

# Thomas Woolner: a Pre-Raphaelite Sculptor in Australia

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Detail from Fig. 14. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Portrait of Thomas Woolner. 1852.

*This article is dedicated to the memory of Benedict Read (1945 –2016)*

The brilliant career of Thomas Woolner, R.A. (1825-92) was launched in Melbourne at the peak of the Victorian gold rush in the early 1850s. One of the seven original Pre-Raphaelite Brethren and the only sculptor among them, Woolner arrived on 25 October 1852, hoping to redress his impoverished state by fossicking for his fortune on the fabled goldfields. He had set off from Gravesend in July, accompanied by two other equally penurious artists and Pre-Raphaelite sympathisers: a fellow sculptor, Bernhard Smith (1820-85), with whom he had



Fig. 1. Ford Madox Brown. *The Last of England*. 1855. Oil on canvas, 82.5 x 75 cm. (Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery) ©Birmingham Museums Trust.

been sharing a London studio, and the multi-talented designer and draftsman, Edward La Trobe Bateman (1816-97). Woolner's departure was immortalised in one of Britain's most popular subject paintings by another Pre-Raphaelite admirer and friend, Ford Madox Brown (1821-93). However, unlike its trenchant title, *The Last of England* (Fig. 1), this dramatic step was far from being the last of Woolner.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, his unexpectedly warm reception in an unimaginably distant colony on the outer edge of the British Empire was his making. He was to return to Britain to carve out a highly successful career as the result of his Australian experience.

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<sup>1</sup> B. Read: *Victorian Sculpture*, New Haven and London 1983, p. 3.

Prior to his leaving England, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt had recruited Woolner to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848. The original members of the “P.R.B.,” as they were popularly called, jeered at prevailing academic art conventions influenced by “silly old Slossua Reynolds,” believing that they resulted in brown sludge on bogus Old Masters, churned out by the current crop of art students.<sup>2</sup> Hunt recounted:

. . . the many indications of Woolner’s energy and his burning ambition to do work of excelling truthfulness and strong poetic spirit expressed in his energetic talk were enough to persuade me that Rossetti’s suggestion that he should be made one of our number was a reasonable one; in due course, therefore, Millais having known him at the Academy, he was approved as a member.<sup>3</sup>

Woolner’s forceful, driven personality is perfectly captured in Rossetti’s sketches of him in his London studio (Figs. 2 and 3);<sup>4</sup> in the first of these he examines a small fancy figure he



Fig. 2. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Portrait of Thomas Woolner. 1850. Pen & brown ink, 16.9 x 10.9 cm. (Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery) ©Birmingham Museums Trust.

produced for the mass market, one of which later turned up unexpectedly at a most propitious moment. At this point, Woolner also met a group who were to become closely connected with his Australian venture, including Edward Bateman, then engaged to the feminist painter, Anna Mary, daughter of the English writers, William and Mary Howitt, who were, in their time, household names.

When Woolner left London in 1852, he was already fully trained, having attained the highest category of “carver.” He had spent six years in the studio of the eminent sculptor, William Behnes (1795-1864), who, if lacking flair and originality, nevertheless gave excellent instruction in every facet of his craft. Technically, Behnes was

one of the most accomplished masters of the day, known for the accurate likeness and psychological penetration of his portrait sculptures. Despite his qualifications, Woolner was confronted with the difficult economic conditions of the first half of nineteenth-century Britain when the paucity of public commissions and private patronage meant that scope for the display of talent and imagination was severely limited. Sculpture

<sup>2</sup> D. Holman-Hunt: *My Grandfather, His Wives and Loves*, London 1969, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> W. Holman Hunt: *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, London 1905-06, vol. 1, p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> Fig. 3 is known in reproduction only. *Thomas Woolner R. A., Sculptor and Poet: His Life in Letters*, A. Woolner ed., London 1917, p. 56.

was in the doldrums, a fact officially recognised by the setting up of the Royal Fine Arts Commission, chaired by the Prince Consort, Albert, to encourage the Fine Arts in association with the rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament. In an attempt to redress this problem, the Commissioners announced a national competition in 1843 to select sculptors for a decorative scheme of historical portrait sculptures for the New Palace at Westminster. However, apart from a few somewhat older and already established names (Theed, Bell, Foley, and Calder Marshall among them), the outlook for unsuccessful competitors such as Woolner was bleak. In general, the only categories in which most sculptors might hope to scrape a living were portrait busts or funerary monuments.<sup>5</sup>

As William Holman Hunt observed, Woolner's passionate desire was to achieve artistic preeminence through the creation of monumental sculptural projects expressing the aesthetic aims of the Pre-Raphaelites.<sup>6</sup> These were to be realised in imaginative ideal works based on episodes from history, the Bible, literature, poetry or mythology, the highest categories of all genres both in painting and sculpture.<sup>7</sup> Such works were, at the same time, to be of poetic conception and strictly true to nature, being firmly based on the most minutely observed and faithfully reproduced visual realism.

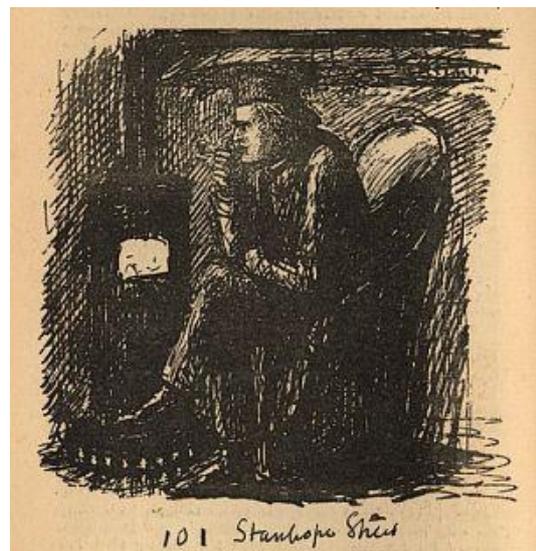


Fig. 3. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Thomas Woolner as a "Fire Fiend." 1853. Reproduced in A. Woolner, *Thomas Woolner: His Life in Letters*, p. 56.

