



DELPHI  
CLASSICS

Alice Meynell

Complete Poetical Works

DELPHI POETS SERIES

D E L P H I P O E T S S E R I E S

**Alice Meynell**

(1847-1922)



**Contents**

*The Life and Poetry of Alice Meynell*

Brief Introduction: Alice Meynell by Katherine Brégy

Complete Poetical Works of Alice Meynell

List of Poems in Alphabetical Order

*The Prose*

The Poor Sisters of Nazareth (1889)

The Rhythm of Life and Other Essays (1893)

The Colour of Life and Other Essays on Things Seen or Heard (1896)

The Children (1897)

The Spirit of Place and Other Essays (1899)

London Impressions (1898)

Ceres' Runaway and Other Essays (1909)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1911)

Essays (1914)

Hearts of Controversy (1917)

*The Delphi Classics Catalogue*

© Delphi Classics 2021

Version 1

DELPHI POETS SERIES

**Alice Meynell**



*By Delphi Classics, 2021*

## COPYRIGHT

*Alice Meynell - Delphi Poets Series*



First published in the United Kingdom in 2021 by Delphi Classics.

© Delphi Classics, 2021.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form other than that in which it is published.

ISBN: 978 1 80170 032 0

Delphi Classics

is an imprint of

Delphi Publishing Ltd

Hastings, East Sussex

United Kingdom

Contact: [sales@delphiclassics.com](mailto:sales@delphiclassics.com)

DELPHI  CLASSICS

[www.delphiclassics.com](http://www.delphiclassics.com)

## NOTE



When reading poetry on an eReader, it is advisable to use a small font size and landscape mode, which will allow the lines of poetry to display correctly.

## The Life and Poetry of Alice Meynell



*Barnes, London Borough of Richmond upon Thames — Alice Meynell's birthplace*

## Brief Introduction: Alice Meynell by Katherine Brégy



From *'The Poets' Chantry'* (1912)

THE WORLD WAS FIRST AWARE of Alice Meynell (or as she then was, Alice Thompson) as a poet when the little initial volume, *Preludes*, blossomed into life like a March violet — early enough, one can never forget, to win Ruskin's enthusiastic praise. Three of its selections ("San Lorenzo's Mother," together with the closing lines of the "Daisy" sonnet and that unforgettable "Letter from a Girl to Her Own Old Age") he forthright declared "the finest things I have yet seen, or felt, in modern verse." That was a personal estimate, to be sure, since Tennyson, Browning, Patmore, and Swinburne were all in the act of writing memorable things; but what a thunderously significant tribute to lay at the feet of a young girl just lifting up her voice in song! *Abyssus abyssum invocat*.

More than a quarter of a century has passed, and in the actual matter of poetry, Mrs. Meynell has published but two additional volumes, the *Poems* of 1893 (an augmented reprint of the original booklet) and the slight but weighty *Later Poems* of 1901; these, with fugitive strains of rare beauty in some favoured review, make up the sum. The voice in its moment was *ex cathedra*; having spoken, she may hold her peace.

She has elected all along to speak in a deliberately vestal and cloistral poetry. Remote as the mountain snows, yet near as the wind upon our face, is her song. It is seldom sensuous, the very imagery being evoked, in the main, from the intellectual vision; and there are moments when "amorous thought has sucked pale Fancy's breath" quite out of the stanzas. Yet these tremble with a deep and impassioned emotion — emotion which seems aloof because it is so interior. For the characteristic note of Mrs. Meynell's music is not yearning or aspiration; it is not the dear and consummate fruition of life; still less is it a mourning over things lost. It is the note of active *renunciation*. Renunciation of the beloved by the lover, that both may be more true to the Heart of Love; renunciation by the poet, the artist, not only of the poor, precious human comforting, but likewise of his own sweet prodigality in art — that he may see a few things clearly, without excess; in fine, the ultimate and inevitable renunciations of the elect soul.

