to make a sign to go up over the door, "representing a Brown Mad Ox crossing a Ford, marked British Art, with you holding on to his horns with a palette and brushes, and R.A. and *Public Press* waving red flags to frighten him." Under such a sign, the success of the exhibition, Rossetti thought, "could no longer be dubious."

Undoubtedly it was the shared fun that cemented the seriousness of the relationship. Writing to Brown's daughter, Lucy, on her engagement to his brother William, Rossetti tells her that he "owes more in life" to her father "than any other man whatever." Throughout his life he insisted that "by far the best man I know—the really *good* man—is Brown." Brown, in turn, upon reading the note Rossetti sent him an hour after the death of his gifted and beloved son, Oliver, remarked, in tears, "It is always Gabriel who speaks the right word." In the last decade of his life, Brown's grandchildren would beg him to tell them some anecdote relating to that "silver thread of lunacy" Max Beerbohm has described as running through "the rich golden fabric of Rossetti's life." Brown would oblige, but always conclude by saying, "It is a shame to tell such stories about him; he was a splendid fellow and a glorious artist." When, in 1909, the seventy-six-year-old Shields received a reprint of the celebrated Moxon *Tennyson*, the illustrations sent his mind back over fifty years to the days "when these were a stimulus and a delight of the fullest kind. . . . those wonderful Rossetti drawings—ah me! There has been none in my age like to him, and life has been impoverished since he passed away—the great mind, the generous soul." And for Shields to



remember Rossetti was, inevitably, to call Brown to mind as well: "my very dearest, with his brave heart, full of welcome always." To Rossetti, Shields was "a great draughtsman—none better living"; he was also "dear old Shields." When Shields suffered a nervous breakdown in 1866, Brown and Rossetti came to his side. When Rossetti experienced the same fate six years later, it was Brown who took him into seclusion and, quite literally, saved his life. Ten years later, it was Shields who held his head and wiped his brow as he lay dying. When Brown was devastated by his wife's death in 1890, it was only Shields's presence as he sat by him night after night that tempered his despair. After Brown's own death in 1893, Shields's letters speak again and again of the terrible loneliness of his old age. He himself died in 1911. On the table by his bed was the plaster cast of a hand so small and delicate that it might be mistaken for a woman's. Pencilled on the base is the inscription "D.G. Rossetti's cunning right hand, that clasped mine in friendship once."

## II

Among the many significant items relating to the history of Pre-Raphaelitism in the W. Hugh Peal Collection in the University of Kentucky Libraries are six letters from Brown to Shields spanning nine central years of the friendship. All have been cited, occasionally inaccurately, in earlier studies, but none has been published in its entirety. The first was written when Brown had, upon Rossetti's urging, moved back into London from Hampstead and was occupying a house and studio in Fitzroy Square.

He had first designed *Cromwell on His Farm* (originally called simply *St. Ives*) as a watercolor in 1853, at a time when the influence of Carlyle was strongest upon him and when he was recovering from a period of severe, debilitating depression. "No man ever does any good in the world," he later wrote, "without passing through the phase some time. . . . This is what I have endeavored to depict." *Cromwell* is shown in the period of his lowest fortunes, out of power and out of sorts, absorbed in what Brown himself labelled "religious hypochondria," a fitting symbol of the artist himself during the early fifties. Brown exhibited a sketch of the subject, based on the earlier watercolor, in 1865; it was not until he received the commission referred to in the letter below that he was able to begin work on the oil painting he had

so long contemplated. By that time he felt that his own long interregnum was over, and Cromwell now became the image of his new perception of the eventual triumph of his own career.

