This book argues that Christina Rossetti’s deep commitment to her Christian faith led her to sing of a loving connectedness to the earth. Emma Mason thus extends the recent work of scholars who have defended Rossetti against the charge that she embraced a repressive, unquestioning, and sometimes life-denying faith. Building on the work of such scholars as Mary Arseneau (Recovering Christina Rossetti, 2004), Elizabeth Ludlow (Christina Rossetti and the Bible, 2014), Lynda Palazzo (Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology, 2002), and Dinah Roe (Christina Rossetti’s Faithful Imagination, 2006), Mason contends that Rossetti’s Christian beliefs ultimately led her to find in her faith the basis for “an ecological spirituality” that envisioned the unity of divinity and the material world (3). For Rossetti, Mason says, any misuse or abuse of nature harmed not only material creation but the divine world as well. Yet rather than casting Rossetti, who died in 1894, as if she were a present-day environmentalist, Mason reminds us that “love of creation” has been just as central to the Christian tradition as “love of one’s neighbor.” Viewing Rossetti’s faith as ecological, therefore, is “not presentist” but rather “historical” (2).

In developing her thesis, Mason explains Rossetti’s early embrace of Tractarian views, her involvement with the Pre-Raphaelites, her response to the beasts and flowers of the earth, and her intense focus on St. John’s apocalyptic vision of the end of time. As Mason weaves the threads of her argument together, she makes three key points about the development of Rossetti’s theological beliefs: first, her concept of the Incarnation led her to reject Western dualism in favor of seeing all things as “both natural and supernatural” (91); second, the doctrine of Prevenient Grace led her to accept what Mason calls “green grace”: the belief that God’s presence permeates the universe as a benevolent force lovingly connecting all things (159); third, this “ecological reading of grace” led her to believe that the apocalypse would be restorative rather than destructive, and would be “triggered through the love of things for each other” (21). According to Mason, this theological perspective not only motivated Rossetti’s participation in the anti-vivisectionist movement, but also prompted her to condemn various nineteenth-century quests for power, especially those linked to either the Industrial Revolution or British imperialism.

Occasionally, Mason refers to something Rossetti wrote, did, or did not do that requires further elaboration. For example, when in her devotional diary Time Flies (1885) Rossetti compares the “sensual Christian” to a sea anemone, Mason infers that she was urging her Christian readers “to sense, feel, and become one with the visible and invisible world” (115). Yet Rossetti concludes this comparison with a cautionary question. Alluding to the biblical verse in which St. John tells of the passing away of the sea at the end of time (Rev. 21.1), Rossetti asks: “But what will become of [the sea anemone] in a world where there shall be no more sea?” Since a sea anemone dies when taken out of sea water, this question appears to be warning the “sensual Christian” to alter his or her behavior before it is too late, that is, before the Last Judgement.

Mason may have missed this cautionary note because of her argument about the apocalypse. If, as Mason argues, Rossetti came to believe that at the end of time the earth would not be destroyed but rather renewed, the earthly sea would survive. But if so, how would Mason construe Rossetti’s question about the anemone? Similarly, the section on aquariums, both domestic and public, fails to explain why Rossetti’s views of them were so inconsistent. According to Mason, Rossetti “did not take living creatures from the sea” and was troubled on seeing an octopus in the Brighton aquarium, which she viewed as its "prison" (169-170). Yet in mentioning her "tank" in a letter of 1860, Rossetti refers to her own domestic aquarium, and other letters suggest that she might have enjoyed her visits to the Brighton aquarium. If Mason found evidence that Rossetti changed her opinion of aquariums, we need to know more than this book tells us.

I do not mean to ignore its strengths. Overall, its argument is persuasively logical and coherent; the numerous endnotes and the lengthy bibliography indicate extensive research; and the tone throughout suggests a passionate commitment to the subject of ecology as well as a respect for the intellectual depth of Rossetti’s devotional writing. Nevertheless, as I read this book, I found myself pausing to ask questions. Isn’t Rossetti’s work filled with expressions of waiting and watching, even longing, for the passing away of this world so that she might see Christ face to face? Throughout her poetry, doesn’t one hear a call to lift up one’s eyes to another, more glorious world that lies beyond this fallen world of pain, tears, and sorrow? In The Face of the Deep (1892), her commentary on the Apocalypse, Rossetti often punctuates lengthy prose passages with either poetic calls to her readers to “lift up” their eyes “to seek the invisible” (Face, 471), or prayerful poems asking God to “lift us above” earth’s “transitory scope” (Face, 288).
Possibly my questions arise from having found in Rossetti's work a map of ascent: an up-hill path leading the Christian pilgrim through a spiritual landscape and away from an earth where, as she writes, "sorrow and love have pitched their tent together" (Face, 116). Rossetti looks mostly upward. While the natural world sometimes delighted her eyes, the speakers in her poetry often locate the soul's final goal somewhere beyond the "everlasting hills," and even beyond sea and stars. Contrarily, Mason asserts that Rossetti placed "salvation only inside material creation" (90).

