



BROWNING FOR THE TRENCHES

Browning For The Trenches, the Annual Browning Lecture given at the Graveside in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey on 8th December 2017 by Michael Meredith © 2017

The year 2017 marks the one hundredth anniversary of America entering the First World War. In 1917 Robert Browning had been dead for nearly thirty years, but among the American soldiers who crossed the Atlantic that year there were many who carried with them a small booklet called 'Browning For The Trenches'.

Compiled by the Boston Browning Society, this selection from Browning's poetry, of just 32 pages, fitted comfortably into a battle-dress pocket. Thirty thousand copies were circulated to the first wave of Yankee soldiers, and were read in the trenches of France as well as in Siberia and Russia. Wherever the soldiers went, Browning went too. The booklets also made their way into the British army and were eagerly read by our soldiers as well.

'Browning For The Trenches' has a claim to be the most unusual selection of the poet's work ever made. Intended for an all-male readership, aged between eighteen and thirty, engaged in a life or death struggle in a foreign land, the selection contains very few of Browning's well-known poems. If you look for 'Childe Roland', 'My Last Duchess' or 'A Toccata of Galuppi's' you won't find them. Nor will you find Pippa's famous:

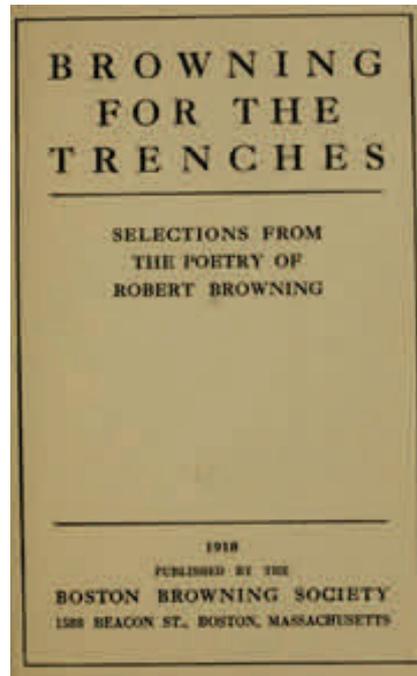
God's in his Heaven

All's right with the world

because, in France in 1917, it was clear that something was seriously wrong with the world.

Instead, the editor chose a few short poems and extracts from longer works, which, in his words, 'expressed courage, good cheer and great ideals'. He threw

his net wide, from *Pauline to Asolando*, and included passages from poems completely neglected or forgotten today. Many were used out of context and in their new form would have surprised Browning. The few narrative poems tell tales of matchless valour; those who die are depicted as self-sacrificing heroes, such as the young Napoleonic soldier in 'Incident in the French Camp' or Pheidippides expiring after his run from Thermopylae to Athens with news of victory.



The first poems strike an air of youthful optimism:

Oh, our manhood's prime vigour. No spirit feels waste,

Not a muscle is stopped in its playing, nor sinew unbraced.

Oh, the wild joys of living! The leaping of rock up to rock,

The strong rending of boughs from the fir-tree, the cool silver shock

Of a plunge in a pool's living water, the hunt of the bear,

And the sultriness showing the lion is couched in his lair.

Browning's military metaphors are used

to encourage the men about to engage the enemy, nowhere better than:

One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,

Never doubted clouds would break,

Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,

Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,

Sleep to wake.

In the long hours of waiting in the mud and squalor of the trenches, some soldiers may very well have questioned the justification of war and what they were doing. If so, Browning's autocratic Prince Hohenstiel-Swangau provided at least a half-answer:

I foresee and I announce

Necessity of warfare in one case,

For one cause: one way, I bid broach the blood

O' the world. For truth and right, and only right

And truth, - right, truth, on the absolute scale of God,

No pettiness of man's admeasurement, -

In such times the soldiers' thoughts would inevitably turn back to home and the sweethearts they had left behind, and so the editor included a number of short love-lyrics to remind them of the happiness and ecstasy of human love:

... I am wrapped in blaze,

Creation's lord, of heaven and earth

Lord whole and sole - by a minute's birth -

Through the love in a girl!

Other poems gave them hope that they would discover this love again in the future:

... minutes which passed - return, remain

Let earth's old life once more enmesh us,

You with old pleasure – me – old pain,

So we but meet nor part again.