Renunciation of the beloved by the lover; that, surely is not a new note; quite a universal note, life and art would seem to say. It is instinct with the power and passion which are the *raison d'être* of poetry. Yet it is never a seriously chosen and admitted strain save by the very little flock — and Mrs. Meynell has made it quite her own. One exquisite sonnet, "Renouncement," has concentrated the message; but the companion poem may be discerned to beat with a still more poignant music. "After a Parting" it is named: —

Farewell has long been said; I have foregone thee;  
I never name thee even.  
But how shall I learn virtues and yet shun thee?  
For thou art so near Heaven  
That heavenward meditations pause upon thee.

Thou dost beset the path to every shrine;  
My trembling thoughts discern  
Thy goodness in the good for which I pine;  
And, if I turn from but one sin, I turn  
Unto a smile of thine.



*Alice Meynell — From a photograph by Resta*

How shall I thrust thee apart  
Since all my growth tends to thee night and day —  
To thee faith, hope, and art?  
Swift are the currents setting all one way;  
They draw my life, my life, out of my heart.

Another early poem, “To the Beloved,” should be quoted in contrast. Surpassingly tender and delicate is its feeling; but its reticence, its singular peace, are almost a rebuke to more vehement possessors:

Oh, not more subtly silence strays  
Amongst the winds, between the voices,  
Mingling alike with pensive lays,



And with the music that rejoices,  
Than thou art present in my days.  
.....

Thou art like silence all unvexed  
Though wild words part my soul from thee.  
Thou art like silence unperplexed,  
A secret and a mystery  
Between one footfall and the next.  
.....

Darkness and solitude shine, for me.  
For life's fair outward part are rife  
The silver noises; let them be.  
It is the very soul of life  
Listens for thee, listens for thee.

Even for this denial, this abeyance of love, has Alice Meynell reserved her own quintessential vehemence.

All this perennial, repetitional sacrifice of the lower to the higher good was foreshadowed in her earliest verses. It is a solitariness never far from our poet's song — a wistful loneliness in the youthful stanzas; a pain high-heartedly born, welcomed, treasured above all cheaper gifts in the more mature pages. Much has been said about that unique and heart-shaking "Letter from a Girl to her Own Old Age." But there is a less known apostrophe, "The Poet to his Childhood," about which something remains to be spoken. It probes to the heart of the sacrificial vocation — whether poetic or sacerdotal matters little:

If it prove a life of pain, greater have I judged the gain,  
With a singing soul for music's sake I climb and meet the rain,  
And I choose, whilst I am calm, my thought and labouring to be  
Unconsoled by sympathy.

Mrs. Meynell has loved the Lady Poverty as truly as ever the Assisian did: but hers is a Lady whose realm is over letters as well as life. She dwells in the twilight and the dawn; her cool, quiet fingers are pressed upon the temples of love; in "slender landscape and austere," in nature marvellously but not rapturously understood, she is found. And close beside her treads another Lady, "our sister, the Death of the Body" — Death the Revealer, making clear at last the mysteries of weary Life. This is distinctly the motive, very personal and very perfect, not merely of the much-praised sonnet "To a Daisy," but of Mrs. Meynell's Nature poetry as a whole.

Through "The Neophyte" and "San Lorenzo Giustiniani's Mother" the selfsame cry is variously but unmistakably heard. It stings the soul in that late and mystical lyric:

Why wilt thou chide,  
Who hast attained to be denied?  
Oh learn, above  
All price is my refusal, Love.  
My sacred Nay

Was never cheapened by the way;  
Thy single sorrow crowns thee lord

Of an unpurchasable word.  
Oh strong! Oh pure!  
As Yea makes happier loves secure,  
I vow thee this  
Unique rejection of a kiss!  
.....