Fittingly the commission came about largely through Shields's good offices in bringing Brown to the attention of one of his own few reliable patrons, Edward Brockbank. Rossetti had taught him to set his prices in guineas, not pounds, but unlike Rossetti, Brown lacked the courage to stick by his guns. Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912), whom Brown elsewhere refers to as "a most genial Dutchman," was born in Holland and trained at the Antwerp academy. He settled in London in 1870. His luminous paintings of Greek and Roman subjects were to bring him a wide popularity and, eventually, a knighthood. He had been elected to the Old Watercolour Society, of which Shields was also a member, shortly before the writing of this letter.

Both Lucy Brown (1843-1894), who later married William Michael Rossetti, and Cathy Brown, wife of Franz Hueffer and mother of the novelist Ford Madox Ford, were accomplished watercolorists. Lucy's *The Duet* had been exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1870, but that was the only time either daughter had a work accepted. Maria Spartali Stillman (1844-1927) had been Brown's pupil and protégée for some time; she had also sat for several of Rossetti's most important canvases. Her husband, the American journalist and one-time envoy to Crete, William J. Stillman, had recommended chloral hydrate, known in this country as "Mickey Finns," to both Rossetti and Shields as a certain cure for insomnia. Shields was able to overcome his resultant addiction with great difficulty. Rossetti suffered for the rest of his shortened life.

37 Fitzroy Sqr W.

April 6 - 73

My dear Shields,

You will be glad to know that Brockbank called here the other day & commissioned me for the "Cromwell on his farm" for 400 gs., at least I *said* 400 gs, but in his letter just received he puts it *pounds* whether by accident or intention remains to be seen, however we must not quarrel over this matter, so I have written to say that if he is quite of opinion that I said Pounds I must accept his impression as correct—but do not mention in [*sic*] to him should you see him.

Have you been talking to him since your return & so hastened his return here? In such case how much I have to thank you! I ought to have written before to thank you for the trouble you have given yourself as put forth in your last to me but of late I get so lazy in the matter of letters & put off batches of them as long as I dare.

I trust you are getting on all right with your pictures for this sezans [sic] exhibition & that they will do you good[.] [F]rom your manner I augur good things from them.

I see they have elected Tadema to your society. This at least is a step in the right direction.

Lucy & Cathy both sent in works to the Academy with what result we must await to see. Cathy painted a watercolour on purpose & Lucy worked all over her "Sir Thomas More's Daughter." Mrs. Stillman sent in two.

I have still a very bad cold & a touch of rheumatism coming on. Mrs. Brown has been ill again all last week & not out of her room yet. The north-east wind is beastly. All join in kindest regards.

Yours as ever  
F Madox B

P.S. The "Convalescent" came here safe.

If the first letter shows Brown and Shields sharing patrons, the second illustrates their informal system of handling loans. George Hake (1847-1903) was the son of Thomas Gordon Hake, a physician whose poetic attempts aroused Rossetti's interest and encouragement. The elder Hake had, along with Brown, accompanied Rossetti to Scotland after his breakdown in the summer of 1872, and had tended him with the same "brotherly lovingness" that Brown had also shown. George Hake, who had been rusticated for a term from Oxford, had spent the entire summer as Rossetti's companion and nurse in Scotland, returning with him to Kelmscott Manor in the fall. After returning to his studies, he continued to make frequent trips to Kelmscott to check on his father's friend whenever his studies allowed. Rossetti had described the incident with the dog in a letter to Lucy Madox Brown as follows: "Will you tell your Papa that yesterday Turvey had to be shot, as he nearly drowned George by jumping on his shoulders and biting his head furiously while he was bathing.

George had a narrow escape and only reached the bank [of the Thames at Kelmscott Manor] with difficulty, bleeding and much exhausted. Nero jumped in and pulled Turvey off, but he got on again." It is interesting to note how Brown "improves upon" the anecdote in passing it along to Shields. The "Institute" referred to is the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours, whose annual exhibit was normally held in the fall.

37 Fitzroy Sqr W-  
Sep 24 '73

My dear Shields,

I am very much obliged by your *five* received safe, the only thing that occurred to me at the time was that it was almost my last one, but you were welcome to it.

