



THE BROWNING SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

ISSUE NO: 4

MARCH 2020

PROMOTING BROWNING'S LIFE & LEGACY

Promoting Browning's Life and Legacy, the Annual Browning Lecture was given at the Graveside in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey on 13th December 2019 by Jenifer Borderud, Associate Librarian and Director of the Armstrong Browning Library (ABL), Baylor, Texas, USA.

While a graduate student at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, I received a research assistantship at Baylor's Armstrong Browning Library, or ABL as it is also known. The ABL, a research center and museum dedicated to the study of the lives and works of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, houses the world's largest collection of Browning materials as well as books, manuscripts, periodicals, tracts, pamphlets, art, and other cultural artifacts to support research on nineteenth-century literature and culture more broadly. Named by the BBC as one of the most beautiful college libraries in America, the ABL also serves as a cultural venue for the Baylor campus, hosts numerous lectures, symposia, and concerts, and draws more than 30,000 visitors a year.

As a graduate student at the library, I assisted visiting scholars with their research, transcribed original letters, and learned about the work of the library's curators. During this time, my interest in Robert Browning was sparked and deepened as I prepared my master's thesis, a critical edition of fifty-two letters written by Browning and his sister Sarianna to their friend Annie Egerton Smith. These letters, which begin in 1868 and end in 1877, the year Smith died unexpectedly while spending a summer holiday with Browning and his sister, provide a glimpse into Browning's relationship with Smith, revealing their shared appreciation of music and travel and their intimate knowledge of each other's households. The letters also serve as a record of Browning's friendship with Smith, whom he described as "one of the

most devoted friends [he] ever had in [his] life" and whose death, Edmund Gosse later wrote, precipitated the end of "a second stage in Browning's life—that which had lasted since the death of his wife in 1861."



After completing my master's in English, earning a second graduate degree in library and information studies, and holding the position of rare books catalog librarian in Baylor's Central Libraries, I was given the opportunity to return to the Armstrong Browning Library and carry on the library's mission to promote the study and appreciation of the Brownings and the wider field of nineteenth-century literature and culture. And this is an exciting time at the Armstrong Browning Library.

The ABL's collections of Browning materials and nineteenth-century letters, manuscripts, and rare books are growing, and we recently renovated collection storage space to ensure the long-term preservation of the library's original letters and manuscripts.

Each year, the library continues to attract scholars from around the world who use the library's collections to advance their dissertations, articles, and book projects. These scholars become part of the Baylor community, sharing their research in public lectures and informal gatherings of faculty and students and attending campus-wide events.

Outreach efforts by library faculty and the development of the ABL's Teaching Fellows Program have led to an increase in the number of Baylor graduate and undergraduate students visiting the library. This semester, 750 students in art, English, history, honors, journalism, and music classes spent time at the ABL. Some students received tours of the library building and learned about the library's history and the lives and works of the Brownings. Other students examined the library's letters, manuscripts, and rare books and now know how to find, handle, and analyze these primary source materials.

The ABL is leveraging technology to broaden its reach. Our Browning and Victorian letters have been digitized and are available to scholars online anytime, anywhere. The library's Browning Music Collection, which includes verse by Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning set to music, will be available online in the near future.

Some of these digitization projects, such as our project to bring together digitized copies of Browning letters from around the world, have resulted in partnerships with institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom, including Eton College. The library's digitized collections are also being incorporated into workshops led by the Baylor Libraries on text data mining to encourage their use in digital humanities research.

The ABL has supported graduate and undergraduate students who sought to tell the Brownings' story through videogames and virtual reality to see how these interactive and immersive technologies impact learning. The library also hosted a flightless, multisite conference on ecology and religion in nineteenth-century studies that virtually connected five institutions in the US and the UK. An additional 600 people in 19 countries participated in the conference online, demonstrating the feasibility of this environmentally sustainable form of professional conferencing.

Of interest to those Browning Society members traveling to Italy in the coming year, the ABL is proud to host the annual dinner and meeting of the Fano Club. This past summer, over 30 people joined the ranks of this exclusive club, founded by Browning scholar William Lyon Phelps in 1912. To become a

member, one must travel to Fano, Italy, view Guercino's painting *The Guardian Angel*, which inspired Browning to write a poem of the same name, and send a postcard to the Armstrong Browning Library requesting membership in the club. By tradition, Fano Club members are invited to the ABL for a dinner in honor of Browning's birthday each spring. Members in attendance tell stories of their trip to Fano, and the youngest member present reads Browning's poem to the group.