Did she? I can't simply say no, for while I initially resisted points such as this, I found the book compelling in part because it challenged my thinking. And thus challenged, I re-read some of her work. When turning to the chapter on "green things" in Rossetti's Seek and Find (1879), her devotional study of the Benedicite (a canticle used in religious services), I was newly struck by the delight with which she reminds her readers that the Creator offers beautiful "cornfields and orchards" for food rather than merely "a magazine" of "gluten, starch, saccharine matter, what not" (Seek, 96-97). In other Rossetti passages on the color green, I noticed the attention she gives not only to symbolic meaning but also to physical comfort. For example, commenting on emeralds in The Face of the Deep, she writes: "Green seems the colour both of hope and of rest: of hope because of sweet ever-renewed spring verdure; of rest because of the refreshing repose green affords strained sight" (Face, 152). Likewise, returning to Rossetti's meditation on love in Time Flies, I noticed that she described the corolla of the forget-me-not as "heavenly blue" and its center as "golden" (130-131). I also noticed that I was freshly struck when rereading some of Rossetti's poems about natural objects.

In particular, Mason's argument has made me see with new eyes the children's poem beginning "O Sailor, come ashore." When asked by the child, who seems to be expecting a gift, what the returning sailor has brought her, he responds: "Red coral, white coral, / Coral from the sea." Since Rossetti herself once made a gift of coral beads, I had previously thought that here she uses her knowledge of marine biology to teach the child reader-- and possibly adult reader as well -- that while coral is beautiful to human eyes, it is created by "feeble insects," as Rossetti calls them, living in the sea. But re-reading this poem with Mason's argument in mind, I now find it perhaps suggesting that the insects, the ocean, the sailor, the child, and the adult reader are all lovingly inter-connected through "the flow of grace," to use Mason's phrasing (14). Furthermore, the word "feeble" now stands out as if it had been highlighted. While my eyes had previously slid over it, it now stirs in me a wealth of associations, both cultural and religious, all of which might be linked to Mason's argument about Rossetti's ecological spirituality, especially the claim that Rossetti's mature theology led her to choose the "weak status of Jesus" over that of the "strong status" of earthly kings (188). In short, I noticed details that I had previously overlooked. And since Rossetti sought for precision in meaning and conciseness in style, these details are certainly significant.

Nevertheless, I am not yet ready to relinquish my image of Rossetti as a poet who sang of struggling, panting up towards God, yearning for a world her corporeal eyes could not see. And I still question the claim that Rossetti blended the terrestrial and celestial into a spiritual materialism that located salvation inside the created world. Most problematic as well as most alluring is Mason's argument that as Rossetti matured in her theological thinking, she found in Revelation a promise that located salvation inside the created world. However, as most alluring is Mason's argument that as Rossetti matured in her theological thinking, she found in Revelation a promise that located salvation inside the created world. Nevertheless, despite these lingering hesitations, I would recommend this book to anyone currently writing on Rossetti or thinking about doing so.

Though recent scholarship has recognized the enjoyment Rossetti took from green spaces and flowers, this book goes far to explain how the environment informed Rossetti's spiritual life. In The Face of the Deep, Rossetti counsels her readers to see with "eyes that have been supernaturalized" (116) so they might "recognize" not only the literal but the figurative. Rossetti also saw the world with her corporeal eyes, and that through those eyes, she took pleasure in the colors and shapes of the natural world. Secondly, although other scholars have occasionally referred to grace when discussing Rossetti's devotional writing, they tend to treat the word as self-explanatory. By making "green grace" central to her thesis, Mason highlights the importance of grace in Rossetti's theological thinking and may thereby stimulate further discussion of a word that permeates her poetry and prose. Finally, and most importantly, by arguing that Rossetti's message to her readers includes a "love command," Mason underscores the predominant theme of her later work: at the end of time there would be, to draw from one of Rossetti's late poems, "no sorrow," but a song of "endless love" (Face, 398). While this song has often been overlooked in both biographies of Rossetti and discussions of her poetry, it seemed to me to resonate throughout this book, as if the writer had heard Rossetti's endless song.