The costumes [for the *Cromwell*] are excellent & just what is required for puritans—only almost too simple & severe, almost to theatricality but I have no doubt correct.

We hear this morning from Rossetti this morning [*sic*] that George Hake was almost killed while bathing by a young & favourite dog that would climb on to his shoulders & bite his head. He was only saved by Nero a large black retriever which came & siezed the other with admirable sense. The young one again & again returned to the attack—possibly in the intention of pulling his master out of the water. He was shot immediately after.

Glad to hear you are at work.

Yours with all kind remembrances from all—  
F Madox Brown

What do those d—d fellows of the Institute mean by turning both Lucy's pictures out after asking her to send them?

The third of the six letters was written over a year later. Shields was still in Manchester, living in Ordsall Hall, the shattered wreck of what had been one of Lancashire's finest medieval houses. The house, which a modern guide book describes as standing "in surroundings almost as nasty as can be imagined," appealed to Shields not only for its picturesque gloom, but also because of its moated isolation, far away from the organ-grinders and other buskers whose serenades posed such a threat to his nerves. He was

contemplating a move to London, but was retained in Manchester by a commission to aid a photographer by the name of M'Lachlan in composing a colossal composite photograph of Queen Victoria and all her descendants. The task, which Shields came to call a "hateful slavery," absorbed most of his time for the next two years.

Brown inquires what Shields is up to, not knowing that he had, six weeks previously, made a bizarre marriage to a sixteen-year-old model, twenty-four years his junior. His diary entry recording it is as strange and baffling as the event itself: "August 15. Married at Irwell Street Chapel. Revd. Mr Codling. Off to Blackpool alone with M'[Lachlan]. Did me wonderful good. Thank God." Needless to say, the marriage (which he kept secret even from Brown and Rossetti for as long as he could) ended in disaster.

Brown had lectured in Manchester in March 1874. With the help of a good deal of puffery from Shields, the lectures were successful enough that he was invited back in the fall, an engagement that he kept despite the greatest tragedy in his life, the loss of his beloved son, Oliver Madox Brown, "Nolly," on 5 November 1874. The painting *Byron and Mary Chaworth* had begun with the design Brown made for the title-page vignette of Moxon's edition of *Byron's Works*. It shows the seventeen-year-old poet holding Mary's hand as they sit on a knoll overlooking the Nottinghamshire plain. (In good Pre-Raphaelite fashion Brown had made a special trip to Newstead to study the painting's locale.) He is pouring sweet nothings in her ear as she gazes into the distance, looking for her own beloved, Jack Musters.

37 Fitzroy Square W.  
Oct. 4 -74

My dear Shields

Ever since my answer to your last letter when you talked of coming to London to look out for a house I have been thinking of you & wondering what you were after & intending to write to you again.

What are you up to? I hope you are well. I am to lecture in Manchester November 23 & 25. I have been changing and improving certain passages in what I have written. Brockbank has made me promise to stop at his house—he has also it seems bought a little picture called "M'lise" of Cathy's (Mrs Hüffer) but beyond this I have heard nothing

further of his projected commission.

You will be sorry to know that Nolly has been seriously ill for now three weeks & it may turn to rheumatic fever or we don't know what. Lucy also has been ill & is scarcely recovered yet. My wife & I have our health for the present—but this illness of Nolly puts us sadly out.

I have been at work on a "Byron & Mary Chaworth" & can't get it finished & on a portrait but can't get the man to sit—so that hangs fire—altogether things are a great bother but I shall be glad to hear that you are well.

For some time I hesitated to write to write [*sic*] thinking you had moved but Brockbank informed us you were still at Ordsell [*sic*] Hall.

With our united affectionate regards believe me ever

Sincerely yours,  
Ford Madox Brown

Of course I shall see you when I come to Manchester.

