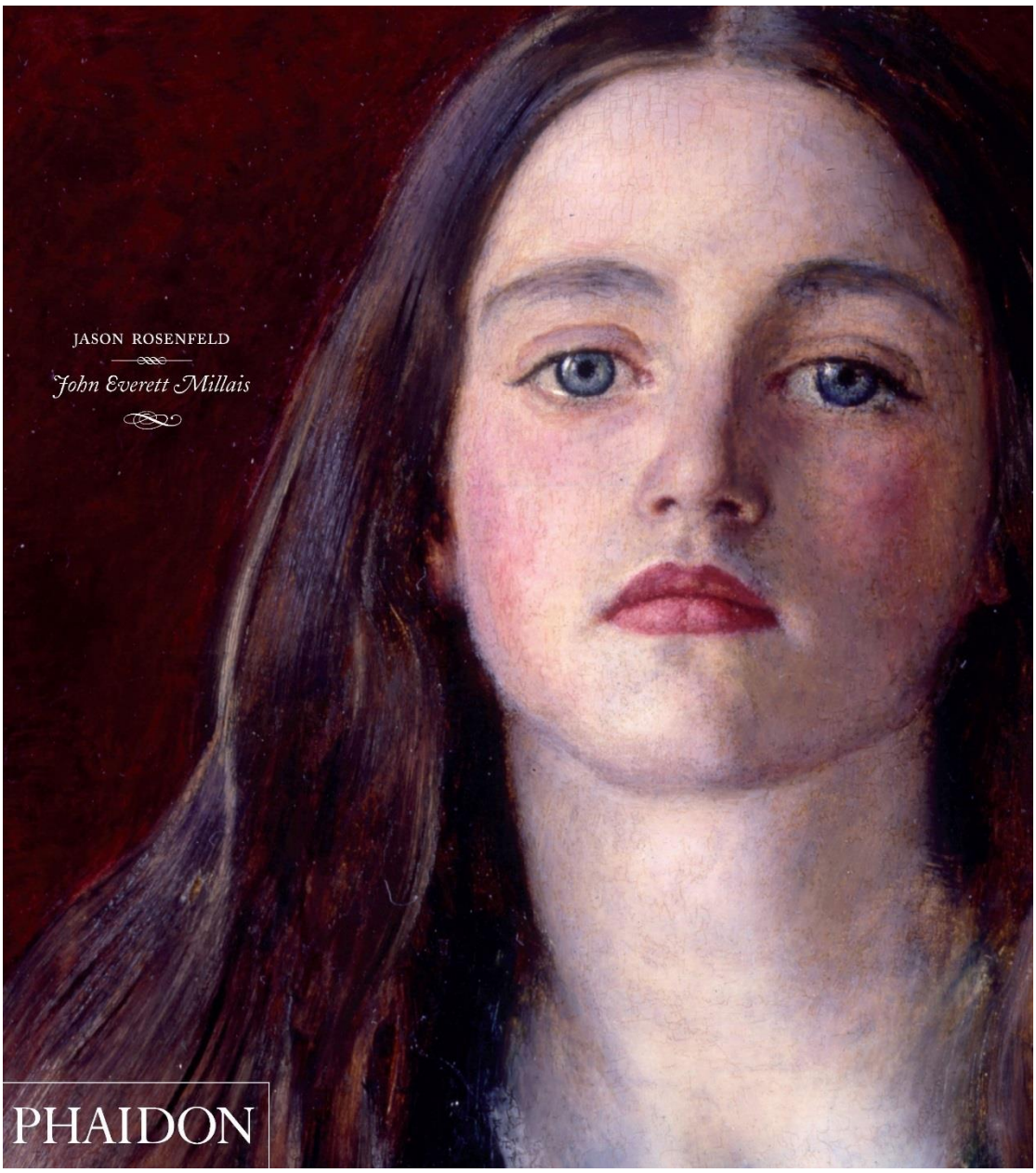
John Everett Millais



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

John Everett Millais. By Jason Rosenfeld. London; Phaidon Press, 2012. 256 pages. Illustrated.