But the most important part of this short anthology addresses, something unmentioned by its editor: fear, immanent death in battle, the loss of close friends – and with them the over-riding question of how to sustain and endure in such circumstances. In the turmoil of adolescence Browning had had a similar need and had turned to a higher power:

My God, my God, let me for once look on thee

As though nought else existed, we alone!

And as creation crumbles, my soul's spark

Expands till I can say – even from myself

I need thee and I feel thee and I love thee.

In the trenches the soldiers are given comforting words from Browning's hard-fought Christian faith:

And softer came the voice – “There is a way:

‘Tis hard for flesh to tread therein, imbued

With frailty –

Wilt thou adventure for my sake and man's,

Apart from all reward?” And last it breathed –

“Be happy, my good soldier; I am by thee,

Be sure, even to the end!”

That was from *Paracelsus*, and later in the anthology we are shown the vision of the living Jesus who appears to the narrator of *Christmas Eve*:

All at once I looked up with terror,

He was there.

He himself with his human air,

On the narrow pathway, just before.

I saw the back of Him, no more –

No face: only the sight

Of a sweepy garment, vast and white,

With a hem that I could recognize . . .

And my pulses leaped for joy

Of the golden thought without alloy

[That] because my heart I proffered,

With true love trembling at the brim,

He suffers me to follow Him

Forever, my own way . . .

The anthology finishes with the most appropriate ‘Prospice’ – ‘Look Forward’ – in which Browning expresses his confidence that, after his death, he will be reunited with his wife Elizabeth:

For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,

The black minute's at end,

And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,

Shall dwindle, shall blend,

Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,

Then a light, then thy breast,

O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,

And with God be the rest.

Today, a hundred years on, it is strange to think of Browning as a war poet, yet in reading this remarkable selection from his work, one can see how his poetry provides comfort, reassurance, encouragement and inspiration in a time of appalling conflict.



8th December 2017, Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey

WORK IN PROGRESS

Patricia Stefanowicz, Master of Wine and member of the Browning Society is currently writing a paper on Robert Browning in Asolo, with reference to the **Asolo window at the Armstrong Browning Library**, the town itself and the area's rather delicious DOCG Prosecco Asolo wines.

The Armstrong Browning Library of Baylor University, Waco, Texas boasts sixty-two stained glass windows believed to be the largest collection of secular stained glass in the world. These brilliantly hued, inspirational windows illustrate the poetry of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning in a stunning medium of light and colour.

Forty-seven of the windows represent themes from Robert Browning's poetry, while eight are based on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's well-known *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and four of the newest windows contain lines from both poets. These beautiful windows are featured on all three floors of the building.

Three striking cathedral windows in the McLean Foyer of Meditation, very different from the pictorial style throughout the rest of the building, transmit a feeling of sunrise or sunset as the shades of glass vary from deep amber to pale lavender.

The three oldest windows in the building, dating to 1924 and originally installed in the Browning Room of Carroll Library, were designed by **Haskins Glass Studio, Rochester, New York**. The majority of the windows, commissioned in the late 1940s and early 1950s as the main floor of the building was being planned and constructed, were created by **Charles J. Connick Associates, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts**, and by **Jacoby Art Glass Company, Saint Louis, Missouri**.

Eight more Connick windows were added in the 1960s and 1970s. Three of these windows completed the span of stained glass across the front of the building on the third floor, while the other five enhanced the southwest corner.

In the 1980s, the remaining five window spaces on the northeast corner of the third floor were filled with stained glass, the work of Charles J. Connick Associates, Inc., **Lynn Hovey Studio, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts**, and **L. L. Sams Stained Glass, Waco, Texas**.

The newest windows, installed between 2000 and 2007, were created by **Willet Hauser Architectural Glass, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**, formerly Willet Stained Glass Studios. These six colourful windows grace the first floor entrance and depict Italian scenes significant to the Brownings.

