

# MORE ABOUT THE BROWNING

FRANCES THERESA RUSSELL

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning.** By Louise Schutz Boas. Longmans, Green & Co., New York, 1930. 216 pp. \$3.50.
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning.** By Irene Cooper Willis. Gerald Howe, London, 1928. 96 pp.
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning; A Portrait.** By Isabel Constance Clarke. Hutchinson & Co., London, 1929. 304 pp.
- Andromeda in Wimpole Street; The Romance of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.** By Dormer Creston. Thornton Butterworth, London, 1929. 281 pp.
- Miss Barrett's Elopement.** By C. Lenanton (Carola Oman). Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1930. 372 pp. \$2.50.
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning; Letters to Her Sister.** Edited by Leonard Huxley. John Murray, London, 1929. xxiii, 344 pp.
- The Brownings: A Victorian Idyll.** By David Loth. Brentano's, New York, 1929. xviii, 289 pp.
- The Brownings.** By Osbert Burdett. Constable & Co., London, 1928. ix, 345 pp. Houghton, Mifflin, 1929.
- Some Memories of Robert Browning.** By Fannie Barrett Browning. Marshall Jones, Boston, 1928. xvi, 44 pp.
- Browning's Parleyings; The Autobiography of a Mind.** By William Clyde DeVane. Yale University Press, 1927. xxiii, 306 pp.
- The Versification of Robert Browning.** By Harlan H. Hatcher. Ohio State University Press, 1928. ix, 195 pp.
- Caponsacchi.** By Arthur Goodrich and Rose Palmer. Appleton & Co., New York, 1928.
- Pompilia.** By David Graham. Nash and Grayson, London, 1928.
- Reinspecting Victorian Religion, (Browning and Tennyson).** By G. G. Atkins. Macmillan, New York, 1928. 151 pp.
- Browning, in Characters and Events.** By John Dewey. Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1929.

OVER a half century ago, a Browning editor observed that nearly sixteen years had passed since Mrs. Browning's death, and her Life still remained to be written. He added the opinion that this lack would not be permanent, for a biography was bound to be forthcoming at the insistence of posterity. Sure enough, the following decades brought forth half a dozen volumes dealing with this notable lady, the last of them, however, being published more than a score of years ago. After this long silence comes the present fanfare in a rather deafening outburst. The cause of this sudden full orchestral lilt is probably located not so much in the public's demand as in the producer's desire,—the natural wish to "get in on" the booming biographic market, and secure some shares in the profitable Victorian Revival.

Though it is the wife in this renowned family that seems to be singled out for special distinction at present, even as in those days when Robert Browning was identified as the young man who married Elizabeth Barrett, the famous poet, this distinction is only apparent and not at all invidious. In the first place, as soon as the celebrated husband became eligible for biographies, he had his share, prompt and adequate, so that as a theme he is now more hackneyed. In the second place, as I have already remarked elsewhere, Browning's life, aside from his romance, was too commonplace and conventional to be suitable for treatment *a la mode*. Not being a Banished Don Juan, nor an Inhibited Dissenter, nor yet a Prince of Paradoxes, he would furnish but thin flat stuff for a bizarre or a devastating recital. And in the third place, he is inextricably included in these new volumes, not only in those labelled *The Brownings*, but in those ostensibly devoted to Elizabeth alone; since the two were so truly a unit that any account of one without due reference to the other would be fractional and incomplete. It is, amusingly enough, one of "Time's Revenges" that the stress is now laid on Elizabeth's Life and Robert's Work.

Of the six *E. B. B.* volumes cited above, the smallest is not thereby the least valuable. Irene Willis's thumb-nail sketch was made for the Representative Women Series, and is as capably condensed as the pocket biographies of Robert Browning by Arthur Waugh and Frank Marzials.

Isabel Clarke's full-length "Portrait", with its complete detail, will doubtless become the definitive biography for English readers as that of Louise Boas for American. While Mrs. Boas is less concerned than the English women with the political background from which Mrs. Browning's later poems were projected, she is more interested in the contemporary reaction to the poet and in her literary reputation. Her biographical manner is a judicious compromise between the rather bald, objective Clarke's narrative and the highly dramatized version of C. Lenanton. For general format also, including the ample illustrations, the prize of the whole collection must be awarded to Longmans among the publishers.