During the 1840s, Woolner had devised a number of sculptural designs that embraced those artistic principles, including his ideal subject for the Westminster Hall competition, which had won critical approval when exhibited in 1844, but had failed to net him a commission. In 1851 he entered another competition, this time for the Wordsworth monument for Westminster Abbey. The Pre-Raphaelites revered Wordsworth as one of the great poets of Nature, and Woolner's elaborate composition realised a Pre-Raphaelite manifesto in sculpture. However, though his competition entry was highly commended, the commission again went elsewhere. At this point, he had endured a decade of poverty and disappointment and, possibly, a

<sup>5</sup> B. Read: "Thomas Woolner: P.R.B., R.A.," in Read and Barnes, eds.: *Pre-Raphaelite Sculpture: Nature and Imagination in British Sculpture 1848-1914*, London 1991, p. 21; *Victorian Sculpture*, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-29, 199.

<sup>6</sup> Read, *Victorian Sculpture*, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

<sup>7</sup> Read, "Thomas Woolner," *op. cit.*, p. 21.

romantic rejection.<sup>8</sup> The prospect of finding a fortune on the Australian goldfields must have looked like a heaven-sent opportunity. In the company of two artistic colleagues with the authoritative figure of William Howitt to lend them respectability, the prospect of a thrilling adventure—not without risks, but with financial reward virtually guaranteed—seemed a positively responsible course of action.

Shortly after Woolner and his colleagues set off for Victoria, Howitt also departed, having decided to visit his youngest brother, who had emigrated to the Port Phillip settlement in 1840. Dr. Godfrey Howitt, whose family took in Woolner on his arrival in Melbourne, was one of the city's most eminent physicians with a large city landmark residence and garden at the corner of Collins and Spring Streets. This favourable circumstance was further enhanced by the doctor's close friendship with Charles Joseph La Trobe (1801-75), Lieutenant-Governor of the newly created colony of Victoria, who by happy coincidence was also first cousin of Woolner's travelling companion, Edward La Trobe Bateman. Thus Woolner was received into a circle where the rigid English class system was greatly relaxed and where his host, Godfrey Howitt, formerly a provincial if highly qualified doctor, now belonged to the colonial elite. Woolner found himself embedded, so to speak, in the heart of gubernatorial Melbourne. Through his English connections, he had landed in an influential network of cultivated locals, who were deeply interested in the arts and also, to his pleasant surprise, familiar with the work of the London Pre-Raphaelites. As an original P.R.B., he was therefore unique in the colony, and without artistic rivals; the only other contemporary sculptor of note, Charles Summer (1825-78), set up in Melbourne in 1854, the year of Woolner's return to Europe.

Having pronounced in 1840 that the arts and sciences were “unborn” in the infant society,<sup>9</sup> the colony's then Superintendent, La Trobe, had quietly gone about nurturing both in a private capacity, on his very modest salary. During the first decade of the 1840s, choosing from less than a handful of professionally trained artists, La Trobe had

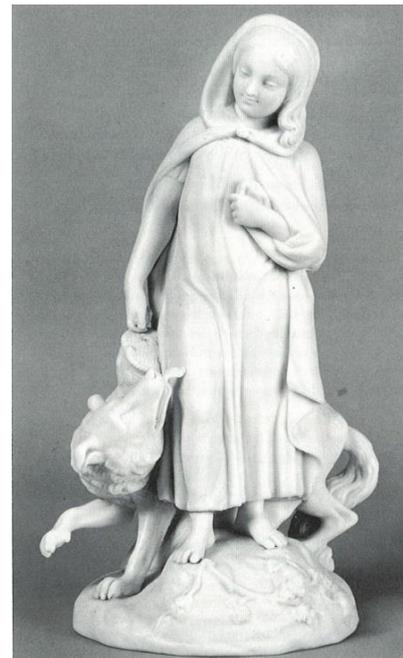


Fig. 4. Thomas Woolner.  
*Red Riding Hood*. c.1849.  
Parian ware. Height 29.5 cm.  
(Joanna Barnes Fine Arts, London).

<sup>8</sup> Read, “Thomas Woolner,” *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> La Trobe to John Murray, 15 Dec. 1840. C. J. La Trobe: “Letters from the Colony,” *The La Trobe Journal* 71 (2003), p. 132.

commissioned pastel views of his house and garden by George Alexander Gilbert (1815-89) and portraits of his children by the miniaturist, Georgiana McCrae (1804-90). Before his return to Europe in 1854, he was to commission from his cousin a series of superlative souvenir views of his house and garden, Jolimont, executed in Bateman's brilliant pencil technique.<sup>10</sup> As Woolner's correspondence shows, La Trobe was already acquainted with his work, and his words of encouragement were immediately forthcoming. On 28 October, Woolner recorded the moment which marked the beginning of his remarkable career trajectory. Within three days of landing at Melbourne, and hardly able to believe his good fortune, he wrote:

I am staying at the above address and receive every kindness possible for a human being to have from another. The Howitts are delightful people and live exactly like rich people do in England. Bateman sleeps at his Excellency's, Mr. Latrobe's to give more convenience to us. We have to dine with that great man today: he wants to know me because Bateman found that my little figure of Red Riding Hood was one of his favourite ornaments and told him [La Trobe] I did it.<sup>11</sup>

