



THE BROWNING SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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BROWNING'S REMARKABLE RELATIONSHIPS WITH SOME EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN

Following Evensong, on 14th December 2018, members of the Society gathered in Poets' Corner. After a brief address by Dr Sue Brown on the theme *Reflections on Browning's remarkable relationships with some extraordinary women*, wreaths were laid on behalf of The Browning Society, The Browning Settlement and The Armstrong Browning Library.

Here is the talk.

Robert Browning was buried here at midday on 31 December 1889. It was a day of intense fog. As a frustrated Times reporter, whose job it was to record the important people at the funeral wrote: "In the arches of the roof the yellow fog still lingered, and all down the choir and the transept candles and gas gave a dim light" "In the darkness it was difficult to distinguish the features of even the most eminent men save when accident brought one into close contact with them". Distinguishing the features of women, eminent or not, was much less of a problem for, indeed, there were very few of them at Browning's funeral.

This was not unusual: Victorian funerals were often largely male affairs. Just as Browning's indispensable sister, Sarianna, felt unable to attend so, too, Emma Wedgwood, Darwin's equally indispensable wife, was not in the Abbey when he was buried over in the north aisle close to Sir Isaac Newton's grave. One woman who did attend, however, was his niece, Julia Wedgwood, who walked in the family procession alongside her second cousin, Margaret, the widowed mother of a strapping but generous-spirited young boy, whose passion for music mystified

his family since, as they saw it, he had no gift for it. He grew up to become Ralph Vaughan Williams, the great composer who was buried close to Darwin over seventy years later.

Julia Wedgwood did not attend Browning's funeral but I have the strong sense that she came here shortly after it. Though the thick fog continued for several days making getting around London exceptionally difficult the Pall Mall Gazette of 4 January 1890 noted a remarkable phenomenon: "Ever since Browning's funeral a constant stream of people have visited the grave in Westminster Abbey. A considerable proportion of the visitors are ladies."



Anna Swanwick, Vice-President of The Browning Society

As we celebrate this year the centenary of women getting the vote, it is appropriate to reflect a little on Browning and women. We cannot know what he or his wife thought about female suffrage. Elizabeth was of that generation who came to maturity before the issue began to seize public attention. Had she been born 40 years later, however, it's hard not to imagine that she would have been a suffragist, if not, indeed, a suffragette, though we might also guess that Browning would have held her back if she had set out to smash windows or chain herself to the railings of Downing Street. Her feminist sympathies were clear not least in her long narrative poem "Aurora Leigh" which brilliantly showed just how difficult it was for a gifted woman to fulfill herself creatively and fashion an independent course in life, though, in the end,

Aurora, like Elizabeth herself, marries.

Browning never recorded his views on female suffrage. He survived into that period when Gladstone (incidentally a notable absentee from both Darwin and Browning's funerals) had killed off hopes of enfranchising women for over twenty years in his 1884 Reform Act when he proudly welcomed what even he called "the peasantry" to the privilege of citizenship but excluded their female employers.

Julia Wedgwood was given the task of making the case for female suffrage in an important collection of essays, *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture* edited by Mrs Josephine Butler in 1869. She did so not on the grounds of equality nor even the entitlement of property-owning women with a stake in society to take their place as responsible citizens. Instead, she used a much more contemporary argument: giving the vote to women would help to normalize relations between the sexes. Enfranchising women, she wrote, mattered because of what "it implies" rather than "what it is." Both sexes would become involved in "a wide, enduring, common life". Browning would have had no difficulty with that. Julia's reflections owed much, I think, to the lessons she had learnt from her intense friendship with him between 1863 and 1865 and their lively conversations on all manner of subjects. "I have felt more sure of God", she later wrote to a close friend "in my moment's glimpse into a deep soul, than in all the rest of my life." (I should say, however, that she would have been horrified to have her name associated with his in public, and in this of all places. After their friendship ended she went to great pains never to say his name, talking only of "An Old Friend" or sometimes "My Dearest Friend".)

Browning was unquestionably the cleverest of all the great Victorian poets and unlike most of them (and, indeed, Charles Darwin) he was entirely comfortable in the company of clever women. He had after all been married to the woman who came to be seen as second only to the most gifted Victorian female writer of all, George Eliot. Browning and Eliot were warm friends, admiring each other's work and supporting each other at diffi-

cult times. Browning had no qualms at all in visiting her in the days when most shunned her irregular ménage with George Henry Lewes, a married man. Browning always respectfully referred to her as “Mrs Lewes”. Had she been that, she might have found her place here in Poets Corner sooner than she did.