Nolly Brown's illness grew progressively worse as the original peritonitis turned into a general poisoning of the blood. He died in delirium on the 5th of November, 1874. For his father, whose life had never been easy, it was, undoubtedly, the hardest blow he ever had to endure. Rossetti and Shields responded with expressions of sympathy almost immediately. Shields, knowing the likely state of affairs in the Brown household, characteristically enclosed an unsolicited loan. Rossetti's hope that his "dear Friend" would "find help in yourself, for elsewhere it is vain to seek it," took root. Writing to his friend and patron, the attorney George Rae, Brown confesses that "what seemed likely to turn out the crowning reward of a life not overstocked with successes otherwise is suddenly turned into a mockery and illusion, and yet we are strangely calm. . . . There is nothing for it but to patch up what remains of hope in other directions and get to work again; but the savour is gone, unless in the work for itself."

Nolly was buried 12 November 1874. The fourth letter to Shields in the Peal Collection was written approximately a month later. The trip to Manchester planned for late November had to be postponed, but Brown felt himself bound to deliver the promised lectures. As the letter also shows, he was still hoping that Brockbank would purchase the Byron picture. (It was eventually

sold to a Manchester alderman named Thompson.) He also had yet to meet Shields's child-bride. Shields's article, which described Brown as "a great teacher and pioneer in English art—distinct, not comparable, a unique figure among our few noble painters," was eventually published in the *Transactions* of the Manchester Literary Club. The *Literary Remains* of Oliver Madox Brown, edited by his two brothers-in-law, Franz Hueffer and William Michael Rossetti, was published by Tinsley & Company in 1876.

56 Euston Square  
W.C.

Dear Shields,

Your nice kind letter finds me here with William Rossetti having just returned from staying with the Hueffers at Merton. I have been intending to write to you before coming next Monday but have kept putting it off because what *can* I say[?]

My wife has been rather alarmingly ill & we had to sit up with her for at least a week at night, but she is gradually coming round again— & I shall be able to leave her with her two daughters for the 3 days I must be in Manchester. Unfortunately *I* have a very bad cold now—a thing that sticks to me when it comes, but I shall not be able to put off these lectures again so must come at all costs.

I shall arrive at 12:30 *noon* Monday & if not putting you out shall be glad indeed to meet you at the station, of course I would much prefer that it was to your house that I was bound (draughts or no draughts) but the possibility of a solid commission from Brockbank must not be overlooked—but I must try & be with you as much as he will let me—people who are your hosts are usually tyrannical & jealous. I have told him however that I cannot accept any public engagements of a festive character & have declined the "soirée" of the Athenaeum as well.

Brockbank had sent me your article yesterday—it is very thoughtful & friendly of you to make a row about me in this way & the article itself is proof that as a literary character you would have been as remarkable as in your pictorial one. What I shall tell the people in my lectures will (after this) perhaps tend a good deal to clear up misapprehensions &

induce people to look with the eye of common sense.

You will I dare say expect me to write more about myself & ourselves at this melancholy juncture (I am just now finishing an oil picture of "Byron & Mary Chaworth" which has been of course much delayed but which I hope to get done with before leaving London) but as I said before what can I say. Since the funeral on the 12th ult. we have not been to the house, but were kept at Merton by my wife's illness & now here by my cold.

We must begin soon to think of his literary remains which I suppose William Rossetti & Hueffer will edit between them. It will be a sad task having to sort his books & look out his manuscripts—but sad is the complexion of the event. I made a drawing of him after death which I think successful both for likeness & as a pleasing piece of expression. We also have a cast of his right hand which is most beautiful & a carte-visite was fortunately taken of him some months before his death. I must bring you one.

We must make your wife's acquaintance soon, you must bring her to stay with us us [*sic*] either at Fitzroy Square or where ever we may be. With our best regards to her believe me ever yours affectionately

F Madox Brown

P.S.