On hearing of this extraordinary coincidence, Rossetti responded from London: "How queer that Mr. Latrobe should have your 'Red Riding Hood.' I remember you were working on that the first time I ever saw you. I feel quite confident as to portraiture in Australia, in case digging fails."<sup>12</sup> *Red Riding Hood* was one of Woolner's small imaginative figures, created in 1849 for the mass market in Parian ware, a fine white porcelain, by the British firm Copeland. Gratifyingly, on the same occasion, the urbane La Trobe had added that Woolner "must not leave the Colony without doing something in the fine arts first."<sup>13</sup>

Ambitious Woolner was not one to let such an opportunity pass. Within one week of setting foot in Melbourne, he noted in his diary: "I should have taken a sketch of Mr. La Trobe's face in the afternoon but I was rather late and he had gone out for a drive with his lady . . . This morning I did a little to the sketch of Charley Howitt."<sup>14</sup> However, the most pressing task at hand was the fortune awaiting him on the goldfields and he set off with his shipboard companions, Bateman and Smith, on 2 November. They were to meet up on the road to the diggings with another party of Godfrey Howitt's relatives, his younger son, Edward, and the

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<sup>10</sup> State Library of Victoria, Pictures Collection; the series is illustrated in H. Botham: *La Trobe's Jolimont: A Walk Round My Garden*, Melbourne 2006, p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> Woolner, *Life in Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Woolner, *Life in Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>13</sup> Woolner, *Life in Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Diary of Thomas Woolner in Australia, 1852-54, State Library of Victoria, La Trobe Australian Manuscripts Collection, MS 1926.

doctor's older brother, William Howitt, recently arrived with his two sons, Alfred and Charlton. The reality check of hard labour in primitive conditions, for little or no reward, took less than a month, prompting Woolner to write to his father: "My anticipations are considerably moderated since I began digging, now I see no very sparkling fortune in the future: as soon as ever I get enough to give me a start in London, I am off to a certainty."<sup>15</sup> Finally, on 18 May 1853, he recorded his decision to "try life in other shapes," later calculating that the value of the gold he found was £50 while his expenses had amounted to £80.<sup>16</sup>

Rossetti's confident prediction that portraiture in Australia would be successful proved accurate. Woolner made the most of his situation, writing to his father on 10 July:

I have come to Melbourne to work at my art. There is every prospect of my doing well, as I have powerful friends who are anxious to aid me in every way. I am staying at Dr. Howitt's and the kindness of his family to me is wonderful. I have executed a medallion of the Doctor, one of his Excellency and another of little Charles Howitt. They all give great satisfaction here and you will see what the newspaper says which I send you.<sup>17</sup>

Prior to his departure from London, in addition to his ideal projects, Woolner had executed a series of six cast bronze portrait medals, which, owing to their larger size and single-sided compositions, are termed medallions.



Fig. 5. Thomas Woolner. *Dr. Godfrey Howitt*. 1853.  
Plaster relief medallion, 21.3 cm.  
(Private collection, Melbourne).



Fig. 6. Thomas Woolner. *Charles Howitt*. 1853.  
Plaster relief medallion, 10.0 cm.  
(Private collection, Melbourne).

<sup>15</sup> Woolner, *Life in Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Woolner, *Life in Letters*, *op. cit.*, pp. 44, 61.

<sup>17</sup> Woolner, *Life in Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

The immediate source of this idea seems to have come from his studio companion, Bernhard Smith, who began producing low-relief profile portrait medallions after his return from France.<sup>18</sup> He had trained in the studio of Étienne-Jules Ramey, the collaborator of Pierre-Jean David d'Angers, whom Victor Hugo described as “the Michelangelo of Paris.” David d'Angers is often credited with the revival of the antique medallic genre reinvented in the Renaissance, a form which he used to produce a portable pantheon of some five hundred illustrious portraits. The medallions were mass-produced by Parisian foundries; casts of them also exist in plaster, porcelain and other metals such as lead. Amongst possible influences on Woolner's development of this form, Bernhard Smith aside, the scope and style of David d'Angers' *oeuvre* is likely to have been a major point of inspiration.

Woolner quickly saw the potential of portrait medallions, which admirably suited his purpose on a number of levels, aesthetically and commercially. While he adopted the medium “to get a living,” he also stated that in each case, the highest standards of accuracy and careful research and execution were maintained.<sup>19</sup> These notably portable works of art blurred the boundary between public monument and private *objets d'art*. They were flattering to the subject, conferring on even the homeliest an aura of patrician reserve and distinction. At the same time, the relative ease of execution and compact size made them affordable and suitable for display in a domestic environment. They could be reproduced in plaster or bronze on request and replicated any number of times in either media. The compositional format of these portrait medallions, with emphasis on linearity and spatial compression, was balanced by the effects of relief and expressive surfaces that when cast in bronze, produced dynamic lighting effects.

The form originated in the coins of classical antiquity, a style to which Woolner was particularly drawn, as another founding Pre-Raphaelite Brother, the critic F. G. Stephens, noted:

In the style of his ideal works it had from the first been part of Woolner's ambition to embody something of Phidian dignity, simplicity and naturalness, combined with exhaustive representation of detail. It was this view of the potentialities of sculpture which induced him . . . to join the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood—and while it retained its original characteristics to take part heartily in its efforts.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> L. Ormond: “Thomas Woolner and the Image of Tennyson,” in Read and Barnes, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>19</sup> Read, “Thomas Woolner,” *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>20</sup> F. G. Stephens, *op. cit.*, p. 522, quoted in Read, “Thomas Woolner,” *op. cit.*, p. 22. n. 14.