More than one meditation of this final volume suggest the influence of that immemorial (and in these latter days too little known) treasure-house of poetry and vision, the Roman Breviary. But always the distinction and the originality of Alice Meynell's thought, the peculiar personality of her vision, have about them a very sacredness. Not lightly comes the illumination of the singular soul: that *particular* judgment so transcendently more appalling than the final and *general* judgment! She has not feared to travel up the mountain side alone — to look down, with eyes that have known both tears and the drying of tears, upon the ways of human life.

In the matter of artistry and poetic technique, Mrs. Meynell's work is like fine gold smithery; classic gold smithery, exquisite and austere. "I could wish abstinence to exist, and even to be evident in my words," she has somewhere written; but the words are scrupulously chosen. Her mastery over slight forms — the quatrain, the couplet — is quite as consummate and almost as felicitous as Father Tabb's. And through this ethereal poetry shine lines of the highest and most serious power.

They who doomed by infallible decrees  
Unnumbered man to the innumerable grave,

falls upon the ear with Miltonic grandeur. And any poet might rejoice in the fancy which perceives day's memories flocking home at dusk to the "dove-cote doors of sleep," or cries out so subtly in the colourless February dawning:

A poet's face asleep is this grey morn!

Mrs. Meynell's poetry, like a certain school of modern music, suggests and betrays rather than expresses emotion. It is definite but intangible. It creates an atmosphere of angelically clear thought, of rare delicacies of feeling, and speaks with a perfect reticence. Mistakenly, perhaps, the hasty might dub it a poetry of promise: on the contrary, it is a poetry of uncommonly fine achievement. But it does not achieve the expected thing. We are conscious of a light, a flash, a voice, a perfume — the soul of the Muse has passed by. And we were looking for the body, flower-crowned!

When all is said, it is in her prose that Mrs. Meynell has attained the most compelling and indubitable distinction. In much critical work and some biography, and in a series of essays covering subjects all the way from "impressionist" art to the ways of childhood — or from "Pocket Vocabularies" to the "Hours of Sleep" — her pen has prevailed with a masterful delicacy. These brief pages are seldom distinctly literary in theme, yet they have made literature. Scarcely ever are they professedly religious, yet the whole science of the saints rests by implication within their pages. Alice Meynell is the true contemplative of letters. For contemplation, which in the spiritual world has been described as a looking at and listening to God, is in the world of art a looking at and listening to life. It is an exceedingly quiet and sensitive attention to all that others see but transiently, superficially, in the large. We can scarcely believe many minds capable of the exquisitely subtle and sustained attention, the delicate weighing, the differentiation, and withal the liberal sympathy, which have

been the very keynote of her criticism. Take, as an instance, this pregnant passage upon the return and periodicity of our mental processes:

“Distances are not gauged, ellipses not measured, velocities not ascertained, times not known. Nevertheless the recurrence is sure. What the mind suffered last week, or last year, it does not suffer now; but it will suffer again next week or next year. Happiness is not a matter of events; it depends upon the tides of the mind. Disease is metrical, closing in at shorter and shorter periods toward death, sweeping abroad at longer and longer intervals towards recovery. . . Even the burden of a spiritual distress unsolved is bound to leave the heart to a temporary peace; and remorse itself does not remain — it returns. Gaiety takes us by a dear surprise. . . . Love itself has tidal times — lapses and ebbs which are due to the metrical rule of the interior heart, but which the lover vainly and unkindly attributes to some outward alteration in the beloved.”

Coventry Patmore (who in his turn has been the subject of Mrs. Meynell’s illuminative criticism) declared fully one half of the volume just quoted, *The Rhythm of Life*, to be “classical work, embodying as it does new thought in perfect language, and bearing in every sentence the hallmark of genius.” Only the poets, perhaps, have shared with the saints this singular contemplative attention to things great and small. And in the Nature painting which colours Mrs. Meynell’s pages the same quality is conspicuous. Neither the lyre nor the brush seems strange to the hand which has so sketched for us the majesty of the *cloud* — not guardian of the sun’s rays merely, but “the sun’s treasurer”; the course of the south-west wind, regnant and imperious; and that “heroic sky,” beneath whose light “few of the things that were ever done upon earth are great enough” to have dared the doing. Not Wordsworth himself has more graciously sung of the daffodil. And who has so understandingly praised the modest yet prevailing grass of the fields, or the trees of July, or given so discerning a study to the gentle “Colour of Life”?