I send you a catalogue as you require—but please understand that I consider it *cancelled* long ago. I never show it except as a quite private matter now, for there is that in the tone of it which I don't like—it fact too much of the shop-puf[f]—for me to like it to go much about—but do as you like with it provided you let people understand my views of it at present.

The fifth letter, written a year and a half later, is of great interest for its bearing on the project that was to occupy most of the latter portion of Brown's life, the painting of the murals in the Manchester Town Hall. The building, begun in 1868 and officially opened in 1877, is one of the great achievements of Victorian architecture. Its designer, Alfred Waterhouse (1830-1905), was a skilled watercolorist who occasionally exhibited at the Royal Academy and who would have devoted himself to a career in



painting had it not been for the religious scruples of his Quaker parents. A pioneer in the use of terra cotta and structural ironwork, he is also known for his almost instinctive sense of site—as witnessed by his massing of the Town Hall in its awkward, almost triangular location. Among his other best-known works are Owens College, Manchester; the London and North-Western Hotel, London; University College, Liverpool; and his masterpiece, the Natural History Museum in South Kensington. What Brown thought of his genius is indicated by the letter below.

The plan for the decorations that resulted from Brown and Shields's collaboration as described in the letter was not carried out. Rather Brown's efforts were concentrated on the creation of twelve frescoes in the Great Hall depicting episodes in the city's history from its origins as a Roman camp in 60 A.D. to the opening of the Bridgewater Canal in 1761. (Brown originally suggested the Peterloo Massacre as the final subject but was overridden on political grounds.) Done in the Gambier-Perry process, they were begun in 1878 and not completed until 1892, a year before the artist's death.

The letter also shows Brown and Shields solicitous of each other's welfare as well as that of their friends. That Brown was seriously considered at all, over such objections as his being too old and too much an artistic maverick to undertake the work, was primarily the result of Shields's exhaustive efforts on his behalf. When the committee, after much hassling and frustrating delays, finally awarded the commission to Brown and Shields jointly, Shields generously withdrew so that Brown could receive the full benefit of the award. The attempt to win commissions for Thomas Armstrong, Arthur Hughes, and William Cave Thomas came to naught.

Armstrong (1832-1911) was born in Fallowfield, Manchester, and had begun his studies at the Manchester Academy. In Paris at the same time as Brown, he too had come under the influence of Millet, Bodmer, and the Barbizon School. Later in his life he became Director for Art at South Kensington. Hughes (1832-1915), a protégé of such Pre-Raphaelite luminaries as Ruskin, Millais, and Gabriel Rossetti, had shared in the abuse heaped upon the movement in its early days, but never obtained his just proportion of the acclaim his colleagues later received. The quietness and tenderness of his canvases were simply upstaged, but a few, like the bittersweet *April Love*, originally owned by William Morris,

have come into their own in this century. Cave Thomas, a lifelong friend to both Brown and Rossetti, moved on the outer fringe of Pre-Raphaelitism. Best known for having contributed the title to the short-lived journal *The Germ*, he exhibited at the Royal Academy from 1843 to 1884.

Godfried Guffens (1823-1901) and Jan Swerts (1820-1879) had first met when they were both students of Nicholas de Keyser at the Antwerp Academy. Influenced, like the British Pre-Raphaelites, by Friedrich Overbeck and the German "Nazarenes," they worked together throughout their careers to re-establish the art of painting in fresco in the Low Countries. The news that they might be given the Manchester commission brought howls of jingoistic outrage; Shields was particularly eloquent in denouncing what he considered a direct attack on the dignity of British art. The committee, on which the Manchester alderman Edward Thompson served as Brown and Shields's chief ally, was forced to retreat in shame.

