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Pre-Raphaelite Wonderland: Christian Yandell's Alice

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Abstract
The nineteenth century was a time of revolutionary change in Britain-industrial, scientific, social and cultural upheaval drove the heart of Empire to seek out the new and challenge the old. Within the arts, J. M. W. Turner's impressionistic renderings of steam trains and retiring Trafalgar-era gunships turned a century-long tradition of landscape painting on its head and at the same time proclaimed British art a world leader. Less revolutionary in technique, though more so in word and deed, was a group of young radical London-based artists who appeared mid-century, united in rebellion against Royal Academy training and the artistic traditions of their birth. Calling themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, they sought to replicate nature's realism in a framework of contemporary, medieval, and high-literary subjects (Parris). Prominent members included Ford Madox Brown, William Holman Hunt, Elisabeth Eleanor Siddall, Edward Burne-Jones, child prodigy Charles Everett Millais, poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and print maker, writer, and prominent socialist William Morris.

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The nineteenth century was a time of revolutionary change in Britain—industrial, scientific, social and cultural upheaval drove the heart of Empire to seek out the new and challenge the old. Within the arts, J. M. W. Turner’s impressionistic renderings of steam trains and retiring Trafalgar-era gunships turned a century-long tradition of landscape painting on its head and at the same time proclaimed British art a world leader. Less revolutionary in technique, though more so in word and deed, was a group of young radical London-based artists who appeared mid-century, united in rebellion against Royal Academy training and the artistic traditions of their birth. Calling themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, they sought to replicate nature’s realism in a framework of contemporary, medieval, and high-literary subjects (Parris). Prominent members included Ford Madox Brown, William Holman Hunt, Elisabeth Eleanor Siddall, Edward Burne-Jones, child prodigy Charles Everett Millais, poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and print maker, writer, and prominent socialist William Morris.

Casting aside the in-vogue Academy style, the Brotherhood announced the arrival of a new art based on the imagination; overtly Romantic, it reflected the horror and ecstasy of dreams, life and death, good and evil, mythology and alchemy, passion and love, with the latter both won and lost. One commentator on Pre-Raphaelite art described it as an interesting mix of “concern for the moral issues of modern life” alongside a celebration of “the technical virtues of medieval art and the romantic appeal of medieval history” (Wilton 157–59). The movement gave rise to intensely realistic, brilliantly colored works laden with symbolic elements. Out-of-doors en plein air painting was also promoted—a radical idea at the time—and the beauty of nature and humanity was presented in magical, often mythical settings. Exhibited Pre-Raphaelite works stood out from the muted tones and soft lines of those done in traditional and Academy styles.

Though the Brotherhood was short-lived—forming in 1848 as revolution swept through Europe and dissipating during the 1860s—its influence was profound and...
ongoing. This was evidenced by the subsequent rise of Symbolist art throughout Europe from the 1870s through to the 1910s, and a continuing interest in, and replication of, works in the Pre-Raphaelite manner (Clare). This late nineteenth-century child of Romanticism and the Pre-Raphaelites rejected science, logic, and the industrial revolution for a romanticized art and literature based on inner contemplation, spiritualism, and a deeper understanding of one’s place in the natural world. Both movements saw artists embracing the medieval, including Arthurian legend with their tales of gallant knights coming to the aid of virtuous women—reflecting their own search for meaning in the industrialized age (Cheney). The Bible was an equally rich source for stories and moral guidance.

Impressionism is usually presented as the most influential art movement of the second half of the nineteenth century; however, Symbolist art was equally as revolutionary and more internationally dominant, with adherents such as Francisco de Goya, Eugene Delacroix, Edvard Munch, and Aubrey Beardsley adopting its philosophical constructs and fantastical content. Pinning these art movements down and unraveling their spider web-like network of connections is difficult more than a century later. The lines are now blurred, for example, between Pre-Raphaelitism, Symbolism, and Art Nouveau, despite their spatial separations. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists took what they liked from what was on offer or had come before. The melding of Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist methods and motifs was an easy task for those not especially attracted to Impressionism or modernist trends.

The formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had coincided with the mid-century blossoming and democratization of photography, giving rise to more photographers and a greater variety of subjects. The “Pre-Raphaelite lens” mirrored many of the Brotherhood’s achievements in paint, print, pen, and watercolor (Waggoner). One of the most talented exponents of the camera at the time, and a close friend of key members including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was Charles Dodgson. Using the alias Lewis Carroll, he published Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) and Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There (1872)—both revolutionary works of juvenile fantasy fiction.
Their appearance at the far end of Pre-Raphaelitism may suggest a disconnect from the aims and objectives of the Brotherhood, and Dodgson’s Wonderland, with its strangely timeless and decidedly unrealistic world of talking plants and animals, was in many ways the very antithesis of Pre-Raphaelitism. Likewise, the Tenniel drawings, which graced the original publications and became intimately connected with them, belong to the Punch world of black-and-white political cartoons. They cannot be said to reflect the rarefied air or brightly detailed coloring of John Everett Millais’s Ophelia or one of the numerous portraits of Rossetti’s muse Jane Morris (Mancoff). As a result, the two Alice books have generally not been considered Pre-Raphaelite in the voluminous and ongoing critique of Carroll’s work. For contemporary readers in Victorian England, Wonderland was far removed from the hyper-realistic and medieval canvases of Millais, Holman-Hunt, and Rossetti. However, what may once have appeared a clear disconnect is now less so due to a better understanding of the context and conduct of the Pre-Raphaelites.

Connections between the Victorian novel and Pre-Raphaelitism have been highlighted, and neo-Victorian novels with Pre-Raphaelite motifs have also appeared (Honnighausen; Windling; Andres; Fox). A natural affinity exists between fantasy writers and the magic and myth evident in Pre-Raphaelite art, continuing to the present day with, for example, the Middle Earth art of Alan Lee and its subsequent expression in the Peter Jackson films of Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings saga (French; Walker). Both Carroll’s Wonderland and the Pre-Raphaelites now appear to represent a manifestation of the dreamlike idyll sought by English artists and writers during a time of change and insecurity. The connection may not have been highlighted at the time of original publication, but more than half a century later, and in a place on the other side of the globe, it was.

A Narrative Art

In 1923, young Australian artist Christian Yandell (1894–1954) applied a Pre-Raphaelite pen to the task of illustrating Alice in Wonderland (1924). A latecomer to the Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist worlds of myth and legend, Yandell’s work from the 1910s through to the 1930s strongly reflected both, with theosophical underpinnings eventually dominating (Harris; Roe; McFarlane; Sarmiala-Berger; Nunn). Like Pre-Raphaelitism, Yandell’s was a narrative art, embedded in stories and telling their own. Intelligent, mythological, spiritual, dreamy, and mystical, it was less a reflection of Melbourne in 1923 than London in 1865.

As she approached her twentieth year, Yandell either sought, or accepted, a commission to illustrate an abbreviated version of Alice in Wonderland for the New Zealand-based publishing house Whitcombe and Tombs. There would be no leather
bound, profusely illustrated quarto tome arising from this contract, but merely a small, cheaply produced school reader for ages nine to ten. Despite the edition’s patrician origins and nondescript cover design, interspersed within the pages was a small collection of drawings that paid homage to the Pre-Raphaelites. Finely detailed and reflecting as much as possible a natural reality in the unnatural Wonderland, Yandell’s work added a new dimension to the telling of this by then well-known story.

The artist’s delayed adoption of Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist technique and imagery was in many ways inexplicable for a young Australian. However, it reflected the British cultural matrix transplanted to her home state of Victoria as a result of waves of migration, beginning with the arrival of the First Fleet of convicts, soldiers, and free settlers at Sydney—Botany Bay—in 1788. By the time Yandell was born in 1894, significant Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist art works had found their way onto the walls of a large number of Australian public galleries, in an orgy of acquisition driven by a mixture of patriotic fervor and taste (Trumble, Love & Death). For example, the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1876 acquired Ford Madox Brown’s monumental Chaucer at the Court of Edward III (1847–1851). These works continued to arrive in the opening decades of the new century, following the death of Queen Victoria in January 1901 and the arrival of an Australian constitution with Federation that same year. Prominently displayed in institutions such as the National Gallery of Victoria and Art Gallery of New South Wales, they had an impact upon Yandell when, as a young National Gallery of Victoria Art school student in 1910, she first moved to Melbourne to study. At a time when Modernism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Fauvism, and a variety of other “-isms” were appearing, and despite the local achievements of the Heidelberg School artists in the area of landscape, Yandell’s work was decidedly distinct and disconnected from many modernist trends. Her most obvious influences were the Pre-Raphaelites Rossetti, Millais, and Burne-Jones, alongside Symbolist graphic artist Aubrey Beardsley and Australian practitioners in black and white such as Norman Lindsay. Yandell’s few paintings in oil and watercolor from this period displayed a strong literary sense and included medieval
elements—as did the Pre-Raphaelites—most notably her portraits in paint and print of Morgan Le Fay, a powerful sorceress of Arthurian legend.