The Asolo Window was given by Ethel and Rex Ramsower in memory of her mother, Laura Higginbotham Osborne, and her grandmother, Ethel Lattimore Higginbotham, and is inscribed: "They

inspired me to love Browning", and:
*How many a year, my Asolo,
 Since--one step just from sea to land--
 I found you, loved yet feared you so--
 . . . Italia's rare o'er-running beauty
 Crowds the eye--*

"Prologue" Asolando

The abundant richness of the wreath evokes the feel of an autumn harvest and is a visual feast, with figs (whole and cut)



and fig leaves, grapes, walnuts, pomegranates in varying stages of ripeness, the blue berries of Virginia creeper, and other foliage.

The central image is the view from the loggia at La Mura, the summer home of Browning's close friend Katharine de Kay Bronson. During his last visit to Asolo, the poet insisted on never missing the sunsets from the sheltered balcony, and he envisioned building a tower just across the steep ravine. Pippa's Tower, pictured here, was built instead by his son, to honor his father's memory.

The window is set in late summer or early autumn, the time of Browning's arrival in Asolo for his final visit in 1889.

The rural road or walking path in the vignette in the upper left corner represents the many carriage rides and lengthy walks Browning enjoyed during his visits to Asolo. The poet had a deep appreciation for the unusual beauty of the area calling it "the most beautiful spot I ever was privileged to see."

In the lower left is pictured Asolo's south gate, the Porta Loreggia. A glimpse of the home of Katharine de Kay Bronson, where Browning spent many happy hours, is seen on the left. It was called La Mura, meaning "the wall," because it was set into the old wall of the city.

In the upper right corner is an image of La Rocca ("the fortress"), the ruins of a pre-Roman stronghold that crowns the hill above the town, with vineyards spill-

ing down the base of the slope. Browning enjoyed taking the steep climb to the summit, where the view on a clear day included Venice's Campanile and the domes of Padua.

The Fontanina Zen or Zen Fountain, dating from 1571, is shown in the lower right corner of the window. It is located just outside La Mura. On his final visit to Asolo, Browning lodged nearby on the street now called Via Roberto Browning.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY IN 2018

Browning Sunday at St Marylebone Parish Church, commemorating the marriage of Elizabeth Barrett to Robert Browning, will be on **Sunday 9 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), an afternoon of music and song and afternoon tea.

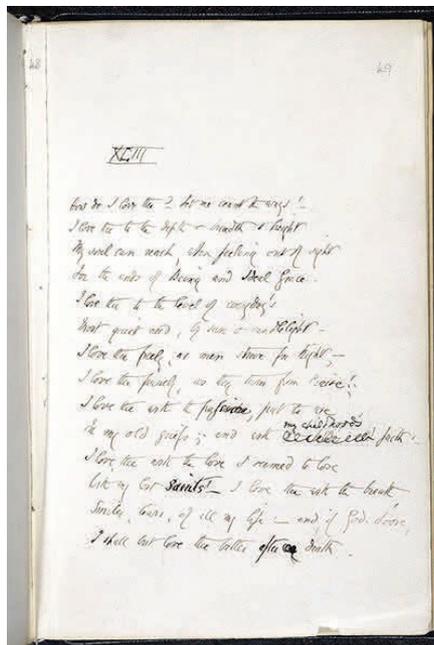
The **Friends of Pembury Parish Church** (also known as St Peter's Old Church, Pembury near Tunbridge Wells) are holding their Heritage Weekend on **14th -16th September** this year, and this will include a **"By the Fire Side" Flower Festival**. The theme is based around the title of Robert Browning's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



The annual **Wreath-Laying** ceremony at Robert Browning's grave in Poets' **Corner in Westminster Abbey** will take place on **Friday 14th December, 2018**, 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 2018

The **2018 AGM with Readings from EBB and Afternoon Tea** was very successful and followed a more informal pattern than usual. Members of the Committee read poems by Elizabeth and enjoyed a delicious afternoon tea.



VISIT TO ETON

Members and friends enjoyed a happy afternoon at **Eton College** in May hosted by Michael Meredith. Treasures relating to Robert and Elizabeth were expertly laid out in the Library and introduced by Michael. Following time in the Library members and friends repaired to the Charteris Rooms for a sumptuous afternoon tea.



LET ME COUNT THE WAYS

On **Sunday 13 May, at 7.30pm**, Actors **Rosamund Shelley and Tim Hardy**, with **Gavin Roberts** providing the musical accompaniment, staged a performance of "Let Me Count the Ways" at the Omnibus Theatre, Clapham Common.