The "Rowley" referred to in the letter was Brown's patron and Shields's close friend, Charles Rowley—another useful ally in the campaign for the Town Hall commission. His autobiography, *Fifty Years of Work without Wages*, contains amusing and insightful portraits of both Brown and Shields. Brown often referred to him as a "dear little man." The other artists mentioned are: John Dawson Watson (1832-1892), a painter of genre and landscape pictures, who had studied at the Manchester School of Art and frequently exhibited at the Royal Institution there; Edward John Gregory (1850-1909), best known for his watercolors and his sketches for *The Graphic*, although he eventually became President of the Royal Institution; Henry Stacy Marks (1829-1898), who had, after completing his studies at the Royal Academy, supported himself by painting Christmas cards until he finally began to win recognition for his historical canvases; and, finally, Walter Jenks Morgan (1847-1924), an illustrator and genre painter, later President of the Birmingham and Midlands Arts Club.

At the time the letter was written, Shields had just returned from an extended tour of Italy where he had astonished Rowley, who accompanied him on the trip, by suggesting that they express their delight at a particularly lovely vista by turning somersaults in the road. On his return, he had stayed with Brown while looking for a suitably secluded house in London. His child-wife had been left behind in Brighton, where Shields has arranged for her to

attend school. Brown's mock-heroic allusion is to I Kings 12:16.

37 Fitzroy Square W.  
July 22 -76  
Sunday

Dear Shields,

Why are you silent? Solacing yourself with your wife at Brighton when your cry should be "to your tents O Israel"? I have not been able to write to you till this minute for you left me no address. I am to go down to meet the Committee of Decoration at Manchester this week & sadly would require to speak with you before going. Things may get into a terrible mess I see owing to Waterhouse & general stupidity but with Rowley & much energy, may still be brought right. When I am there I shall do my best for our common interests[,] saying a word for Armstrong as a Manchester man & hoping to be able to serve Arthur Hughes & Cave Thomas—with caution as I can see my way. I don't yet know what day the meeting is to take place. I only know that it must not be *Wednesday*, because that day I have an engagement in London. You promised to finish your short truncated visit here, you & your wife, on your return from Italy[.] Are we to expect you now? I suppose you must look out for a house.

I have just written off a scheme of decorations for the 5 Rooms (substantially what we decided on before you left) to Ro[w]ley to be shown to Councillor Thompson. Stating what portion you devised of it. 

5	4	3	2	1
---	---	---	---	---

1 Committee Room Religions; 2 Politics; 3 Entrance hall Manufacture & commerce; 4 Llegendary [sic]; 5 The banqueting hall to be devoted to great men of different municipalities (your idea & as I told them most important). Watson, Gregory & Marks have you know, declined. I, you, & Morgan are now it seems to be spoken with & (oh that it should be so!) *Guffens & Swertz of Belgium*.

With our united kind regards to your wife & yourself[,]  
yours as ever

F Madox B

By the beginning of 1882, Shields and Brown had traded places,

Shields having set himself up in a relatively quiet corner of London, and Brown having removed to Manchester in order to work full-time on the Town Hall frescoes. While his wife enjoyed the charming views from their house in suburban Crumpsall, the always grumpy Brown complained of the almost constant northern rains. Shields's generosity in resigning his share of the Town Hall commission had been repaid when Brown convinced Waterhouse to hire Shields to design all the stained glass and mosaics for the chapel at Eaton recently commissioned by the Duke of Westminster—some ninety subjects in all.

Rossetti, too, had been active, producing those large canvases devoted, in William Michael's unhappy phrase, to "female heads with floral adjuncts" so characteristic of his final phase. He had also, in the preceding fall, brought out a new edition of his poetry, which now filled two volumes. But his health, never very sound in the decade following his 1872 collapse, began to deteriorate rapidly. In February, the friend of his last years, Hall Caine, had taken him to Birchington to get him out of London and into the sea air. It was there that he developed the uremic poisoning of which he died on Easter morning, 9 April 1882. Shields, who had been sent for on the previous day, was there to cradle his head in his last moments and, at William Michael's request, to make a last drawing of his dead face; "a melancholy tearful task," Shields wrote in his diary. "Gone is the man whom I loved most."