Another Anglo-American parallel is the copious drawing made on the Browning *Letters* by D. Creston and C. Lenanton. The difference is that *Andromeda in Wimpole Street* consists mainly of these extracts joined by the quoter's explanatory links, whereas *Miss Barrett's Elopement* attains a fusion of this borrowed material into a symmetric story. In the former, by a bit of negligence, a good chance is lost for a neat connection. Think of choosing such

a fine symbolic title and failing to point it by an allusion to Browning's favourite picture, the lovely *Andromeda* on his wall at home! Not that he ever conceived of himself as a Perseus. What the exultant Robert was proud of, after the event, was the prize he had secured, not the prowess of a rescuing hero. To have won this crown—"which was not nailed on his head,"—to have grasped this pearl—"which he might cast into the sea,"—this was the triumph that made him the luckiest and happiest of men.

Carola Oman's offences are more numerous, positive, and obvious. The first annoyance is the pseudonym followed by the real name in parenthesis. Why both, when either one is supposed to render the other superfluous? For the next irritation the publishers are responsible: the atrocious drawings on the jacket and within, from *Vogue* out of *Vanity Fair*, peculiarly inappropriate to the subject, and eloquent only as testimony to the brand of fish angled for with this gaudy meretricious bait! The title is a maliciously deliberate flying in the face of Miss Barrett's own emphatically expressed sentiment. And the title as indicative of theme is the most unfortunate of all.

The old style romance ended in the peal of wedding bells sounding the prophetic assurance that they lived happily ever after. The new style realism begins at that trivial episode in order to demonstrate that they did no such thing. It struck Aldous Huxley, as he listened to the ultra-modern boast of irresponsibility, infidelity, and indifference to everything but personal freedom, that all this was really atavistic cave-man savagery; the truly modern instances, he reflected, were the Brownings. So here is an authentic case of romantic realism, documented and verified, a True Story that did Turn Out Right. And it is this turning-out process that is the fascinating part. What a pity, then, to stop at the old style point, when the stage is so superlatively set for a new style drama combining the best of both periods! If it was originality that Miss Oman sought by this truncating of the oft told tale, she might rest content with her unique spelling of such words as *sopha* and *organdi*. Certainly all other narrators, and observers, have been impressed and rhapsodic over the spectacle of this faultless husband, this perfect wife, this altogether marvellous marriage. Yet not only will it bear investigation and repetition, but it happens that the new material just brought to light constitutes a special invitation to this enterprise. Such a sequel to *Miss Barrett's Elopement* would please those readers who are obliged to buy their imagination ready-made, and who prefer fictionized garb even for that which they enjoy all the more because of its truth.

Miss Oman's method would indeed serve better for this portion than for the one already done. Her device of taking an unconsciously self-painted portrait, with its natural sweeping lines and fresh colours laid on by the born artist's hand, and hacking it into bits for the purpose of fitting it into a different frame, simply turns a beautiful picture into an ingenious picture-puzzle. It necessarily involves the "chopping and changing" so abhorred by Browning himself. You may admire the manipulation with which the mosaic is pieced together; you may appreciate the dexterity with which the whole is shellacked into a lustrous surface; you may recognize the essential truth loyally preserved under all this fabrication; but you never can forget that it is only a skilful artifice.

Particularly in those Wimpole Street conversations between the high contracting parties, is the dialogue lifted bodily from the letters written just at that time. The main effect produced is a sharpened realization that even those delightful people who "write just as they talk" cannot, after all, talk just as they write. Symbolic of the whole is the book's conclusion. As the newly-wed fugitives were hastening to the station, the groom asks solicitously, "How do you feel, love?" and the bride replies blissfully, "Beautiful!" These were the actual words spoken fifteen years later, and were the very last ever to pass between the husband and wife, whose intensity of devotion in 1861 made the attachment of 1846 seem a pale and shallow affair in comparison. And, thus uttered, those phrases are infinitely more significant.