On behalf of Baylor University and the Armstrong Browning Library, thank you for allowing me to share some of the good work happening at the ABL. I am deeply honored to be part of this ceremony commemorating Robert Browning, and it is my hope that The Browning Society and the Armstrong Browning Library will continue to work together to celebrate and promote Browning's life and legacy.



Jennifer Borderud is Associate Librarian and director of the Armstrong Browning Library (ABL). She previously held positions as access and outreach librarian at the ABL and as rare books catalog librarian in the Central Libraries at Baylor University. She received both her BA and her MA in English from Baylor University and her MS in Information Studies from the University of Texas at Austin. While writing her master's thesis, *Browning's Companion Dear and True: The Letters of Robert and Sarianna Browning to Annie Egerton Smith*, she held a graduate assistantship with former ABL director Mairi Rennie. She resides in Waco, Texas, with her husband Josh and their two children.



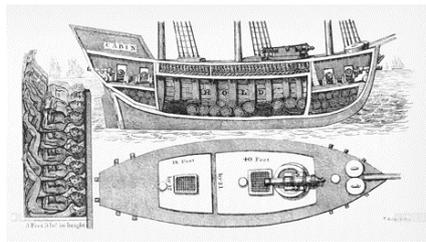
THE BROWNING AND SLAVERY

The President delivered Simon Avery's paper at the 2019 Annual Commemoration of the Marriage of Robert Browning with Elizabeth Barrett which took place at St Marylebone Parish Church on 12th September 1846.

The paper addressed the highly complex relationship between the Brownings and slavery raising some difficult and challenging issues – both about the poets themselves and about the wider political culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

So much of the history of the British slave trade often remains untold, and this silencing is something which both the Brownings in their own day and modern historians in ours have sought to address.

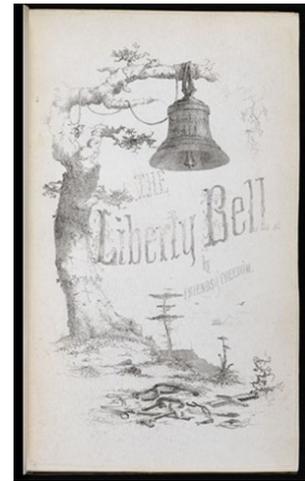
The talk focused mainly on Elizabeth's poetic responses to slavery but also addressed the question of how Robert reflected upon slavery. For both poets, the legacy of slavery was undoubtedly problematic and haunting.



At the heart of Elizabeth's poetry, from her first compositions to the last, is a concern with the push for equality, liberty and freedom from structures of oppression. Her poetic voice is one which speaks for the rights of women, the working classes, children, animals and whole countries – Greece and Italy – which were fighting for independence and unification.

Of course, many writers in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries had addressed the issue of slavery and often the most telling interrogations of the problems of slavery were offered by women writers. Poets such as Hannah More, Anna Barbauld and Amelia Opie, for example, deal with the horrors of slavery in the wake of the developing abolitionist movement. And novelists such as Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park* and Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* used the language of slavery to reflect covertly on the position of women in the patriarchal systems of the Regency and early-Victorian periods. But arguably none of these texts is as bold in its treatment of slavery as Elizabeth Barrett's poem of the mid-1840s, the astonishing dramatic monologue entitled "The Runaway Slave

at Pilgrim's Point".



Simon Avery is Reader in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, of the University of Westminster

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY IN 2020

Browning Sunday 2020 at St Marylebone Parish Church, commemorating the marriage of Elizabeth Barrett to Robert Browning, will be on **Sunday 13 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 readings from the works of Robert and Elizabeth and afternoon tea.

The annual **Wreath-Laying** ceremony at Robert Browning's grave in **Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey** will take place on **Friday 18th December, 2020**, 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.

The **4th Annual St Marylebone Festival** featuring literature and music connected with St Marylebone will take place between **18th and 24th July 2020** in St Marylebone Parish Church. Performances will take place each day and tickets may be bought on the door or via the Festival website: www.stmarylebonefestival.com



LIFE IN A NEW RHYTHM

St Marylebone Parish Church and the Brownings: 'Life in a New Rhythm' adapted from a text by Simon Avery and performed by Peter Wight, Neil Stuke, Helen Fospero and Nick Barber as part of the 2019 Commemoration of the Brownings marriage in St Marylebone Parish Church.



St Marylebone Parish Church's strong literary associations are well known: dramatist Richard Brinsley Sheridan married here, poet Lord Byron, novelist Wilkie Collins and the son of Charles Dickens were all baptised here and the list goes on. But what did St Marylebone Parish Church and the surrounding area mean to the Brownings?