Later in 1857, Woolner was to defend the canons embodied in antique Greek sculpture, criticizing the “redhot young Ruskinites” of second generation Pre-Raphaelites (Burne-Jones and William Morris), for “the wild enthusiasms they all and each fluster into at Gothic sculpture, indiscriminately, good or bad.”<sup>21</sup>

Between 1846 and 1852, Woolner had produced six portrait profiles, including those of the literary lions Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning and Thomas Carlyle, in the hope of cashing in on the prevailing fashion for acquiring images of current heroes. As an amateur poet in his own right, Woolner’s admiration for Tennyson, the poet-laureate, was perfectly sincere.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, he was also highly political and, inspired by David d’Angers’ example, hoped from the outset to portray as many of the great and the good in contemporary society as possible. Over the course of his career, he was to achieve this ambition, producing a portrait gallery in sculpture of some of the British Empire’s most eminent figures.<sup>23</sup> It was in Melbourne in 1853 that an opportunity to further this aim presented itself.

In setting out so confidently for the Australian goldfields, it clearly never occurred to Woolner that he might be faced with failure. He therefore came without his sculpting tools or even, as he lamented, examples of his work such as his favourite small fanciful figure of *Puck*, from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. As he wrote to his father: “I know I could get some commissions for him [Puck] in bronze at a good price.”<sup>24</sup> The sensible decision to take up sculpture again in order to make a living involved certain problems which he described on 10 July 1853:

I should be able to make some money quickly if it were not for the difficulty I have with plaster of Paris, that which is sent from England gets damp with sea air and is spoilt for artistic purposes . . . I had to make some modelling tools ere I began and dig in the earth for some clay—this I could do to perfection after my 8 months digging experience . . . I have my tools a little in order now and mean to work hard. I get 25 pounds for a medallion here. In England they would not give me 25 pence. I should ask you to send some more clay and tools but I am quite uncertain when I shall return . . .<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> T. Woolner to W. B. Scott, 17 Dec. 1857. J. F. Cox: “An Annotated Edition of Selected Letters of Thomas Woolner, Pre-Raphaelite Poet and Sculptor.” Ph.D. diss. (Arizona State University, 1973), pp. 82-83.

<sup>22</sup> Ormond, in Read and Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> Read, “Thomas Woolner,” *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> Woolner, *Life in Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>25</sup> Woolner, *Life in Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 61. Woolner’s claim that he could earn £25 per portrait medallion is supported by Phebe Howitt’s letter to Edith of 12 May, 1855 (see p.41, note 46 below), stating that she sent £125 to Woolner in London for bronze portraits (four of the family and one of La Trobe). By contrast, clearly banking on Wentworth’s popularity, Woolner offered to supply replicas of his portrait medallion in an intensive

There were no bronze foundries in Melbourne or Sydney at the time; these medallions were all executed in plaster on the understanding that sitters could commission bronze casts of their portraits from the sculptor when in due course he returned to England. Woolner executed plaster portraits of his Australian subjects, firstly in Melbourne in 1853, and afterwards in Sydney where he moved in January 1854 for six months in search of further work. In addition to these plasters that his sitters could acquire, he made a duplicate set which he took back with him to England in July that year. His patrons could then send to London for bronze replicas of their portraits. The first bronze sculpture was not produced in Australia until 1865 when Charles Summers cast the Burke and Wills monument in Melbourne.<sup>26</sup>

Woolner worked his Melbourne connections shrewdly by starting at the top with the Lieutenant-Governor and his personal friends, executing plaster portraits of Dr. Howitt, his wife, Phebe, their daughter, Edith, and their youngest son, Charley. The Howitt ladies, in particular, were much taken with the ebullient, good looking young Woolner, providing him with accommodation and promoting his cause among their friends. As a result, a number of notable early Port Phillip settlers, all close friends of La Trobe and the Howitts, followed their lead and commissioned portraits from him. However, it was not merely his remarkable luck in landing amongst a Melbourne group with ties to the London Pre-Raphaelites that guaranteed Woolner's success. This was as much an outcome of his particular abilities as an artist who set himself the highest standards in accordance with the sovereign Pre-Raphaelite principle of imitating nature as closely as possible. In this vital aspect, he was able to capture a striking physical likeness while at the same time conveying a suggestion of his subject's inner life. Critics of the day invariably remarked on this feature that sharply differentiated Woolner's *oeuvre* from contemporaries such as Bernhard Smith whose more generalised treatment of form lent a blander, rather static, appearance to his portraits.<sup>27</sup>

According to Benedict Read, the leading authority on nineteenth-century British sculpture, Woolner's accuracy in modelling realistic detail was "without parallel in contemporary

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advertising campaign in *The Empire* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* (6<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> April, 1854). These, together with the medallion of La Trobe (which had been advertised earlier, but without a price) were to be cast in bronze and sent from London to public subscribers at the cost of £5 each.

<sup>26</sup> Sand casting for industrial bronze fittings was practised in the colonies from the mid-1850s but the lost wax method required for fine art purposes was not available commercially until 1973; I am grateful to Peter Corlett, sculptor, and Peter Morley, director of Meridian Fine Art Foundry, for this information; J. Eastwood: "Summers, Charles," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne 1976, vol. 6.