The new material just brought to light is the volume of *Letters from Elizabeth Barrett Browning to her Sister*. These—over a hundred of them—were written to Henrietta, and fortunately preserved by her, carefully copied and annotated by her husband, Captain Surtees Cook, and finally produced for publication by their son, Sir Edward Altham. (Surtees Cook, like his father-in-law, Edward Moulton, adopted the maternal surname). Advanced samples of the letters were given in *The Cornhill*, January to August, 1929. They are of course invaluable, worth more than all these other volumes put together, for tone as well as content, Mrs. Browning being a most charming correspondent. We applaud Henrietta, and we rebuke the wicked Arabel who either neglected or refused to preserve and bequeath hers. Arabel, the good pious girl, who was Elizabeth's special guardian and "almost her favourite sister," had an equal number of letters, if not more. If we could have those, together with all of Robert's to his sister Sarianna, we should be rich indeed. Apropos of epistles, the latest news is that the original letters of Robert and Elizabeth are to join the Browning-

iana at Wellesley College instead of going to the Huntington Library in California. These treasures are the opulent gift of Caroline Hazard as a memorial to Alice Freeman Palmer.

The two volumes with the title *The Brownings* form another English-American pair, Mr. Loth's sub-title suggesting the difference in character. The allegoric fantasy which introduces the *Victorian Idyll* strikes the picturesque attitude that is sustained, at a more pedestrian gait, throughout the narrative. As a story, it is the most readable thing so far written about the Brownings. Its dramatized reconstruction may invent atmospheric details, but keeps to the plausible. The author is clear and accurate on the European political situation of the time; and his whole book is written in excellent taste, except that it grates a little to have the nick-name "Ba" used constantly, whether in appropriate context or not.

Osbert Burdett's bulky volume is an entirely conventional recapitulation of familiar data, sober, rather sentimental and discursive, and, like Miss Clarke's, somewhat heavy without being at all profound. His attempt to accompany the historical matter with the critical is unfortunate, as it plays havoc with any logical sequence, and merely interrupts the chronological. He is given to abrupt change of subject, and grants too much space to synopses of the hand-book variety.

These Seven Keys to Browning, by Messrs. and Mesdames Burdett, Loth, Creston, Willis, Clarke, Oman, and Boas, have many resemblances along with the variations above noted. Not one offers any new material, or an iconoclastic point of view. Few of them make the best selection or use of the old material. They confine themselves chiefly to narration (the easiest way), and eschew the more arduous task of character delineation, Burdett alone even making a pretence at literary criticism. This lack of desirable analysis and synthesis is, however, counterbalanced by the welcome lack of author's attitudinizing and supercilious carping for the sake of showing off. The temper is uniformly judicious, sympathetic, and sincere. Most refreshing of all, nobody says a word about the notorious Browning Optimism.

Most deplorable of all, on the other hand, is the discreditable amount of inaccuracy, of erroneous or misleading statements made by experts and authorities. Miss Oman, for instance, must have had "mulatto" in mind when she emphasized the point that Treppy was "not apologetic over being a Creole". To belong to the same race as Robert Browning's grandmother, the aristocratic Margaret Tittle, certainly called for no apology. The faithful Wilson was in the same breath described as middle-aged. To be at the youngest

edge of that flexible period in 1832 would make one an elderly bride some thirty years later, when she married the Florentine Ferdinando. She lived on into the nineties.

All the biographers wrestle with the inescapable problem of Mr. Barrett, Irene Willis coming off best with her quietly ironic interpretation. Mrs. Boas may be justified in declaring him to be "in truth, no inhuman monster." That depends on your idea of inhuman. But to speak of the child Elizabeth as being "by far the most skilful in averting wrath and acquiring merit," is to do a grave injustice to the daughter who not only truly loved him with all the ardour of a vehement nature, but also loved frankness and candor to a quixotic degree, and disdained implacably anything like dissimulation or trickery. Her own girlish Autobiography gives some graphic instances of this trait conflicting with the other. Quite as decidedly refutable is the assertion that Browning almost resented the invalid's growing strength, that he preferred "his recumbent goddess," and "had no desire to observe her in any but the graceful posture of her couch." One can fancy the scathing sarcasm with which he himself would squelch that ridiculous libel. As for the point that he "had studied as much as he liked at London University," he would grant that was absolutely true, and that he had liked to study less than half a term.