There were other clever women with whom Browning was at ease. Anna Swanwick who, like Julia Wedgwood, had been taught as a girl by the great Unitarian leader, James Martineau, and went on to become a gifted translator of Goethe and Aeschylus as well as a Vice President of the Browning Society. And Eliza Fitzgerald whom Browning liked to address as “Learned Lady”, tossing out Latin quips for her to decipher or teasing her with obscure references. And Kathleen Bronson, the cultivated American hostess, in whose company Browning spent many happy hours in his last days.

Another well worth mentioning is Alexandra Sutherland-Orr, the sister of the painter, Frederick Leighton. Browning always hated being asked to explain his poems. He said that their meaning was perfectly clear when they were read aloud (which wasn't always quite true.) But he was sometimes prepared to discuss his work with women, if not men. He went to considerable, if unavailing, trouble to defend *The Ring and the Book* to a critical Julia Wedgwood. In his later years, in particular, he shared his drafts with his sister, Sarianna, and with Mrs Sutherland Orr, reading his poems aloud to them and taking on board some of their comments. This enabled her to publish the first *Handbook to Browning's works* drawing on her inside information about their meaning and inspiration. She was also Browning's first substantial biographer, publishing her *Life and Letters of Robert Browning* in 1891, just two years after he died. In that she set a notable precedent. Some of the best biographies of Browning have been written by women: Betty Miller in 1951, Maisie Ward in the 1960s and, most perceptive of all, in 2004, Pamela Neville-Sington whose early death still grieves us. It is not by chance that Browning has attracted more insightful female biographers than any other nineteenth century poet. As he said himself, “I have been much favoured in friendships – especially from women.”

It would be misleading, however, to give the impression that he was uncritical in his attachment to the company of clever women. When he first got to know Elizabeth she was enthusiastically involved in a warm and mutually admiring friendship with Harriet Martineau, both of them at the time pursuing their writing careers from their invalid sofas. Robert who had got to know Martineau in his early years as he tried to make his mark in literary London had reservations about her, just

as she did about him. Under his influence, Elizabeth's friendship with Martineau faded. Later Harriet Martineau, an extraordinary phenomenon as a woman who wrote about many of those subjects thought to be reserved for men, had some acerbic things to say about the Brownings in private. In her *Autobiography*, however, though she settled a number of old scores, she also wrote more generously about him. “A real genius was Robert Browning, assuredly, and how good a man, how wise and morally strong, is proved by the perilous experiment of the marriage of two poets”. Successful partnerships between great artistic personalities are, indeed, rare and usually bought only at the price of one member suppressing their creative instincts or else both separating. Think of Robert and Clara Schuman, Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson or another famous poet commemorated here, Ted Hughes, whose marriage to a possibly even finer poet, ended in tragedy. The marriage of Robert and Elizabeth Browning will always have a particular hold on our imagination because of its rare success in what was indeed a “perilous experiment”.



The wreath layers: The Revd Clive Dunnicco, The Robert Browning Settlement, Dr Sue Brown, and 2018 Lecturer and John Wilson Interim, Dean of University Libraries and Director of The Texas Collection, for The Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University

And so back to the fog-filled Abbey and that black-suited, overwhelmingly masculine congregation assembled for Browning's funeral. Many accounts agree that

the high point of the ceremony was the singing of an anthem composed for the occasion by the Abbey's deputy organist, John Frederick Bridge. The words were those of Elizabeth composed before she

met Browning, but suffusing the solemn proceedings with her inimitable female spirit, as Browning, with his great gift for friendships with women, would surely have wanted. Let me finish by reading three verses from that poem “The Sleep”. [verses 2, 5 and 9]

Reflections on Browning's remarkable relationships with some extraordinary women, the Annual Browning Lecture given at the Graveside in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey on 14th December 2018 by Dr Sue Brown © 2018

BY THE FIRESIDE 1



Norman Collings, Vice-President with his wife Sue at Pembury

The **Friends of Pembury Parish Church** (also known as St Peter's Old Church, Pembury near Tunbridge Wells) held their Heritage Weekend on **14th -16th September 2018** and included a **"By the Fire Side" Flower Festival**. The theme was based around the title of Robert Browning's poem. This is the parish church where Robert and Elizabeth's son, Robert "Pen" Wiedemann Barrett Browning married Fannie Coddington.