<sup>27</sup> J. Peers: "Beyond Captain Cook: Thomas Woolner and Australia," in Read and Barnes, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

sculpture.”<sup>28</sup> This was due to his thorough grasp of underlying anatomical structure as much as his talent for perceiving and recreating finely nuanced surface forms and life-like textures of hair and skin. Outward signs of mind and temperament, conveyed by an accretion of closely observed lines and wrinkles, articulate the features of Woolner’s sitters. This impression of character and personality is reinforced by his treatment of the eye. Avoiding the blank, lifeless stare of so many sculpted heads from classical times onwards, the directed gaze of Woolner’s sitters conveys an expression of mental alertness to match the penetrating portrayal of their physiognomy.<sup>29</sup>

These qualities were perceived by a *Melbourne Morning Herald* critic in 1853 who commented on Woolner’s first three profile medallions of La Trobe (Fig. 12), Godfrey (Fig. 5) and Charley Howitt (Fig. 6) all of whom gave, he wrote:

the counterfeit presentment of inner life . . . If we were compelled to express a preference at all we should give it to the medallion of the Governor, Mr. La Trobe . . . every line of the face evinces that power in the artist, in catching and fixing the habitual mood of the mind, as told to by the countenance.<sup>30</sup>

Contrary to generally accepted practice, Woolner was never tempted to flatter his sitters, even where it may have been expedient. While Georgiana McCrae’s portraits of Edith Howitt lend her a delicate, heart-shaped face (Fig. 7), Woolner’s profile (Fig. 8) reveals her heavy jaw and solid features, exactly as she appears in photographs of the time (Fig. 9).

Fig. 7 (below). Georgiana McCrae. *Edith Mary Howitt*. c.1853. Pencil on paper, 20.0 x 16.1 cm. (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne).



Fig. 8 (above). Thomas Woolner. *Edith Mary Howitt*. 1853. Bronze relief medallion, 21.8 cm. (National Gallery of Australia, Canberra).

Fig. 9 (below). *Edith Mary Howitt* (detail), c.1852. Albumen silver *carte-de-visite*, 8.9 x 5.3 cm. (State Library of Victoria, Melbourne).



<sup>28</sup> Ormond, in Read and Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>29</sup> Read, *Victorian Sculpture*, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-85.

<sup>30</sup> *Melbourne Morning Herald*, 13 July 1853, n.p. [fol. 7 counting from the cover sheet].

While a plaster version of Edith's portrait medallion (Fig. 8) has not yet come to light, those of her parents, Godfrey and Phebe Howitt, are still in the possession of family descendants. The portrait of Phebe Howitt (not pictured) was designed as a pendant to that of her husband (Fig. 5), facing left. In pristine condition, the subtle modulations and detailed modelling



Fig. 10. Thomas Woolner. *Thomas Anne Cole, Farquhar Cole and Captain George Ward Cole*. 1853. Plaster relief medallions, 20.8 cm., 18.0 cm., 20.8 cm., respectively. (State Library of Victoria, Melbourne).

demonstrate Woolner's skill as a relief sculptor; moreover, in true Pre-Raphaelite style, there is no attempt to idealise the subjects. Judging from contemporary *cartes-de-visites*, these are excellent likenesses. The four Howitt subjects of 1853 were followed that same year by the family group of their friends, the early Melbourne settlers Captain George Ward Cole, his wife, Thomas Anne (*née* McCrae) and their young son, Farquhar (Fig. 10).

Realistic details such as the carefully articulated pattern and sharply modelled folds of the ladies' head-dresses are recreated with Pre-Raphaelite precision, by impressing the fine netting of their caps into the original plaster.<sup>31</sup> This process, in due course, was faithfully transcribed in the bronze version of Phebe Howitt's portrait.<sup>32</sup> The plaster casts of Dr. Godfrey and Charley Howitt (Figs. 5 and 6) also demonstrate Woolner's extraordinarily

<sup>31</sup> Peers, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>32</sup> C. Clemente: "The Private Face of Patronage: the Howitts, Artistic and Intellectual Philanthropists in early Melbourne Society." MA thesis, (University of Melbourne, 2005), p. 59, pl.14.

refined modelling technique together with his noted ability to capture character: Howitt's professional gravity and reserve and the lively optimism of his small son, Charley, are clearly evoked even in this most compact of formats.

It is revealing to compare the effect of these delicately nuanced portraits in pure white plaster with examples in bronze which were later executed in London. They show how Woolner exploited the medium for its warm-toned patina and the expressive play of light and shadow to animate his subjects' features.



Fig. 11. Thomas Woolner. *Sir Charles Fitzroy*. 1854.  
Bronze relief medallion, 33.0 cm.  
(Sydney Living Museums).



Fig. 12. Thomas Woolner. *Charles Joseph La Trobe*. 1853.  
Bronze relief medallion, 21.1 cm.  
(State Library of Victoria, Melbourne).

Bronze casts of the two heads of colonial government, Charles Fitzroy (N.S.W.) and Charles La Trobe (Victoria), are a case in point (Figs. 11 and 12). Here, again, Woolner's singular gift for psychological insight is evident: with firmly set mouth and directed gaze, Fitzroy's expression is commanding; even his crisply curling hair conjures the decisive energy of this canny, aristocratic operator. By contrast, La Trobe, a gentleman, but without Fitzroy's

powerful connections, is clearly a man of sensibility and introspection. It is not difficult to associate the reflective personality revealed in Woolner's portrait with La Trobe's reputation as a sterling character whose vision for an educated, civilised community had a formative influence on Melbourne's development as the cultural capital of Australia.

The year 1851, just prior to Woolner's arrival in the colony, had been a watershed in Victoria. The confluence of two seismic events, separation from New South Wales and the discovery of gold, were to permanently transform the economic, social and cultural landscape. The newly created colony of Victoria with governmental autonomy thus replaced the pre-separation, pastoral Port Phillip District of New South Wales. Its former Superintendent, Charles La Trobe, as the new Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria, was invested with considerable powers of patronage, a fact immediately noted with typical bounce by Godfrey Howitt's brother, the irrepressible William Howitt, on his arrival in 1852:

[La Trobe] most politely dismounted from his horse, welcomed me most heartily to the colony and asked what he could do for me. From the long intimacy of the governor with my brother Dr. Howitt and my reputation, it was clear that I had only to devote [illegible] myself some political or executive career and my immediate [illegible] in honourable and profitable employment was certain.<sup>33</sup>

Woolner arrived as the flushing of enormous funds from the gold rush through the economy was producing an astonishing growth of civic and cultural structures, and at a moment when he was particularly well-positioned to benefit from having friends in the colonial government. Attracted to Victoria by the gold rush, he and other artists were now present in unprecedented numbers in Melbourne. This stimulating climate of prosperity and development in the early 1850s also led to the establishment of entrepreneurial artist organisations and opportunities for Woolner and his colleagues to exhibit their works.