Up and down upon the earth, to and fro upon it, wander the children of men; but few indeed may be trusted to catch the authentic *Spirit of Place*. Scarcely even our beloved Robert Louis, it would seem, since we have his own record that the act of voyaging was an end in itself — there being

nothing under Heaven so blue  
That’s fairly worth the travelling to!

But to the eyes of this woman there is not the same blue in more than a single zenith. “Spirit of place!” she cries in one most characteristic passage, “It is for this we travel, to surprise its subtlety; and where it is a strong and dominant angel, that place, seen once, abides entire in the memory with all its own accidents, its habits, its breath, its name. . . . The untravelled spirit of place — not to be pursued, for it never flies, but always to be discovered, never absent, without variation — lurks in the byways and rules over the tower, indestructible, an indescribable unity. It awaits us always in its ancient and eager freshness. It is sweet and nimble within its immemorial boundaries, but it never crosses them. . . . Was ever journey too hard or too long, that had to pay such a visit? And if by good fortune it is a child who is the pilgrim, the spirit of place gives him a peculiar welcome. . . . He is well used to words and voices that he does not understand, and this is a condition of his simplicity; and when those unknown words are bells, loud in the night, they are to him as homely and as old as lullabies.”

It is almost a pity, for letters, that so few poets have been mothers; it is the abiding pity of childhood that so few mothers have been poets! Mrs. Meynell has an entire volume dedicated to *The Children*, and sealed with that gracious understanding of

child-life which nothing other than experience can quite authenticate. It is so easy to sentimentalise over children — easy, also, to regard them as necessary nuisances: but to bear with them consistently, in a spirit of love and of discovery, is a beautiful achievement. “Fellow travellers with a bird” (as Alice Meynell felicitously calls the protective adults) may learn strange and hidden things, as they have eyes to see or hearts to understand. Not so impatiently will they frown upon the strange excitement which sparkles from the child’s eyes, as from the kitten’s at dusk — inherited memories of the immemorial hunt, and of the “predatory dark” a thousand years ago. Not so surprising will seem the eternal conflict of bed-time, if they once realise the humorous and pretty fact that the little creature “is pursued and overtaken by sleep, caught, surprised, and overcome. He goes no more to sleep than he takes a ‘constitutional’ with his hoop and hoopstick.” In “The Child of Tumult” Mrs. Meynell has given a most tenderly subtle study; and here is her word upon the forgiveness of children: —

“It is assuredly in the absence of resentment that consists the virtue of childhood. What other thing are we to learn of them? Not simplicity, for they are intricate enough. Not gratitude, for their usual sincere thanklessness makes half the pleasure of doing them good. Not obedience, for the child is born with the love of liberty. And as for humility, the boast of a child is the frankest thing in the world. . . . It is the sweet and entire forgiveness of children, who ask pity for their sorrows from those who have caused them, who do not perceive that they are wronged, who never dream that they are forgiving, and who make no bargain for apologies — it is this that men and women are urged to learn of a child. Graces more confessedly childlike they make shift to teach themselves.”