A depiction of Marylebone in the early nineteenth century when the Brownings knew it can be found among the amazing array of nineteenth-century art housed in Tate Britain. 'Punch or May Day' painted in 1829 by Benjamin Robert Haydon (who was himself baptised and married in the parish church), gives a glimpse of the fast-changing streets of central London.



Haydon was well known to the Barrett family and he and Elizabeth were to correspond for several years. Haydon's 'Punch or May Day' focuses upon a busy urban scene. People of all classes rub along together in this picture and appear to fill the canvas to bursting with colour and activity. On the left-hand side stands a Punch and Judy show, watched by a whole array of figures – ladies and gentlemen, a soldier, a farmer whose pocket is being picked, and a small

boy who appears to be working as a chimney sweep. A woman is slumped in the bottom left-hand corner, while a carriage tries to negotiate the crowd on the right-hand side. The scene is vibrant and it becomes hard for the viewer to know where to rest their eye amongst it all. And then, in the upper right-hand corner of the canvas is a depiction of the top half of St Marylebone Parish Church with its tower and columns. This is an image of urban street life on Marylebone Road at the end of the 1820s – its diversity, its vitality, with the parish church presiding over it all both as a kind of moral guardian for the area and associated with the modern world and the rapid expansion of the burgeoning metropolis. This was the world in which Elizabeth wrote from her home at 50 Wimpole Street. Politically engaged from an early age, she followed her father and brother in a commitment to Whig politics with its concern for the legal, civil and religious rights of the individual.

By the time the Barrett family moved to London, Elizabeth had already established herself as a challenging poet who had produced works dealing with issues such as the abuses of press-ganging, Latin American politics, styles of political leadership and, following her great hero Lord Byron, the Greek War of Independence.

From her Wimpole Street room, Elizabeth could dedicate herself to this work with few interruptions, developing her position as commentator upon some of the most pressing concerns of the day – industrialisation, slavery the problems of capitalism, women's rights – as well as writing some of the most beautiful and challenging religious poetry of the century. Indeed, when Robert met Elizabeth she was already an internationally acclaimed writer and, a few years later, she would be a contender for the post of Poet Laureate on the death of Wordsworth in 1850.

In contrast to Elizabeth, the young Robert Browning was, by 1846, still emerging as a poet, although increasingly recognised as a fascinating new voice with works like *Sordello* and *Pippa Passes*. Growing up in Camberwell in South East London, Robert was, like Elizabeth, primarily self-educated at home and supported by his family.

The Brownings' courtship began when Robert was shown a highly complementary reference to his poetry in Elizabeth's 1844 poem, 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship'. Celebrating his work as part of the new modern literature of the age, the poem's speaker talks of reading 'From Browning some "Pomegranate" which, if cut deep down the middle,/ Shows a heart within blood-tinctured, of a veined humanity'. As a result, Robert wrote that initial letter which, nineteen months later, would find him and Elizabeth standing together here in St Marylebone Parish Church.

'I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett', opens his first correspondence in January 1845; and then, a few sentences latter, comes the unflinching assertion that 'I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart—and I love you too', a declaration which initiated a correspondence which would consist of 573 letters and which would also lead to 92 visits by Robert to Elizabeth's room at Wimpole Street, all of them conducted clandestinely so that the developing relationship would be kept secret from Elizabeth's overbearing and controlling father. Elizabeth, who had suffered many years of ill health, mostly confined to her home, had been growing more active as her relationship with Robert progressed – she left her room, left the house, and travelled around London more as she steadily prepared herself for the new life which could be in the offing.

Suddenly, that new life was upon them as Mr Barrett announced that they would be leaving London in a month's time in order that the house could be cleaned and redecorated. Robert immediately recognised what he called 'the extreme perilousness of delay' and pushed for the swift completion of their plans.

On 12 September 1846, in one of the most momentous events in the history of nineteenth-century literature, they were married, attended only by their two witnesses, Elizabeth's maid, Elizabeth Wilson, and Robert's cousin, James Silverthorne.

There would be a week between the marriage service and the couple leaving London, a week in which Elizabeth was constantly nervous that what they had done would be discovered. The parish church's bells heard by Elizabeth as she sat in the drawing room at Wimpole Street, served to increase her anxiety and sense of guilt and she was even concerned that someone might go through the parish church's register, find her and Robert's signatures from the service, and inform the newspapers. At the same time, however, and in the months afterwards, the Brownings reflected in letters on what the ceremony at St Marylebone had meant to them. Writing at 1pm the very day they were married, Robert, in his typical exuberance, told Elizabeth that she had 'given him the highest, completest proof of love that ever one human being gave another. I am all gratitude . . . all pride that my life has been so crowned by you'. In return, the next day Elizabeth wrote to Robert that, during the ceremony: "I thought, that, of the many, many women who have stood where I stood, and to the same end, not one of them all perhaps, not one perhaps, since that building was a church, has had reasons strong as mine, for an absolute trust and devotion towards the man she married, – not one!"