Prior to 1852, there had been few practising professional artists among the Port Phillip settlement's permanent residents, Georgiana McCrae being an exception. By 1853, there was a serious attempt to set up an organisation for the display and sale of art in the colony. The short-lived Victoria Fine Arts Society, founded on 20 April 1853, opened its sole exhibition in August, to which in an effort to support Woolner's artistic career in the colony, La Trobe and the Howitts contributed their portraits.<sup>34</sup> Despite the failure of this initiative, a second

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<sup>33</sup> Alfred William Howitt to Charles Summer, n/d c.1854. State Library of Victoria, La Trobe Australian Manuscripts Collection, A. W. Howitt Papers, MS 9356.

<sup>34</sup> Victoria Fine Arts Society: *Catalogue of the Victoria Fine Arts Society's Exhibition Melbourne, August 20 1853*, Melbourne 1853, p. 16.

opportunity arose the following year when Woolner and other locally based artists were represented in the first officially sponsored Melbourne Exhibition of 1854, inspired by London's Great Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851. With Justice Redmond Barry as Chief Commissioner and a committee consisting of Godfrey Howitt and other members of his circle, it included a Fine Arts Court, marking the beginning of the colonial government's involvement in the artistic affairs of Victoria. Once more, Howitt lent Woolner's portrait medallions of himself, his son, Charles, and of La Trobe, while his wife, Phebe, also contributed examples of Edward Bateman's work.<sup>35</sup>

When Woolner went to Sydney in early 1854, there was a shift in the pattern of his commissions, reflecting the nature of his contacts in the two cities. Without exception, Woolner's Melbourne sitters had belonged to the personal friendship circle of La Trobe and Godfrey Howitt. Amongst these were the family group of Captain George Ward Cole, as discussed above, along with Octavius Browne, John Pinney Bear and his wife Annette, James Clow and later, in 1858, the posthumous portrait of Georgiana McCrae's young daughter, Agnes. This list shows just how effective the Howitts' promotion of Woolner had been amongst their immediate circle, a fact confirmed in a letter to his father dated 24 January 1854, in which he announced his recent arrival in Sydney. He also referred to a commission by public subscription for a statue of William Charles Wentworth (1791-1872), the popular explorer, Legislative Council Member and leader of the movement for responsible government and independence from Britain. Woolner ardently hoped to win this commission on which he pinned many of his professional and personal aspirations:

I worked out all the good folks I could get to sit to me at Melbourne and have come here chiefly to try to get a statue of Wentworth, the Sydney folks have been subscribing towards . . . If this Wentworth statue were in Melbourne instead of Sydney I could make almost certain of it; but here I have no friends particularly interested in my success. Of course I could not expect to find such friends as the Howitts. I might wait a long time for that. Sir Charles Nicholson, Speaker of the Legislative Council, is remarkably civil to me in introducing me about and inviting me to his house etc., etc., but what good is all this to me, unless I obtain work thro' it?<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Melbourne Exhibition: *Official Catalogue of the Melbourne Exhibition, 1854, in connexion with the Paris Exhibition, 1855*, Melbourne 1854, p. 30.

<sup>36</sup> Woolner, *Life in Letters, op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.

Despite his peevishness, Woolner had once more landed squarely on his feet. His six months in Sydney were to prove every bit as rewarding as his time in Melbourne, as he confirmed in a journal entry of 26 May 1854: “I have on the whole enjoyed my last twelve months more than any other in my life.”<sup>37</sup> The key to his success was the introduction to Nicholson, “the most erudite collector in [New South Wales],” which had undoubtedly come from La Trobe, the Howitts, or both. The links between Dr. (later Sir Charles) Nicholson and Godfrey



Fig. 13. Thomas Woolner. *William Charles Wentworth*. 1854. Bronze relief medallion, 21.6 cm. (Sydney Living Museums).

Howitt, both medical graduates of Edinburgh University (one directly preceding the other), went back to the early days of the Port Phillip settlement, if not earlier. Nicholson had land and investments in the Port Phillip District and was its elected representative on the New South Wales Legislative Council in 1843. In the more immediate past, La Trobe had spent several months in Sydney in 1851, preparing for the separation and handover of executive powers to the new colony of Victoria.

While his Melbourne subjects were linked by personal friendship, the introduction to Nicholson gave Woolner access to the small, inner elite of official Legislative Council members at the heart of Sydney’s political establishment. The *Illustrated Sydney News*, like the Melbourne reviews, also drew attention to the life-like quality of Woolner’s portraits, including “a very striking medallion of Mr. Wentworth” (Fig. 13):

Amongst the medallions which we inspected were likenesses of some of the first men of the country, executed all of them with the utmost fidelity of outline and feature, and manifesting an insight into individual character and expression which only genius can possess and give effect to. A portrait of Sir Charles Nicholson, Speaker of the Legislative Council, is wonderfully like: the sagacious look of the bright and piercing eye is given to the life. The massive head of Edward Hamilton, Esq., will be easily recognised by his friends, and will suggest, no doubt, the ponderous sledgehammer of his logic. We noticed also the delicate features of Mr. Fanning, which seem animated with the very spirit of taste and refinement. We may add a medallion of James Martin, Esq., M.L.C., whose bump of perception is startlingly developed and another of

<sup>37</sup> Woolner, *Life in Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