Many a man, and many a woman, have written more nobly than they have lived: into the art has gone the truest part of the soul. But what unique conviction breathes from work which is at one with life — nay, which is the fruit of deep and costly living! The acuteness, the activity, the profundity of Mrs. Meynell’s thought could not fail to achieve their own place in English letters. But her sympathy and her eternal rightness of vision are qualities in which we rejoice, humbled. These have given to her work that peculiar intuitive truth which is the rarest of beauties. “Her manner,” wrote Mr. George Meredith, “presents to me the image of one accustomed to walk in holy places and keep the eye of a fresh mind on our tangled world.” But no single virtue of all Mrs. Meynell’s work is of the obvious or popular kind. Her pages are packed with thought, and the style — one of exceptional precision and exceptional beauty — is yet given to ellipse, to suggestion rather than emphasis, and to a quite inalienable subtlety. She speaks to the higher, even the highest, faculties of the mind. She has pleaded all along for singularity of soul, for distinction and elevation of personality, for the rejection of many things from our multitudinous modern life.

Sometimes, as in “Decivilised,” it is with the trenchant wit and irony that her sentence has been passed:

“The difficulty of dealing — in the course of any critical duty — with decivilised man lies in this: when you accuse him of vulgarity — sparing him, no doubt, the word — he defends himself against the charge of barbarism. Especially from new soil — transatlantic, colonial — he faces you, bronzed, with a half conviction of savagery, partly persuaded of his own youthfulness of race. He writes — and recites — poems about ranches and canyons; they are designed to betray the recklessness of his nature and to reveal the good that lurks in the lawless ways of a young society. . . . American fancy played long this pattering part of youth. The New Englander hastened to assure you, with so self-denying a face, he did not wear war-paint and feathers, that it

became doubly difficult to communicate to him that you had suspected him of nothing wilder than a second-hand dress coat. And when it was a question not of rebuke but of praise, the American was ill-content with the word of the judicious who lauded him for some delicate successes in continuing something of the literature of England, something of the art of France. . . . Even now English voices, with violent commonplace, are constantly calling upon America to begin — to begin, for the world is expectant — whereas, there is no beginning for her, but, instead, a continuity which only a constant care can guide into sustained refinement and can save from decivilisation. . . . Who shall discover why derivation becomes degeneration, and where and when and how the bastardy befalls? The decivilised have every grace as the antecedent of their vulgarities, every distinction as the precedent of their mediocrities. . . . They were born into some tendency to derogation, into an inclination for things mentally inexpensive.”

But oftener the word has been spoken gently, almost casually; that the multitude seeing might not see, and hearing might not understand. Yet this attitude of Mrs. Meynell’s is as far as possible from disdain. For the “narrow house,” the obtuse mind baffled and inarticulate, for the shackled body, the groping soul, she has spoken with largest sympathy. Further than Charles Lamb’s goes her defence of beggars — since she pleads their right not simply to free existence but to a common and fraternal courtesy. All the great and elemental things of life have claimed allegiance from Alice Meynell; her mind, like Raphael’s, “a temple for all lovely things to flock to and inhabit.” Love and the bond of love, the grace and gaiety of life, the woman’s need of a free and educated courage, the delicacies of friendship — one finds their praise upon her reticent lips: these, with unflinching truth to self, and a faith lofty and exquisite. For the pathos of the sentimentalist (ubiquitous and not without a suspicion of the ready-made) our artist has shown slight patience. She will not laugh at her fellow-men; neither will she insist upon weeping over them. There is restraint, “composure” in her dream of life. Yet perchance we open the fortuitous page, and some such lines as these face us:

“It is a curious slight to generous Fate that man should, like a child, ask for one thing many times. Her answer every time is a resembling but new and single gift; until the day when she shall make the one tremendous difference among her gifts — and make it perhaps in secret — by naming one of them the ultimate. What, for novelty? what, for singleness? what, for separateness, can equal the last? Of many thousand kisses the poor last — but even the kisses of your mouth are all numbered.”

It is as old — as sweet and as sad — as the world!