Brown's response to the news, sent from his new home in Manchester, is the last, most important, and certainly the most moving of the six letters in the Peal Collection. Like the others, it is rich in allusions to art and artists. Herbert Herkomer (1849-1914) was born in Bavaria into an artisan family that migrated to the United States in 1851, but returned to Europe and settled in Southampton a few years later. His first success had been as an illustrator for *The Graphic*, and he had won some popularity for his watercolor renditions of village life, but his fame stemmed mainly from *The Last Muster*, a depiction of a Chelsea pensioner recognizing that one of his companions has died during a chapel service. The facile sentimentality of both that painting and the rustic vignettes are, to Brown, merely "Herkomerisms." Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898), the best-known and most influential of Rossetti's disciples, had established his reputation with the five paintings he had exhibited at the opening of the

Grosvenor Gallery in 1877. He was to be created baronet in 1894. Edward John Poynter (1836-1919) had studied with Whistler and DuMaurier at the Atelier Gleyre in Paris—one of the group of young artists later described in DuMaurier's celebrated novel *Trilby*. He had been Slade Professor in 1871 and later served as Director of Art at the South Kensington Museum and the National Gallery. He too was knighted, two years after Burne-Jones. Frederick Leighton (1830-1896), later Baron Leighton of Stretton, shared Poynter's neo-classical bent. In 1855 his first Academy painting had been purchased by the Queen for £ 600, launching an extraordinarily successful career that was to culminate in his becoming the only English artist ever elevated to the peerage. At forty-six, forty-nine, and fifty-two respectively, Poynter, Burne-Jones, and Leighton all seemed "tolerably young" to the sixty-year-old Brown.

William Holman Hunt (1827-1919) had been, along with Rossetti, one of the founding members of the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848, but had become estranged from Rossetti and his circle in later years, as had John Everett Millais (1829-1896), another of the original seven brothers. Millais's election as an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1853 effectively dissolved the Brotherhood; such popular and often unabashedly sentimental paintings as *The Black Brunswicker* and *Bubbles* had by the 1880s produced for him an income estimated at £ 30,000 a year. George Frederick Watts (1817-1904) had begun to exhibit in 1837. Unpopular with critics and the public alike, he had lived in obscurity and depression until two years earlier when an exhibition in Manchester had established him as one of the leading painters of the day. It was followed by other major exhibitions at the Grosvenor and in New York. The Scottish painter Sir Joseph Noel Paton (1821-1901), a close friend of Hunt and Shields, as well as Rossetti, had won prizes in the Westminster Hall competitions in 1845 and 1847. Appointed Her Majesty's Limner for Scotland and knighted in 1866, he is best known today for his fairy paintings based on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Although Hunt was only three years older than Leighton, Brown clearly conceives of these four painters as belonging to his own generation.

The "enemy" Brown mentions is probably the chronic depression he had suffered periodically ever since the death of his first wife in 1845. It may, however, have been gout, which began

to afflict the artist around this time and which he, in his crusty way, attempted to explain away as rheumatism.

Calais Cottage, Crumpsall  
Monday April 10/82

Dear Shields,

I don't know how you feel this [*sic*] sad event; to me it is the greatest blow I have received since the loss of our dear Nolly. I cannot at all get over the idea that I am never to speak to him again. And yet when he was alive it seemed as though nothing I could hear as to his health could surprise me; & still it was not apparently his *visible* ailments which proved fatal. How could one imagine such a break-down[?] When I saw him in bed last, eating sandwiches & asking for cake & grapes not three hours after his dinner I thought his ailments imaginary & so they might have been then[,] so little did they foreshadow this kidney disease.

A great man is gone! & the effects of it on art in this country none can tell, but one may fear. Unsubstantiality and affectation on the one hand & "Herkomerism" on the other. I fear it will go hard with the British school when a few more of us are gone. You, Jones, Poynter, & Leighton are tolerably young yet; Hunt, Milais [*sic*], Watts, myself & Paton are in the sear & yellow or wrinkling stage decidedly, & what is to follow? I can't foresee.