Thomas Barker, M.L.C. Mr. Woolner intends shortly to return to England, where we have no doubt he will obtain the commission for the Wentworth statue.<sup>38</sup>

By June in 1854, Woolner had clearly met with considerable success in Sydney, particularly with his medallion portrait of the local hero, William Wentworth. His hopes of winning the commission for the subscription statue of Wentworth, however, suffered a setback when objections were raised on the basis of his unproven ability to successfully execute large-scale, free-standing sculpture. The decision that the judges should be appointed in London rather than Sydney was the cause of Woolner's departure from the colony:

The consequence of this decision is I must return to England quickly as possible, this course being my only chance. I make a great sacrifice in doing this as I have just become known in Sydney and can obtain as much work as I can do modelling people's heads, but the statue is £2000 commission and too good an opportunity to allow any chance to escape.<sup>39</sup>

From Melbourne, the Howitts had followed Woolner's attempts to win the Wentworth commission with keen interest. Lively and entertaining, the handsome young sculptor (Fig. 14) had succeeded in charming Phebe Howitt and her daughter and at some point, he and Edith had become unofficially engaged. One intimate work in ivory of 7.5 cm diameter, a tiny, hand carved version of Edith Howitt's profile portrait medallion, clearly designed to nestle in the palm of a hand for close and private viewing, must date from that time.<sup>40</sup> However, while Phebe Howitt, in particular, was sympathetic to this romantic situation, marriage to a penniless, unknown artist—no matter how personable and promising—was out of the question. Clearly, the hopes of the young couple were fixed on Woolner's winning the Wentworth commission to make his name and launch his career. After leaving Sydney and returning to Melbourne, he departed for England on 22 July 1854.

Woolner did not return home empty-handed. In addition to the plaster portraits sold to his colonial sitters, he took with him a second set of plaster models from which to cast bronze medallions as there was no foundry capable of doing so at that time in the colonies. His distressing discovery on 9 August 1854, during the voyage home, that the case of casts had apparently disappeared, confirms that he was counting on commissions from his Australian patrons as a form of start-up capital in London: "I shall be in a most unfortunate position; I shall be there in England without the means of doing what is an important part of my

<sup>38</sup> "Fine Arts," *Illustrated Sydney News*, 3 June 1854, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Woolner, *Life in Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>40</sup> A. Neale: "Woolner's Australian Romance." *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 19 (2010), pp. 30-31.

business; it will be more out of my pocket than I can reckon.”<sup>41</sup> His relief was immense when informed two months later, on 11 October, that the medallion case with his seeding capital had been sighted: “It was a great delight to hear this and has . . . removed a great weight from my mind: without my medallions I should be like a man on an uninhabited district with but little food and having lost his stock of seed that he meant to serve him in time to come.”<sup>42</sup>

Woolner’s gallery of Australian portraits represented far more than income from commissions for bronze casts of his colonial medallions, vital though that was. This suite of strongly individualised profiles, when displayed in London, made an impact on English viewers. Though small in scale they exude a sharpness of perception, accuracy of execution and uncontrived realism, those very Pre-Raphaelite attributes which became the hallmark of



Fig. 14. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Thomas Woolner*. 1852. Pencil drawing, 16.3 x 14.7 cm. (National Portrait Gallery, London).

Woolner’s style. In Australia he had been able to benefit from a unique window of opportunity to practise and develop his modelling skills in a short, concentrated period of about twelve months, during which he had no contemporary rivals. This undoubtedly contributed to the self-esteem of an artist who, beneath his noisy, opinionated exterior, was, according to William Howitt’s son, Alfred, “very shy and nervous.”<sup>43</sup>

Woolner’s Antipodean success is evident in both the quantity and quality of his Australian work which another founding Pre-Raphaelite brother, critic F. G. Stephens, praised as “remarkable, even among Woolner’s portraits, for their vivacity, learning and solidity.”<sup>44</sup> There is evidence that after he returned to England, Woolner became dissatisfied with some of the medallions he had modelled before he left for the colonies. Consequently, he produced new versions of the Tennyson, Carlyle and Browning medallions between 1855 and 1856.<sup>45</sup>

Clearly Edith Howitt, who had remained in Melbourne, and Woolner, now back in London, continued to regard themselves as engaged, and for the first half of 1855 their hopes were still

<sup>41</sup> Woolner Diary, cited at note 14 above.

<sup>42</sup> Woolner Diary, cited at note 14 above.

<sup>43</sup> Alfred Howitt to Mary Howitt, 3 July 1854. A. W. Howitt Papers cited at note 33 above.

<sup>44</sup> Stephens, *op. cit.*, 1892, p. 522. Quoted in Read, “Thomas Woolner,” *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>45</sup> “List of Works” in Woolner, *Life in Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

focused on the outcome of the Wentworth commission. Correspondence between May and July that year from Phebe Howitt to her daughter, then away on holiday in the country, shows that Woolner's decision to move back to London was taken with the family's full knowledge and encouragement. On 12 May 1855, Phebe Howitt wrote:

Now Mr. Woolner has got a studio, he will have occupation to settle his mind and the next letter will evince more calm wisdom. It will never do for him to put away his powers and vitality in useless regrets about leaving Australia etc. it will take some time after exhibiting in England before orders would pour in but to leave England immediately after making a name would be throwing away a chance likely to be far more permanent and beneficial in the end than any amount of profit in Australia. I shall write as soon as I have time and hope Mr. Woolner will see that it is for the best to remain in England.<sup>46</sup>



Fig. 15. Interior of Thomas Woolner's London studio. Unknown photographer.  
(Benedict Read Collection, kind permission of Benedict Read).