Antipodean connections with the Brotherhood are ephemeral: the brief, twenty-month residence on the Victorian goldfields between 1852–1854 of sculptor Thomas Woolner and subsequent commissions following his return to England (Verrocchio; Neale); the mid-century immigration of two sisters and a brother of William Holman Hunt (Hudson); and Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s infatuation with exotic animals, including Australian kangaroos, wallabies and, most famously of all, wombats—all kept in lively captivity at his small Chelsea zoological garden (Trumble, “Rosetti’s Wombat”). More generally, the Pre-Raphaelites had featured in discussions within the arts section of local newspapers since the early 1850s—these mostly being extracts from London reports. In February 1861, a public subscription for an engraved print copy of Holman Hunt’s Light of the World portrait of Jesus Christ was got up in Sydney, though “Savoir Faire” in a letter to the editor later that year, called the Pre-Raphaelite style “bad” and the final engraving “unpicturesque.”

The bringing together in 1924 of Lewis Carroll and the Pre-Raphaelites in the quaint Whitcombe’s Story Books edition of Alice in Wonderland reveals the evolution of an interesting synthesis of British and Australian art in the years since the 1860s. During the course of the twentieth century, the close cultural and familial links between Empire and colony would disappear and an indigenous Australian art flourished. Locally born artists such as Christian Yandell would find their own path, taking from an array of influences and images to create something new. The Alice drawings are testament to a richness of tradition from which the young Melbourne-based artist could draw.

The book

The 1924 edition of Alice in Wonderland issued by Whitcombe and Tombs for the Australasian education market was a nondescript, sixty-four-page primary school reader. Edited by E. A. Stewart, it featured an original cover design by the Carlton Studio of Melbourne, plus twelve black-and-white engraved line drawings by Christian Yandell. Intended “for children aged 9 to 10 years,” it was number 415 in the Whitcombe’s Story Books series and marked the first illustration of Alice in Wonderland by an Australian artist. Nine editions appeared through to 1960, with the majority printed in Christchurch. No extant copy of the original 1924 edition is known to have survived, though the print run numbered 10,000 and by 1960—when the last edition appeared—some 74,770 had been issued.

The ephemeral nature of school readers and associated curriculum materials meant they did not usually find their way into public or private collections. Often
printed on low-quality paper with simple cardboard covers and glued, stapled, or single-stitch bindings—similar to modern, mass-market paperbacks—they were discarded by children and educational institutions after heavy use in the classroom and home. The present day rarity of school readers is, in addition, the result of their limited availability for purchase in non-specialist bookshops at the time of release. Illustrations within—especially black-and-white line drawings—were in many instances roughly colored by their young owners, further degrading the school reader’s value as a collectible and affecting the likelihood of preservation.

For the Whitcombe and Tombs edition of Alice in Wonderland, the thickly textured cover image was in stark contrast to Yandell’s fine line drawings within. The cover depicted, below a large banner title, the disembodied head of a Cheshire Cat looking down upon a Mock Turtle and Gryphon dancing by the seashore. For those surviving copies, the use of coarse brown paper and dark inks created an indistinct and confused image that tended to mask the quality of the illustrations within. Yandell’s drawings, apart from being the first, are also perhaps the finest by an Australian artist on this subject for more than half a century. Their failure to appear in a publication of higher quality, and never having subsequently been reproduced—apart from a single instance of the “Drink me” vignette included in the Alice 125 exhibition catalogue (Paul)—adds to the mystery surrounding this little-known artist’s work. Though a solo retrospective exhibition has been mounted, with fully illustrated catalogue, Yandell usually receives only a passing mention, if at all, in surveys of Australian art and art history (Draffin; Holden; Hylton; Nunn; O’Conor; Do Razano).

The artist

During her lifetime Yandell—who married fellow artist Mervyn Napier Waller in 1915 and after 1930 went by the name Christian Waller—worked with distinction in book illustration, book plate and print design and the creation of large stained-glass windows for churches in her native Victoria and nearby New South Wales (Waller; Young; Westhoven; Frankston City Council). She was adept in line drawing with pencil, in the use of watercolor and oil, and in the preparation of linocuts and other printing techniques. The Alice in Wonderland line drawings are in many ways typical of her early work, revealing the aforementioned pre-Raphaelite influences that later
developed with the inclusion of esoteric, theosophical, occult, and mystical symbolism, alongside elements of Egyptology and Arthurian legend.