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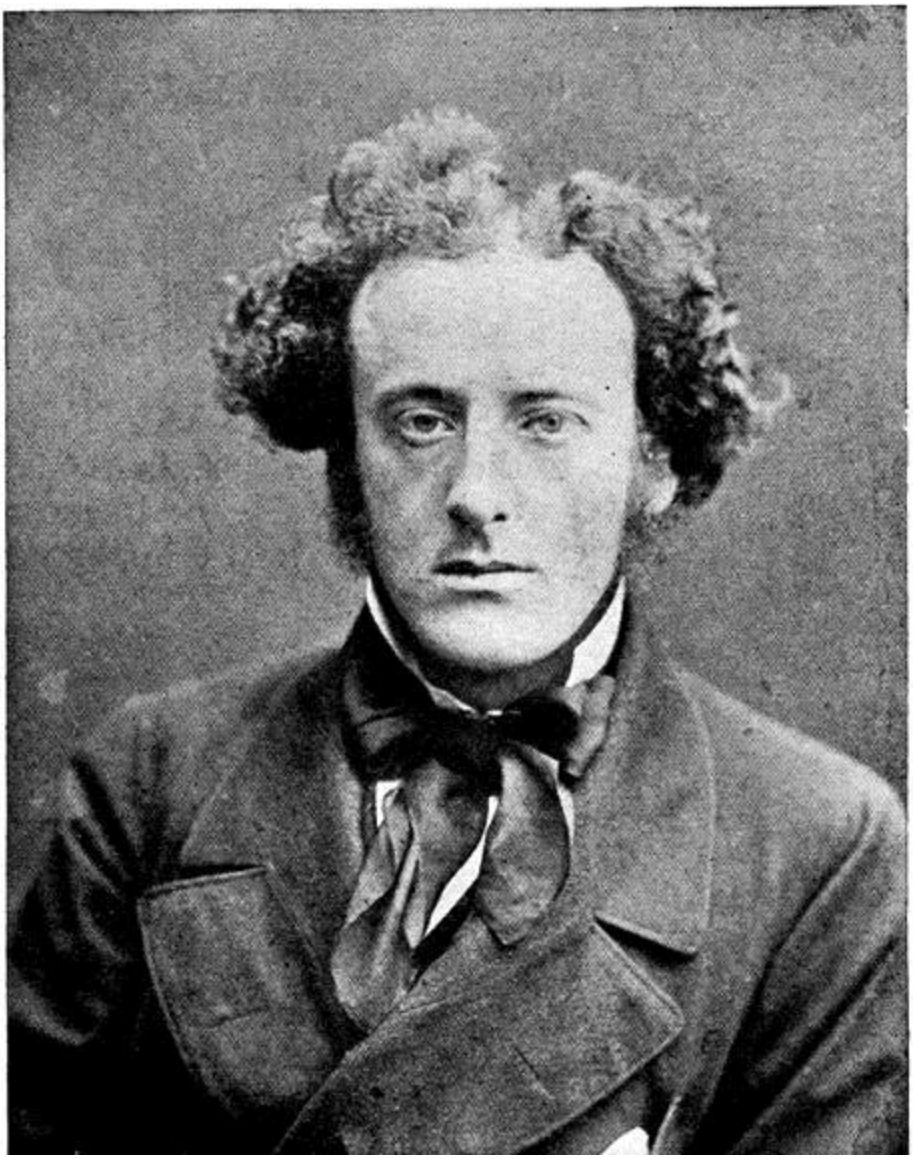

John Everett Millais (1829-1896) This photo would be from his middle years.

At last Millais gets the book he deserves and that complement goes to both Millais and the book's writer, Jason Rosenfeld. Millais and his art have been the topic of other books and his works have appeared in many anthologies. Several books give brief accounts of aspects of his life. Now Rosenfeld gives a full account of his life and reproduces a massive number of his works in colour – and none in horrible black and white. Even ink or pencil sketches are reproduced in their original colours. Being a large format book (25. 5 x 29.5 cms / 9 ¾ x 8 1/2 inches) means that the artwork can be appreciated in detail: with much of Millais's art the delectation is in the details.

Every painting gets a detailed description of its size, the materials and paint used in its composition and where it is currently located. Many get a detailed history of the painting's inspiration, the circumstances concerning its creation and the painting's critical reception and sale. Rosenfeld, like the very best critics, gets us to see something famous in our culture in new ways. He does this by putting so many of the artworks into the larger narrative that they capture a moment from. *Ophelia* is so well known that it can only be obvious, but few others are and so they need Rosenfeld's detailed explanations. Portents of future tragedy are appear in many of Millais's other works. Initially many of them seem to foretell a happy future or at the least, capture a happy moment. *The Woodsman's Daughter* is one such work. It appears to be a moment of sweet innocence, but really captures a scene from Coventry Patmore's poem of that name. This painting shows the beginning of a romance between a poor woodsman's daughter and the son of a lord. As a result of this romance she dies young in tragic circumstances.