Phebe Howitt continued to throw her weight behind every move to further Woolner's career prospects in Britain, even going so far as to ask Dr. Howitt "if he thought anything could be done to influence the Sydney committee."<sup>47</sup> More practically, she supported him financially and letters to her daughter reveal how Woolner conducted business from England with his

<sup>46</sup> Phebe Howitt to Edith Howitt, 12 May 1855. State Library of Victoria, La Trobe Manuscripts Collection, Papers of the Howitt family, MS 13848.

<sup>47</sup> Phebe Howitt to Edith Howitt, 2 July 1855. Papers of the Howitt family cited at note 46 above, MS 13848.

Australian patrons: “Mr. Woolner . . . received the £125 and would execute my commissions.”<sup>48</sup> It seems that these commissions must have been for five bronze casts, four of her family and one of Charles La Trobe. Four of these medallions of Godfrey, Phebe and Edith Howitt and La Trobe are known to have survived, and, with the exception of Edith’s profile, remain in the possession of Howitt family descendants, together with a plaster cast of Charley Howitt.<sup>49</sup>

Wentworth kept changing his mind about the statue commission and by May 1855, according to Woolner, he had “resolved on founding a fellowship at the Sydney University with the money instead.”<sup>50</sup> But by mid-1857 the matter was still undecided and, to Woolner’s intense annoyance, he was obliged to supply sketches for the statue despite his awareness that Wentworth was also considering other sculptors.<sup>51</sup> In the end, the commission was awarded not to Woolner but to the Italian sculptor, Pietro Tenerani (1789-1869), whose statue of Wentworth was erected at Sydney University in 1862. However, it was Phebe Howitt’s sudden incapacitation, probably from a catastrophic stroke sometime around the end of 1856 or beginning of 1857, which led her daughter to break off the engagement with Woolner.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, in London, his career flourished and orders continued to arrive from Australia for bronze casts from his plaster medallion models, of which Wentworth and La Trobe proved the most popular (Figs. 12 and 13). Woolner later went on to execute portrait busts of other prominent colonials who visited Britain, such as Justice Sir Redmond Barry (1878; National Gallery of Victoria) and the editor of *The Argus*, Edward Wilson (1868; State Library of Victoria).

While he had failed to secure the Wentworth commission which had prompted his return to Britain in 1854, the culmination of Woolner’s artistic association with Australia was, appropriately enough, the gigantic free-standing *Monument to Captain Cook* of 1878 (Fig. 16).<sup>53</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Phebe Howitt to Edith Howitt, 1 July 1855. Papers of the Howitt family cited at note 46 above, MS 13848.

<sup>49</sup> Clemente, “Private Patronage,” *op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>50</sup> In 1854 the sum of £200 was donated to Sydney University to establish a Wentworth medal. Source: Woolner correspondence quoted in Neale, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>51</sup> Woolner to Emily Tennyson, 25 June 1857. Woolner, *Life in Letters*, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-35.

<sup>52</sup> Alfred Howitt to Anna Mary Howitt, 10 August 1857. A. W. Howitt Papers cited at note 33 above. Reference to Phebe Howitt’s “last dreadful attack,” Woolner to Georgiana McCrae, n.d. September, 1858. State Library of Victoria, La Trobe Australian Manuscripts Collection, McCrae Family Papers. MS 12831.

<sup>53</sup> According to the *Sydney Evening News* (26 Feb. 1879, p. 3.), the height of the statue from feet to crown is 13 feet, 6 inches [411 cm.] with an extra 2 feet [60 cm.] for the uplifted arm.



Fig. 16. Thomas Woolner. *Monument to Captain Cook*. 1878. Bronze, height 471 cm. Hyde Park South, Elizabeth Street, Sydney, N.S.W. (Photograph: Monument Australia).

This bronze figure is the polar opposite in terms of dimension and public significance of the small, privately commissioned medallion portraits of the gold rush years.<sup>54</sup> Pleasingly, Woolner's Australian *oeuvre* reflects his highly successful career path, from modest beginnings to its culmination in the Cook colossus, coinciding with official recognition in England with his appointment as Royal Academician (1874) and Professor of Sculpture (1877-79). Despite differing views as to the artistic merits of the Cook statue, this monumental figure does, in fact, splendidly embody those principles first defined by Woolner and the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers: truth to nature, high seriousness and poetic spirit. Cook is presented as the heroic explorer: his stern, farseeing gaze and commanding stance, articulated by the details of his handsome costume and the monumental dimensions of his figure, signify the weight of his impact on Australian history. Towering over Sydney's Hyde Park, this is Woolner's final contribution to this sunny land of promise so cherished in his memory.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> The only other large sculpture by Woolner in the southern hemisphere is the statue of John Robert Godley (1814-61), founder of the Canterbury Association, erected in Cathedral Square, Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1867. The statue has survived the recent earthquake. See B. Read: "Thomas Woolner's Godley and the British Statue Overseas," in M. Stocker, ed.: *Remembering Godley: A Portrait of Canterbury's Founder*, Christchurch 2001, pp. 78-86.

<sup>55</sup> Peers, *op. cit.*, p.37, n.29.

A little over two months after arriving in Australia, Woolner stated: “This day concludes 1852, an important year to me. I have left nearly all I love to seek nearly all I want.”<sup>56</sup> But by 1854, Woolner’s gamble with his career and future prospects had paid off in unexpected ways and on 23 July he departed for England in a very different frame of mind, declaring “all the vague hopes of youth fulfilled. I have found them infinitely surpassed and am made proud and happy.”<sup>57</sup>

There can be no doubt that the brilliant career of Thomas Woolner, P.R.B., future Royal Academician and sometime Professor of Sculpture, was launched in the chaos of Melbourne’s gold rush, and that it reflected the colonial elite’s recognition, appreciation and enduring support of Pre-Raphaelite art.

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<sup>56</sup> Woolner, *Life in Letters, op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>57</sup> Woolner Diary, cited at note 14 above.

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