Yandell was both a unique talent and an artist of her time. Black-and-white art evolved to a high level of expertise in Australia during the final decades of the nineteenth century. Magazines such as *The Bulletin* and book illustration for indigenous product such as *The Adventures of Blinky Bill* provided work for talented artists such as the Lindsay brothers, Norman and Lionel. Yandell was involved in a number of book projects during the 1920s, most notably illustrating E. J. Atkinson’s poem *The Renegades* (1921), T. J. Symons’s *Tales from Far and Near* (1920s), Hume Cook’s *Australian Fairy Tales* (1925), Lillian Paten May’s *The Adventurous Elves* (1926), and J. M. Stevens’s *The Mad Painter* (1926). These works reflect elements of Christian’s life and times—the vampish “Roaring Twenties” that were a reaction to the horrors of World War I; the artist’s own training at the National Gallery of Victoria Art School; international art movements and artists; and life in her native Victoria and the city of Melbourne. They also reveal an interest in fantastical worlds of fiction and imagination.

Following this flourish of activity in the public eye throughout the 1920s as a commercial artist, book illustrator, and exhibitor, during the early thirties Yandell became reclusive and worked on the compilation of a collection of her theosophical prints in book form, most notably with *The Great-Breath: A Book of Seven Designs* (1932) and, from the same year, the stalled *The Gates of Dawn* (eventually published in 1977). This was followed by a rather eventful period in her private life during the late thirties when she separated from her husband and had a brief sojourn in the United States as a member of a quasi-religious cult. Upon her return to Australia and reconciliation with her husband, Yandell concentrated on the design and installation of stained-glass windows, working in this field until her death in 1954. As a result her own art is little known, despite the work of Roger Butler and David Thomas since 1978 in both exhibiting and commenting upon her drawings, prints, and mosaics (Butler; Deutscher; Thomas). Yandell has been immortalized in a large portrait in oil taken by her more famous husband; it now forms part of the collection of the National Gallery of Australia. Unfortunately, she produced no such equivalent and her most spectacular work—large church mosaics—cannot be exhibited and are therefore rarely seen apart from by local parishioners.

**The Illustrations**

Twelve of Yandell’s drawings were printed in the Whitcombe & Tombs *Alice in Wonderland*:

1. “. . . and last of all this grand procession, came the King and Queen”—facing the title page
The model for Christian’s Alice was her niece Klytie Pate. Born in 1912, she was eleven at the time her aunt made the initial Alice sketches. Two years later—in 1925—Klytie came to live with the Wallers following her father’s divorce. She later pursued the art of pottery with distinction in Australia and became a champion of her aunt’s work following Christian’s untimely death in 1954. Klytie’s youth, slender figure, and distinctive facial features made her an ideal subject for a slightly more mature Alice than the original seven-year-old portrayed in Tenniel’s engravings.

Yandell’s drawings are an eclectic mix, ranging from depictions of the iconic Mad Hatter’s Tea Party through to densely drawn processional scenes and simple sketches of Wonderland’s inhabitants. These reveal her to be strong in landscape, design, and the depiction of animals, but less so the human form, though we know from extant pencil sketches that her life drawing was sound. The Alice sketches range in size from two vignettes through to four half-page and six full-page engravings. A number are highly detailed, such as the title page print and that featuring the hookah-smoking caterpillar on the mushroom (21), whilst others are simple in both line and subject matter. Some pay homage to John Tenniel’s original engravings from 1865, including “The Dodo solemnly presented the thimble” (15) and “Broken only by the sobbing of the Mock Turtle” (49)—though many are distinctly the work of Yandell, notably “The Queen’s Croquet-ground “ (41). Yandell’s Alice varies both in size (as she does in the book) and facial features, and as a consequence her age in the drawings is not easy to determine—ranging anywhere from eight to eighteen.

Yandell’s reason for taking on the task of illustrating a school reader remains a mystery. It may have been purely mercenary, or perhaps she considered it a worthy endeavor as a number of well-known Australian artists also worked on the Whitcombe’s Story Books series, including Ida Rentoul Outhwaite and May Gibbs (Griffith; McLaren and Griffith).
Perhaps it was the ephemeral connection between Carroll and the Pre-Raphaelites, and most especially Rossetti. His unfinished Dantis Amor (1859–60), with its golden stars upon a Prussian Blue sky and solitary angel-like central figure is a template for many of her linocuts and stained-glass designs. It is one of many obvious links between Rossetti’s art and Yandell’s. The work of any artist is the sum of many parts, many experiences, many influences. Christian Yandell is no different, and barring the discovery of writings on these subjects by her explaining the rationale behind the Alice drawings, such questions must remain unanswered, and the artist a continuing footnote in the artistic and literary history of Australia.

Works Cited