Ophelia (1851-1852)

The Woodsman's Daughter (1850-1851)

Similarly *Isabella* (1848-1849) recreates a moment from another tragic tale by an English poet in which much becomes revealed - with Rosenfeld's help. Isabella appears as the young woman on the right, taking a slice of orange from the soliticious young man Lorenzo next to her, while one of her surly brothers surrepticiously bothers the dog Isabella strokes. The other apparently less obnoxious brother who seems to be pensively assessing his wine with more concentration than it deserves, actually assesses Lorenzo, a clerk in their father's business. The brothers decide Lorenzo is unworthy to be in their family; they want to marry her off to a wealthy man for his money. They kill Lorenzo and then Isabella, unable to carry his body, beheads his corpse and places the head in a pot of basil. She muses over that pot until with its removal, she dies of a broken heart.

The pot of basil in the background works as as a foretelling, the dog's eye looks fearful and behind the lovers the servant watches like someone who knows much of what will unfold. As in so many of Millais's works, young lovers are depicted in vivid sensual settings where danger will soon unfold.

While knowing hidden codes and now unfamiliar narratives can enrich our understanding, they are not necessary to the enjoyment of the many narrative pictures that Rosenfeld reproduces.

Isabella (1848-1849)

Rosenfeld tackles two old fallacies about Millais that still have credability. The first of these fallacies is the idea that he gave up painting Pre-Raphaelite pictures in the later 1850s to paint in other more quickly completed styles to make much needed money. This is wrong, for several reasons. Millais was not desperately poor during his youth and his Pre-Raphaelite paintings sold well. He never really abandoned Pre-Raphaelite art as Rosenfeld demonstrates with several examples. In his last years he painted two works *A Forerunner* and *Speak! Speak!* which in their themes and dramatic presentation are Pre-Raphaelite and retain much of that style.

After diverging away from his narrow focus on Pre-Raphaelite art in the later 1850s Millais would continue to retun to the genre in such later works as *A Ransom, Esther* and *The Idyll*.

The second fallacy Rosenfeld deals with is the idea that after the 1850s Millais's work deteroriated in quality. A few later paintings were lesser works, but others were merely in different genres. The examples Rosenfeld gives make the point. Many of his landscapes and portraits have a power and a vividness, that while more subtle than his 1850s work, also induce a sense of magic.

Millais's art went in different directions because he loved to experiment, to try out different fields in the world of art. He was never solely a painter of Pre-Raephaelite topics: as early as the end of the 1840s he was painting contemporary portraits. Just as his Pre-Raephaelite works reflected his love of stories, many of his landscapes were inspired by his love of the Scottish countryside.

Wisely Rosenfeld refers to Millas's personal life as a background to his art. That attitude comes as a relief after so many tabloid exposés of famous figures. Millais lived a staid life as a family man, enjoying hunting and fishing, bringing up his many children and creating his art. He had a reputation for courtesy, modesty and geneorosity. His religion was soft-pedalled, even less appears to be obvious about his politics: he painted portraits of both the Liberal Gladstone and the Conservative Disraeli. Even in his fortunate life problems and tragedies came. Socially the scandal of his wife Effie's unconsumated first marriage and subsequent annulment before she and Millais were married never really vanished. Many considered him a traitor to her first husband, John Ruskin, as Millais had been his friend and mentor. With considerable nobilty Ruskin never said or implied such things: he continued to review Millais's paintings favourably when he thought praise was justified and criticised them on what he disliked artistically.

Effie and Millais endured other sad events; the death of a son in 1876 and then in the 1890s they had to endure his throat cancer and her developing blindness. For the last six months of his life although fatally ill and barely able to speak, he served as president of the Royal Academy, the organization he had once rebelled against. A detailed chronology shows the pattern of his life and his prolific artistic output.

Despite a few notable artwork omissions, *John Everett Millais* will probably become one of the definitive works on one of England's greatest artists.