Mrs. Boas and Mr. Loth unite in recalling the regrettable Fitzgerald incident, the latter even reprinting Browning's intemperate sonnet, and both omit the pitiful explanation that alters its whole aspect,—"I felt as though she had died yesterday." (It had been a quarter of a century). But Mr. Loth may be pardoned that, and his mistake about the Torquay situation, and his credence of the tradition that the manuscript of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* first appeared at the Lucca Baths instead of Pisa, and even the heinous sin against Mary Mitford committed by saying that Flush was the gift of John Kenyon, all this absolution on the score of his yeoman's service in scotching the absurd legend (retailed by Mr. Burdett without qualm or question) that Robert Browning absented himself from Wimpole Street during the week that elapsed between the wedding and the flight merely because he wouldn't tell the lie implied by asking for Miss Barrett! None of the retailers of this nice little George Washington's Cherry Tree myth has taken the trouble to account for the numerous missives addressed by that impeccable hand through that period to Miss Barrett, to the scandalous deception of the entire Postal System as well as the Barrett housemaid. For this regular visitor to enquire for his particular hostess, who was always at home anyway,

had doubtless become a suspended formula, but the real reason for his staying away was far weightier than this silly invention.

Of the new books concerned exclusively with Mr. Browning, the brief Memoir by his daughter-in-law has its place with the new *E. B. B. Letters* as a prize to be grateful for. Now that this sole survivor of a notable family has consented to break her long silence, we accept her all too few personal reminiscences with an Oliver Twist thankfulness. We could do with quite a lot more. Although Fanny Coddington of Baltimore did not marry Barrett Wideman Browning until about two years before Robert's death, she had known the poet for over twenty years, and the relationship was most devoted and affectionate on both sides. It was she to whom he gave the actual ring of *The Ring and the Book*, which had belonged to Elizabeth, together with the first copy of the first edition of *Asolando*, which had sped from London to the author's Venetian death-bed, arriving just in time for a moment of conscious enjoyment.

No poet modern enough to present no philological cruxes has been so favored and fruitful a field for serious study as Robert Browning. A five-foot shelf would scarcely contain the elucidations and commentaries poured out upon his *Works*. The two most recent dissertations are of the best academic type, and are exceedingly competent researches into their respective domains; the one, an intensive scrutiny of a single group of poems, the only ones aside from *Sordello* and *The Ring and the Book* to be the subject of a separate treatise; the other, a comprehensive survey of one factor in style, and the sole contribution to that phase except Beatty's *Verse Forms* of over thirty years ago. Of Dr. De Vane's interpretation of *The Parleyings* as veiled autobiography, I have spoken at some length elsewhere. Dr. Hatcher's scholarship is equally thorough, and his elaborate classification, something unattempted yet on rhythm or rhyme, is a boon to the student of poetic technique.

Once more we have a couple of Browning products holding hands across the ocean, the two dramas in blank verse derived from *The Ring and the Book*. Of these the Graham effusion is even more inept and sentimental than the Goodrich-Palmer concoction so widely advertised in this country by the acting of Walter Hampden. Flattered as Robert Browning might be at this double tribute to his inspiration, we fear the sight and sound of them would make him swear aloud right through the Abbey stones. He might, however, be quieted by the consolation that these versions do perform a service for him, albeit other than intended.

For whenever we become vexed and exasperated with his own irrelevancies and gaucheries and fanatic partisanship as we wade through the "inordinate muchness" of his masterpiece, we have only to dip into these modern reincarnations, and presto, by the contrast, Hercules is himself again.

Although during his last decade Browning was benevolently skeptical of the infant Browning Society, and declared he was no Browningite, he did relish the annoyance caused by that organization to his dear old critics, who, as he reminded Dr. Furnivall, "have gone on gibing and gibbering at me time out of mind." However he might feel about this season's prolific harvest of criticism and interpretation and information and reconstruction and dramatization, at least he could not complain of contemptuous indignity. Wherein he fares better than most of the departed spirits now being evoked in flocks from their peaceful oblivion.

And whatever might be his own opinion of this whole flock that is now summoning him and his, ours registers admiration, on the whole and all things considered. We, the jury, return a verdict of Not Guilty, and we, the judge, with the reservation that we could spare some better than others, pronounce an indeterminate sentence of popular favour and enduring fame.