Part of the Society's flower arrangement at the Pembury Festival featuring 'Bells and Pomegranates'

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY IN 2019

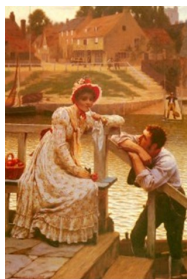
Browning Sunday at **St Marylebone Parish Church**, commemorating the marriage of Elizabeth Barrett to Robert Browning, will be on **Sunday 8 September**. The Choral Eucharist at 11.00am will include a presentation of work by Robert and Elizabeth given by well-known actors. This will be followed by lunch (£20 per head with wine) and an illustrated talk by Simon Avery entitled 'Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Politics of Slavery' followed by tea.

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The annual **Wreath-Laying** ceremony at Robert Browning's grave in Poets' Corner in **Westminster Abbey** will take place on **Friday 13th December**, following Choral Evensong (5pm). After the Wreath Laying and Lecture we shall repair for refreshments to The Two Chairmen (just a few minutes' walk from the Abbey). Tickets (to include refreshments) £20.00 available from the Secretary or via St Marylebone Parish Church.

AGM 2019

The 2019 AGM will follow the pattern established in 2018. Following the business part of the meeting members and their guests will enjoy afternoon tea during which Michael Meredith will give an introduction to Browning's love poems and members will read from a dozen or so works.



CASA GUIDI

The suite of rooms on the first floor of the Palazzo Guidi was, for many years, the home of poets Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. They lived here from 1847 until 1861 and in these rooms they wrote some of their finest poetry. "Casa Guidi" was the name given to the apartment by Elizabeth Browning herself.

The Palazzo Guidi, at the southern end of Via Maggio, dates from the fifteenth century. It was built for a prominent Florentine family, the Ridolfi di Piazza, whose coat of arms - a coronet and crossed palms- can be seen on the corner house of the Palazzo.



Casa Guidi, Piazza S Felice

In the 1840s the Palazzo Guidi was divided into apartments and in July 1847, one of the two furnished apartments on the piano nobile was rented by the Brownings, initially for three months, with all its splendid Guidi furniture. A year later, in May, the Brownings rented the same rooms, unfurnished, at 25 guineas a year and spent some time buying furniture, having curtains made and generally setting up home. Their son, Pen, was born in 1849 and grew up here, learning to play the piano which was moved into the dining room, and keeping rabbits on the terrace outside. Although the Brownings spent some time away from Casa Guidi, when they visited England, Paris, Siena or Rome, this was undoubtedly their happy family home. When Elizabeth Browning died in 1861, Robert commissioned a painting of the drawing room by George Mignaty, as the literary sanctum in which she worked. After Elizabeth's death, Robert left Casa Guidi and eventually died in Venice in 1889.

It was Pen Browning's greatest wish that Casa Guidi should be recreated in his parents' memory but this did not begin to happen until 1971, when most of the apartment was purchased by the Browning Institute of New York. The Institute, which was founded to "encourage and develop the study of literature and the liberal arts, with particular emphasis on

the writings and lives of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning", began the restoration process, opening it to visitors and arranging lectures and exhibitions. The Institute also restored the decoration of the drawing room and the bedroom as closely as possible to that which existed during the Brownings' occupation.



Conte Mario Guidi

The involvement of the Landmark Trust, a charity which rescues historic buildings and makes them available for holidays, began in 1990. The Browning Institute was about to pass on its ownership of Casa Guidi to Eton College, which has a notable collection of Browning material, with the aim of completing the restoration and furnishing the drawing room.

Eton College approached the Landmark Trust to help with the restoration and to make Casa Guidi available to a wider public. The transfer to Eton was completed in January 1992 and, after much careful planning and considerable research, the apartment was furnished as closely as possible to the original described by the Mignaty painting, family letters and the 1913 sale catalogue of Pen Browning's possessions. The furnishings include Pen Browning's desk, chest of drawers and two chairs, busts of Elizabeth and Robert Browning, the sofa used by Elizabeth in London, copies of the Mignaty painting, the painting of St Jerome and the portrait of Pen, the original drawing room mirror, a copy of a bronze plaque featuring the head of Aeschylus, the brocade curtains which match as nearly as possible those described in Elizabeth's letters and other Brownings' belongings.

The restoration of Casa Guidi was completed in 1995 and the apartment now accommodates up to six people for holidays throughout the year, including short stays from November to the end of March. The principal rooms are open to visitors on Monday, Wednesday and

Friday afternoons. 3-6 pm. from April to November.



Robert's study in Casa Guidi

Casa Guidi is one of the 200 or so historic, interesting and unusual buildings that can be rented for self-catering holidays through the Landmark Trust. They include castles, forts, follies, banqueting houses, a lighthouse, a railway station, a former prison and a stone pineapple. Most are in Great Britain but Casa Guidi is one of six Landmarks in Italy, and there are four in Vermont, U.S.A., and three in France.

