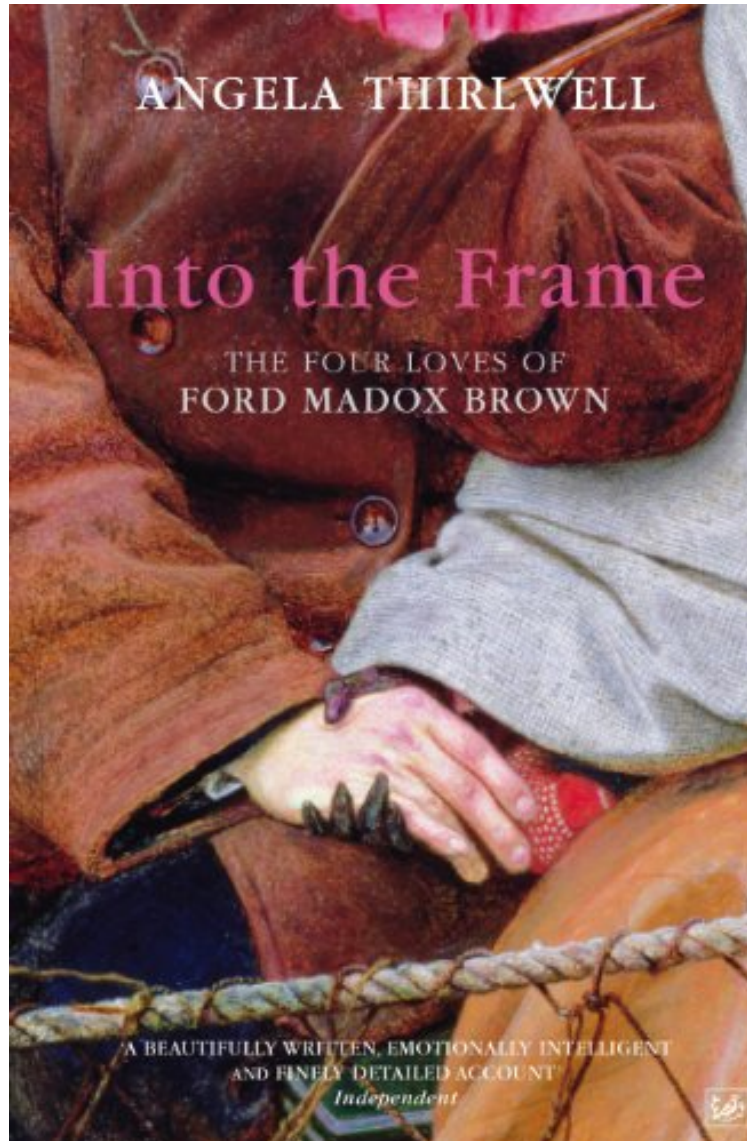


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Angela Thirlwell

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Angela Thirlwell : Into The Frame: The Four Loves of Ford Madox Brown before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Into The Frame: The Four Loves of Ford Madox Brown:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. An excellent quintuple biographyBy Ralph BlumenauThe love life of Ford Madox Brown (1821 to 1893) is perhaps less well-known than the dramatic and convoluted ones of his friends - Rossetti, Hunt, Morris, Burne-Jones. But Madox Brownsquo;s had its own dramas, and Angela Thirlwell gives us this fine life, with special attention to the four women in his life: his first wife Elisabeth; his second wife Emma; and his two other loves, Marie Spartali and Mathilde Blind. The lives of these women are described in detail,