Three weeks later, when in the Loire *en route* to Italy, Elizabeth was

more forthcoming with details of that morning when she told Arabella and Henrietta that, after the ceremony, she and Robert: “parted, as we met, at the door of Marylebone Church – he kissed me at the communion table, & not a word passed after. I looked like death, he has said since”. Indeed, so great was the emotional strain for Elizabeth that she had very nearly passed out on the way to the church and, supported by Wilson, she had had to stop off to buy smelling salts from the chemist!

What the Brownings went on to find and create in their marriage was, by all accounts, nothing short of remarkable: a relationship between two devoted partners who developed together both personally and professionally. The marriage was not without its problems, but their mutual respect and understanding of the other person’s needs was to last for fifteen years until Elizabeth’s death in 1861, a period which was remarkably creative for them both.

In 1931, another innovative writer associated with London, Virginia Woolf, gave a sense of what the Brownings were remembered for in the interwar period. In an essay on *Aurora Leigh*, arguably Elizabeth’s greatest contrition to literature, which was published the same year as Rudolph Bessier’s *The Barretts of Wim-pole Street* was becoming popular, Woolf wrote: “By one of those ironies of fashion that might have amused the Brownings themselves, it seems likely that they are now far better known in the flesh than they have ever been in the spirit. Passionate lovers, in curls and side whiskers, oppressed, defiant, eloping – in this guise thousands of people must know and love the Brownings who have never read a line of their poetry . . . but we all know how Miss Barrett lay on her sofa; how she escaped from the dark house in Wim-pole Street one September morning; how she met health and happiness, freedom, and Robert Browning in the church round the corner”.

In 1846, when they married, this parish church was still only 30 years old, a response to the new modern urbanisation of the city. It seems fitting that these two poets who were themselves so committed to the modern – in terms of embracing new modern ideas, developing new modern poetic forms, and engaging with new modern subject matters – were to marry here.

It took real commitment, organisation and daring to do what the Brownings did on September 12th 1846; St Marylebone Parish Church marks the start of their new lives together as poets and lovers. But as the final lines of Elizabeth’s last letter to Robert before they left London suggest, “none are so bold as the timid, when they are fairly roused”.

Simon Avery is Reader in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture at UoW.

THE LOVE POEMS OF ROBERT BROWNING

The 2019 Annual General Meeting concluded with a reading of some of the Love Poems of Robert Browning introduced by Michael Meredith. Members and their guests read from the texts which included — Song: ‘Nay but you, who do not love her . . . , Ask not one least word of praise, Now, Love Among the Ruins, Two in the Campagna, In the Doorway, A Woman’s Last Word, The Lost Mistress, Confessions, Inapprehensiveness, A Serenade at the Villa, Humility, Sum-mum Bonum, Love in a Life, Life in a Love , In a Gondola, A Lovers’ Quarrel and The Householder

Meeting at Night

The grey sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low;
And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.
Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
Three fields to cross till a farm appears;
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
And blue spurt of a lighted match,
And a voice less loud, thro' its joys and fears,
Than the two hearts beating each to each!

Parting at Morning

Round the cape of a sudden came the sea,
And the sun looked over the mountain's rim;
And straight was a path of gold for him,
And the need of a world of men for me.

Members might like to know that Michael Meredith’s book *A Centenary Selection from Robert Browning’s Poetry, 1989*, ISBN 0-930252-25-X, in which many of these poems appear is available from online from many sources.

Obituary: Monica Foot, press and television journalist, anarchist, feminist, trade union activist and long-term member of The Browning Society, died aged 80 during the late spring of 2019. She was a long-time National Union of Journalists activist and served on its executive committee. In 1995 she retired early from her job in Birmingham to dedicate more time to her beloved allotment, her voracious reading habit and her aim of seeing every single Shakespeare play performed on stage. She is survived by her sons, Matt and John, by her grandchildren, Lorenzo, Joe, Natasha and Corinna, and by her sister, Mary, and brother, Robert.

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:

Jim Smith, 64 Blythe Vale, London, SE6 4NW— jsmith2847@aol.com