Art to Mrs. Meynell has been a thrice-holy thing; a vocation of priestly dignity, of priestly pain, as her poems witnessed. More than once have her words likened the convent-bell, imperious, not to be foregone, to the poet’s elect fetters. “Within the gate of these laws which seem so small,” she tells us, “lies the world of mystic virtue.” Now here is a viewpoint of the highest and rarest insight. What urbanity, what sweetness, what prevailing harmony it carries into the troublous matter of living. It has attained perspective: and perspective is the end as well as the means of life. Surely it is for this prize alone that we wrestle and run. *To treat life in the spirit of art* — that, declared another artist-seer, Walter Pater, is not far from the *summum bonum*: not far from the kingdom of Heaven, one might add, since the ultimate artist is God alone.

Truth, then, has been the first of Mrs. Meynell’s equipments. First truth of seeing (which only the few may ever attain), and then truth of speaking — a rare enough accomplishment. With her work, as with that of Henry James, the fancied obscurity rises mainly from this exceedingly delicate truthfulness; a fastidious requirement of

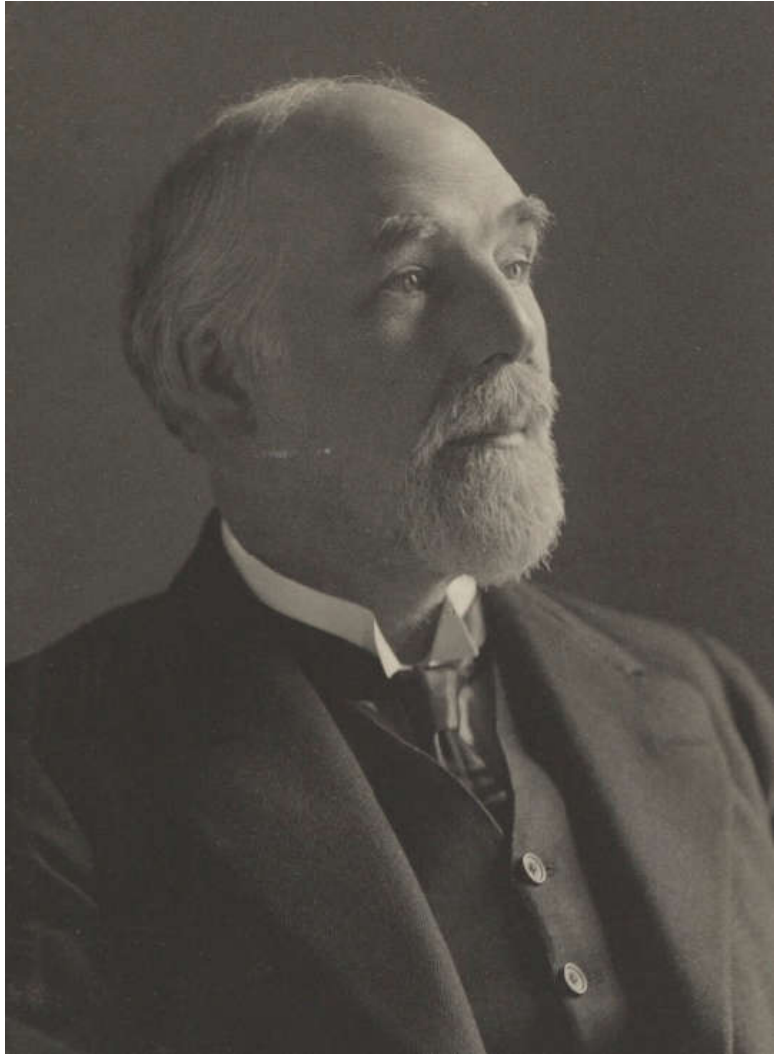
the word — *the* word — without exaggeration, without superfluity — only with Mr. James this desire has led to repetition; with Mrs. Meynell, to reticence. Having called her contemplative, we now perceive her to be ascetic. The “little less,” both in matter and manner, has seemed to her a counsel of perfection.