Telephone: +44 (0)1628 825925.

Web site: www.landmarktrust.org.uk

BY THE FIRESIDE 2

From the title one might suppose this to be a domestic idyll, rather more homely than those exotic locations indicated by "Love among the Ruins" or "Two in the Campagna" or "Home-Thoughts, from Abroad", or by any number of Browning's titles containing un-English sounding names, mostly Italian. Yet this poem, though presumably in some sense 'set' by a fireside, takes us to Italy and on an excursion that involves a challenge, a crisis and a climax. Contrary to the apparent domestic simplicity of the title is the extreme complexity of the poem—complex even by Browning's standards. The poem's narrative or outline is best explained by Eleanor Cook in *Browning's Lyrics: an Exploration* (1974): "When we come to *By the Fireside*, we see, first and obviously, that it is a poem that plays with time. The title points to two fireside scenes, one present and one future In the

present scene, time passes slowly; Leonor reads, then muses; between her reading and her musing come her husband's reflections. The first stanza points forward to an autumn that proves to be not annual but symbolic, 'life's November.' The speaker pictures himself in the future remembering the past; then in the present he remembers the past; then he comes into the present to speak to Leonor of the past; briefly imagines a future after death; returns to the past and its unique moment that defines the present and gives meaning as well as occupation for the future. At the end he comes full circle to make the same assertion as at the beginning."

We may say that the poem celebrates both the courage displayed in the decisive action taken in youth and the delight of remembering that event in old age; the anticipation of emotion recollected in tranquility, so Wordsworth might have put it, though for Browning there's to be no lessening of emotion in old age, nor any clear distinction between the emotion of youth and the tranquility of age: 'I am named and known by that moment's feat'. The young ones will think the old man lost to the concerns and feelings of youth: 'There he is at it, deep in Greek' but the scholar responds, in silence: 'I shall be at it indeed, my friends'—'at it' being one of those phrases that Browning can play upon, from the colloquial to the metaphysical. Here 'at it' takes us outside one frame and within another: there's much here about frames and archways, and of course a 'one-arched bridge'. Implicitly, though not explicitly, a hearth forms such an arch. The interior of the chapel the two cannot enter, though they 'stoop and look in through the grate' (XXXVI). And an arch invites us to pass through it, while posing a virtual screen, not unlike that grate in the chapel wall that bars intruders. It is the screen that is explicitly broken by their love, as in other poems and poets it would be the veil that is torn:

Had she willed it, still had stood the screen

So slight, so sure, twixt my love and her:

I could fix her face with a guard between. (XL)

Screens and guards protect us from the fire, allowing us to feel its warmth without being burnt. Such is this love, far more than 'the obvious human bliss' (XXIX: how brilliant the word 'obvious' there), that can breach every screen or guard:

But we knew that a bar was broken between

Life and life: we were mixed at last

In spite of the mortal screen. (XLVII)

If this poem is difficult — its meanings

extremely hard to disentangle — this may be because most readers remain like those outside the chapel, stooped and peering through the grate. The mortal screen is that of words, as shown in the reductive banality of the closing stanza that must disappoint the expectations of those who 'burn upward each to his point of bliss' ('Statue and Bust' l. 223) and whose purpose is thereby achieved: 'He had burned his way through the world to this'. ('Statue and Bust' l. 225).

Burning is the metaphor of 'The Statue and the Bust', whereas it is the setting (or metonymy) of 'By the Fireside'—whose hearth-parts make up many of the poem's metaphors: arch, bar, grate, screen. In both poems the intensity of the fire of love is too much to be shared in words; both poems close in a rapid descent, a most explicit bathos, into the casual and the colloquial:

*And the whole is well worth thinking o'er
When autumn comes: which I mean to do
One day, as I said before.*

Charles Lock, University of Copenhagen,
6 August 2018

THE BROWNING SOCIETY

www.browningsociety.org

The Browning Society was re-formed in 1969 to provide a focus for contemporary interest in Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The Society arranges an annual programme of lectures, visits, etc., in London and elsewhere. The aims of the Society are to widen the appreciation and understanding of the poetry of the Brownings and other Victorian writers and poets, and to collect items of literary and biographical interest. For an account of The Browning Society formed during the poet's lifetime, see William S. Peterson's *Interrogating the Oracle: A History of the London Browning Society* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1969). Membership of the Society is open to all. The Society's activities centre on London and the South East, but members who live elsewhere in Britain and overseas are kept in touch through the Newsletter and regular interchanges of news and information.

For membership and enquiries contact:

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