but it is of course Madox Brown who holds the story together, and most of the attractive illustrations are of his drawings and paintings which Angela Thirlwell analyzes for us. Madox Brown was never formally a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, but he is sometimes regarded as the Father of the Pre-Raphaelites. Rossetti had apprenticed himself to Madox Brown briefly, and the two men's lives were closely connected in friendship and in tensions - Madox Ford and his second wife Emma allowing the selfish Rossetti to park himself, together with Elizabeth Siddal, for weeks at a time in their home when their hosts could hardly make ends meet. There was also a family relationship, for Rossetti's younger brother William Michael married Madox Brown's daughter Lucy. It was not until Madox Brown's one-man show in 1865 - with his famous painting 'Work' as its centre-piece - that he became well-known and somewhat more prosperous - 'somewhat', because now as always, he spent generously whatever money he had, on his wife, his children, and people in need. But his house in Fitzroy Square (20 rooms on six floors) became a centre for the artistic and Bohemian life of London. Madox Brown's first wife Elisabeth was a true partner in love and intellect and the mother of his daughter Lucy. But after only five years of marriage she died of consumption. Elisabeth had been middle class, but Madox Brown's second wife, Emma, was of working class origin, had originally been his model, and was as healthy (until she took to drink) and uneducated (until she learnt from Madox Brown) as Elisabeth had been ailing and intellectual. Before their marriage Emma had borne him another daughter, Catherine, and then, after their wedding, a son, Oliver, who died tragically young aged nineteen. All the children had a happy childhood because Emma, and mostly their father also, allowed them a freedom which was most unusual in Victorian families, and there are delightful verbal accounts of them. All three would become painters themselves, trained in their father's studio. Then there were the two other women with whom Madox Brown was in love. First there was the supremely beautiful Marie Spartali, daughter of wealthy Greek-born parents. She worked under him in his studio and was a fine artist in her own right. (Do look her up on Google Images.) Close as she was to her teacher, she regarded him as a father figure (he was 23 years her senior), and probably was not fully aware of his feelings. We know of his passion only through the sonnets he privately wrote about her. He was heartbroken when she fell in love and became engaged to and eventually married an arrogant American fortune hunter, William Stillman, an emotional blackmailer, briefly a diplomat, a war correspondent and a failed artist who consistently denigrated her art and her art teacher. But with the generosity that was his nature, Madox Brown supported Marie's engagement against the wishes of her parents, who saw Stillman for what he was. Against the wishes of her husband (whom Madox Brown would come to characterize privately and justifiably as a 'skunk'), she continued after her marriage to paint, to exhibit and take lessons from Madox Brown; and over the years, his romantic obsession would become a mature friendship which lasted for the rest of his life. Angela Thirlwell writes most engagingly about her. The account of Martha Blind, the fourth woman in Madox Brown's life, is very thorough and perhaps just a little on the stodgy side. She was born to German-Jewish parents. Her Protestant stepfather, Karl Blind, had been a radical in the 1840s, who, after the failure of the 1848 revolutions had become a political refugee in England when Mathilde was eleven years old, and he was associated uneasily with Karl Marx. Mathilde grew up fiercely intelligent, a radical, a feminist, and a rationalist, and was expelled from her school at the age of sixteen for her agnosticism. She was a close friend of the exiled Mazzini. Her younger brother went back to Germany in 1866, made a failed attempt to assassinate the reactionary Bismarck and blew his own brains out when arrested. As a poet, critic, journalist, translator, lecturer, biographer and novelist Mathilde became a member of the circle that frequented the Madox Brown home in Fitzroy Square, and a close relationship began between the two of them at about the time when Marie became engaged. Madox Brown was a strong and at times active radical himself, anti-establishment, an admirer of Oliver Cromwell and, as his painting 'Work' showed, cared passionately about the Condition of the People. He had also become an agnostic. Mathilde lived in the Madox Brown's house for weeks and months at a time - not only in London, but also during the many months Madox Brown and Emma spent in Manchester, where he worked off and on from 1879 to 1887 on the massive commission to paint for the new Town Hall six enormous murals on the history of Manchester (in which his radical sympathies again find expression). The relationship between him and Mathilde was probably platonic (again there were twenty years between them), but it was so intense that, unlike that with Marie, it upset Madox Brown's wife and daughters and led to much gossip abroad. Five figures are wonderfully brought alive in this excellent book.

Madox Brown, who grew up in France and Belgium before he came to England and won fame with paintings like 'The Last of England', was always an outsider, and the women he loved also burst out of stereotypes. His two wives, Elisabeth Bromley and Emma Hill, and his secret passions, the artist Marie Spartali and the author Mathilde Blind, were all remarkable personalities, from very different backgrounds. Their striving for self-expression, in an age that sought to suppress them, tells us much more about women's journey towards modern roles. Their lives - full of passion, sexual longing, tragedy and determination - take us from the English countryside and the artist's studio to a Europe in turmoil and revolution. These are not silent muses hidden in the shadow of a 'Master'. They step out of the shadows and into the picture, speaking with voices we can hear and understand.

"To make a fresh point of view, Thirlwell crafts her portrait of Brown through four relationships that had a powerful effect on his emotional life as well as on his career" The Art Newspaper "Engrossing" -- Grevel Lindop TLS "this fascinating biography is a reminder of how easily women artists and writers are lost to us through history" -- Lesley McDowell The Herald
About the Author Angela Thirlwell is the editor of The Pre-Raphaelites and Their World and the author of William and Lucy: The Other Rossettis.