

“Does the road wind up-hill all the way?”: Christina Rossetti in Frome 1853-54

In the layout of the “hilly up-and-down sort of place” (as her elder brother William Michael termed it) to which Christina Rossetti came in the spring of 1853, in order to help her mother run a school there, she found not only a fitting emblem of that rather taxing venture but a surprising signpost to what it had threatened to interrupt: her continuing journey in search of a viable poetic voice, duly schooled and nourished by the example of relevant precursors. Beyond the market square the road leading from the Rossettis’ school into the centre of Frome continues, as it happens, up a steep hill. It passes the church whose vicar in 1853, W. J. E. Bennett, was newly brought in (from the same London Tractarian circles in which Rossetti herself moved) to make it—in what might otherwise seem a desert of Dissent—a beacon of all that she too held dear. A bend to the right would then after another few moments’ walk have taken Rossetti in a denominationally different direction, past the home of the Pietist poet Elizabeth Singer Rowe (1674-1737). At that time the commanding position of the house chanced to correspond to the new position of posthumous prominence, both locally and nationally, into which over the previous decade Rowe had been brought. She was now the sort of foremother whom Rossetti might feel eager to have; and the year that the latter spent in Frome saw her unexpectedly—and even insensibly—absorbing, from the other side of the hill, much of what Rowe had handed down. This paper offers some conjectures about the importance to Rossetti’s development as a religious poet of the formative and felicitous meeting of minds for which a rolling English road on the edge of the Mendips became the unexpected backdrop.