I hear you are at Birchington or were Saturday eve. Are you returned home yet? I shall address this to you there. You have seen so much of poor dear Gabriel of late; you must be terribly cut up—to me it seems like a dream[.] I cannot make out how things are to go on; in so many directions things must be changed.

I trust you are well—I keep the "enemy" at bay but still with some difficulty at times. I hope you & yours are well. Believe me yours as ever

FMadoxB

### III

A final ironic note. Among the many differences in their personalities, purposes, and outlook that made the friendship between Shields and Rossetti so incongruous were their radically

divergent attitudes concerning the nature and function of art. While Rossetti was always careful to distance himself from the advocates of "Art for Art's Sake," he was also highly skeptical of the ability of art to perform any utilitarian moral or social ends. In the early prose tale, "Hand and Soul," written in 1850 for the short-lived *Germ*, he had created a spokesman for his own artistic creed in the person of an artist named Chiaro dell' Erma, who, at one stage in his career, devotes himself to producing large and abstract allegorical paintings on moral themes. His major effort is a series of frescoes devoted to the subject of Peace and installed in the entryway of a church near his studio. In one of the tale's central scenes, Chiaro is forced to abandon any hope for the efficacy of didactic art as he watches in horror while his frescoes are coated with streams of blood shed in a brawl between two feuding clans who go at each other in the very doorway of the church.

For Shields, on the other hand, art held a sacramental function and was always to be devoted *ad majoram gloriam Dei*. Indeed, as a young man he had spent long hours of agonized prayer trying to decide whether to continue his art studies or to become an itinerant street preacher. He chose the former on the grounds that it was, for him, the more promising mode of ministry. His aim was always "to give the Spirit of the Revelation of God to man . . . conveyed in the forms of Scripture translated as much as may be into the shapes at art's command [and] to glorify the Father by . . . work which shall teach, admonish, and accentuate, with the never silent speech of Art."

The culmination of his career came when he was given the sole commission to undertake the restoration and decoration of the Chapel of the Ascension in the Bayswater Road, to create, as he put it, "a new departure in the alliance or service of Art to Piety." After five years of planning and study, including a return trip to Italy to re-examine religious art there, he began work in 1893. He toiled ceaselessly at the project for the next seventeen years, hand-painting the ceiling and all the woodwork, superintending the carving of the furniture, and covering the walls from the floor to the window lights with crowded, painted panels. He completed it only shortly before his death in 1911, having achieved, he thought, his "desire to plant in [a] great highway of London a place of rest for wayfarers, and prayer and meditation, wherein body, mind, and spirit oppressed with the hurrying roar of the city's life, might

find repose and a refreshing feast ever liberally spread upon its walls for whosoever willed to enter."

The chapel and all its contents were destroyed in a bombing raid in 1942.

#### NOTES

Brown's letters are published by the kind permission of Mrs. Imogen Rossetti Dennis. The fullest account of Brown's life remains the biography written by his grandson, Ford Madox Hueffer (who later changed his last name to Ford), *Ford Madox Brown: A Record of His Life and Work*, 1896. His *Diary*, admirably edited by Virginia Surtees, was published in 1981. Biographies of Rossetti abound; the *Memoir* written by his brother William is the best starting place; Rosalie Glynn Grylls's *Portrait of Rossetti* (1964) is both brief and sensible. Four volumes of his *Letters* have been edited by Oswald Doughty and J.R. Wald (1964-67). Shields's autobiography is published in H.C. Ewart, ed., *Toilers in Art* (1891); his essay on Brown appeared in the *Papers* of the Manchester Literary Club, Volume I, pp. 40-47, in 1875. Ernestine Mills's *Life and Letters of Frederic Shields* (1912) has been accurately described as "dull but indispensable."