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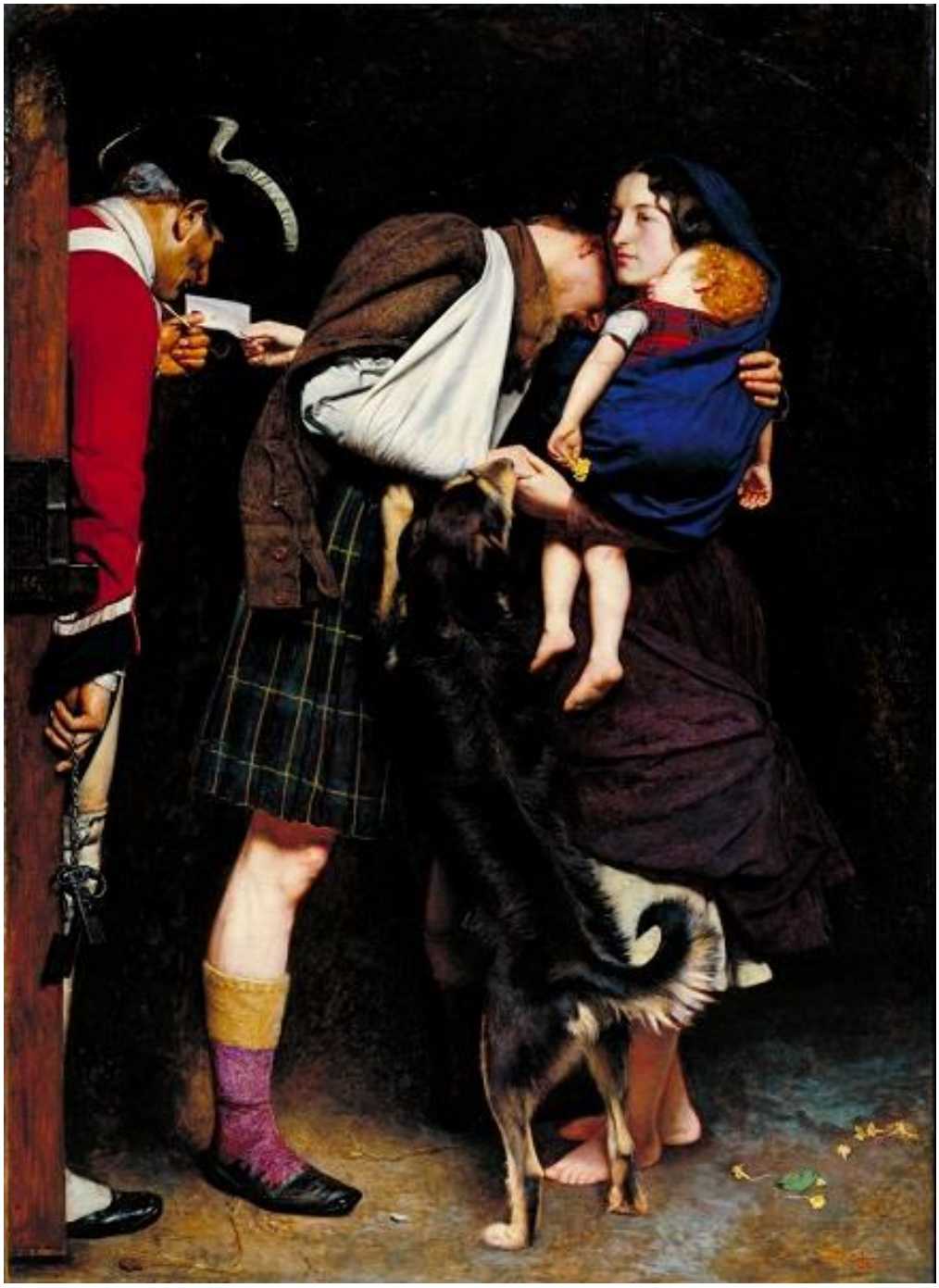
The Ransom (1860-1862)

Peace Concluded (1856) this painting depicts the news of the end of the Crimean War arriving by newspaper. The tweed dressing gown was standard issue for convalescent officers. The toys have a symbolic value.

An Idyll 1745 (1884)

The picture above is apparently not considered to be Pre-Raphaelite: it does not appear in the prominent collections of Pre-Raphaelite art or gains mentions in writings on the topic. The picture on the right, however is usually mentioned in those writings and collections. Both have the same historical theme, the Jacobite rebellion. Both feature British redcoats and Scottish women together in moments of peace in a time of conflict. In style both show an extraordinary attention to detail. The one difference is that *The Order of Release 1746* is more vivid in its colours. Is this enough to have *An Idyll 1745* not considered Pre-Raphaelite? Or is the problem the date of creation? This picture was painted nearly thirty years after Millais supposedly gave up the Pre-Raphaelite style.



The Order of Release 1746 (1852-1853)

The Boyhood of Raleigh (1869-1870)

Chill October (1870)

This landscape, like *The Boyhood of Raleigh* and the landscapes below, was painted after Millais's abilities supposedly deteriorated.

Dew–Drenched Furze (1889-1890)

The Sound of Many Waters (1876)

Esther (1865)

Amazingly this work does not make the Pre-Raphaelite anthologies. Esther is about to see the king to plea for the people. To go beyond the curtain without permission gains the penalty of death. Beauty and sensuality danger and death combine in a Millais painting again.

Miss Eveleen Tennant (1874)

While exemplifying many of his portraits, this work also shows aspects of his Pre-Raphaelite art.

Cinderella

Despite the title this is clearly a portrayal of a Victorian era chimney sweep or houseservant. Like *The Farmer's Daughter* this shows that Millais did not paint only portraits of rich children. Those two paintings are not included in Rosenfeld's collection. while lacking the crisp outlines and vividness in colour of his early Pre-Raphaelite works, at the end of his life the themes are the same.

Speak! Speak! (1894-1895)

Self-Portrait (1880)