Only we, the losers, would quarrel now and again with this perfect abstinence — would drink oftener, if that might be, from a spring of such diamond clearness, of such depth and healing. The fields of modern literature had been more flowery for such nourishment! In all truth, modern thought must needs bear both blossom and fruit because of its shy visits. For Alice Meynell has been very potent in her reserves. She has borne the pennant of the Ideal, with never a dip of the banner, over many a causeway, up many a battle-mented height. She has, by many and by One, been found faithful. Scarcely shall we find a more adequate praise for this English writer than her own praise of the Spanish Velasquez — that she has “kept the chastity of art when other masters were content with its honesty.”

**THE END**

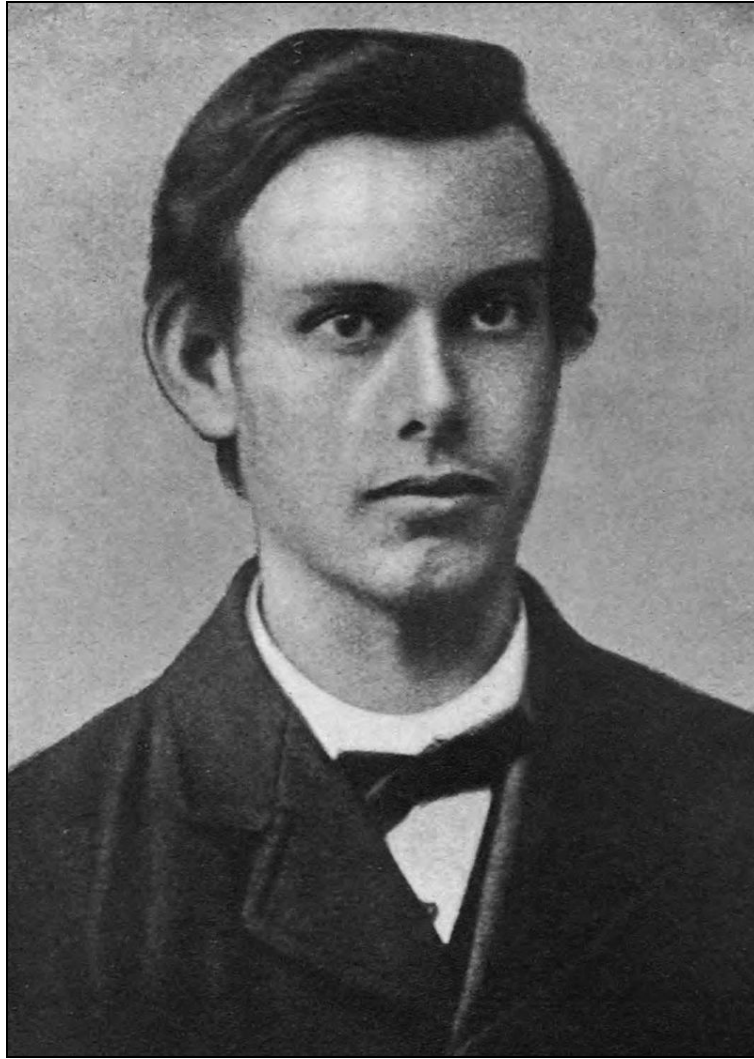


*Meynell, c. 1875*



*The poet's husband, Wilfrid Meynell, 1916 — they were married in 1877 and had eight children, including Francis Meynell (1891-1975), who became a poet and a printer that co-founded The Nonesuch Press.*





*The poet Francis Thompson at the age of 19 — Meynell was an important friend and patron of Thompson.*



*Women Writer's Suffrage League postcard from 1910 — Meynell was a vice-president of the Women Writers' Suffrage League, founded by Cicely Hamilton.*



*Portrait of Coventry Patmore, by John Singer Sargent, 1894 — Meynell had a deep friendship with Patmore, lasting several years, which led to his becoming obsessed with her, forcing her to break with him.*



*Meynell by John Singer Sargent, 1894*



*Meynell in later years*

DELPHI  CLASSICS

*End of Sample*