The musical drama, based on the story of the love affair between Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, was followed by a lively Question & Answer session with the **Dr Simon Avery** and **Dr Scott Lewis**.

CASA TOLOMEI

BAGNI DI LUCCA

Casa Tolomei, the house in Bagni di Lucca where Elizabeth, Robert, and Pen stayed with Wilson and Ferdinando in the summer and autumn of 1853, can now be rented by the night or the week. For the past three years, Laura Poggi and Andrew Walker and their three young children have lived on site while overseeing and assisting with the labour-intensive restoration of the Art Nouveau façade, the intricate frescoes in the second-story drawing room, and the light, airy bedrooms the Brownings occupied during their stay.

Bagni di Lucca is one of the most romantic places in the Browning story. Robert and Elizabeth came there first in June of 1849, soon after Pen's birth, and it was there that Elizabeth handed Robert the poems that became *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Four years later, during another hot Florence summer, the Brownings returned and rented Casa Tolomei, which "beguiled us," Elizabeth wrote, with its large size, low price, and convenience. They brought Pen with them this time, as well as Wilson and their new cook, Ferdinando Romagnoli.



Robert Browning described Bagni di Lucca as "cool, for Italy--& bright, at the same time, as a great sun makes it by day," and this is still true. The house sits near the centre of the small, charming town, and the riverside passeggiata named the Lovers Walk in honour of Elizabeth and Robert is mere steps away. The chestnut trees were blooming during our April visit, and the mountainsides were hypnotically green, as lovely and

full of mist as they would have been when Robert was hiking to Prato Fiorito.



Guests can sketch, write, eat, or simply look out the window from a table situated where Elizabeth sat writing to Arabella and enjoying the view of the garden. Laura Poggi, a Florentine, speaks fluent English, Spanish, and German and is an Italian teacher by trade, so lessons can be arranged during a longer stay. (She is also a wonderful and enthusiastic cook!) Andrew is British, and his mother, Susan, a former teacher who lives in Yorkshire, has written a pamphlet for guests about the Brownings' stay in Casa Tolomei that will help devoted members and even those completely unfamiliar with the Browning history hear the cheerful voices that once echoed in these rooms. Susan has also made a vintage photo album with photos of the Brownings that makes the rooms feel like what they really are—a place beloved of a family who spent happy times here.

Besides the great pleasure of being in the restored portion of the house, Society members can tour the lower rooms, where the intact mid-19th century kitchen and sitting room make it possible to imagine the lives of Ferdinando and Wilson as they played with Pen, fed one another and their employers, and fell in love.

"You can almost hear the steps of Penini walking around with Flush," Laura Poggi says of her life in the house, "and imagine Ferdinando being busy in front of the fire in our old kitchen. Then, of course, Wilson would arrive and shout at him for doing something wrong--too much garlic in the pesto, probably!"

"The restoration started three years ago," Poggi says, "with renovation of the entire roof--400 square meters (about 4,000 square feet) of chestnut beams and traditional clay tiles. Most of the old tiles, and many of the large beams, were in good enough condition to be retained."

The external façade of the house presented a simultaneous challenge.

"At the front, facing the small piazza," Poggi says, "the Liberty-style frescoes

dating from the very early 1900s were discovered under layers of paint. All the more recent paint was painstakingly chipped away and then the original frescoes were retouched to bring them back to their former glory."

The walls facing the garden were "taken back further in time," she says, "to the neo-classical period frescoes. Of the four upstairs windows on that side, the original decoration of two was retained and the other two were re-created to match. These are just as they were in the Brownings' time."

The Poets' Suite and the grand sala were finished in 2016 (after more painstaking work on interior frescoes—much of it undertaken with scalpels), while workers replaced the plumbing and wiring for the entire building. The remainder of the upstairs floor (including Robert's study) and the ground floor is in progress and will be completed by the end of this summer.



Perhaps the most surprising part of staying in Casa Tolomei—besides the sense that the family happiness of the Brownings lives on in the Poggi-Walker family—is that the house still beguiles with its large size, convenience, and affordable price. The Poets' Suite is let via www.booking.com. Guests can also rent the entire second story if in need of more space. For more information, contact Laura Poggi or Andrew Walker at info@casatolomei.com.

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The Browning Society was reformed in 1969.