

THE BROWNING SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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MAN AND WIFE

Hanging above the altar in St. Marylebone Parish Church when Elizabeth Barrett married Robert Browning in September 1846 was an oil-painting of the Holy Family. The work of the Anglo-American President of the Royal Academy, Benjamin West, the picture is still in the parish church today, but had been moved into the old parish church when the architect Thomas Harris reordered the present parish church in the 1880s. The painting returned to the parish church in its present position shortly before the old parish church was demolished in 1949.



Benjamin West, PRA, 1818,

The Holy Family,

The painting is uncharacteristic of West, who is best-known for his very large historical canvasses, the most famous of which is the death of General Wolfe on the Heights of Abraham near Quebec during the Seven Years' War. Towards the end of his life, however, West started to work on a smaller scale, specialising in religious painting and portraits. He frequently used symbolism to emphasise the significance of his subject. This is true of

his depiction of the Holy Family, particularly in the figure of the baby Jesus. The new-born child is shown blessing his parents and the world, as if already aware of his allotted role in life. In his startlingly bold depiction of Jesus, West gives the baby's face an almost adult seriousness, which becomes the focus of the painting. A shaft of light from above suggests the presence of God, while the Trinity is completed by a dove roosting on a beam above the baby's head.

Just how much of this Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning saw during their wedding is unknown. It was a brief ceremony in an empty church with only two witnesses present, yet the Reverend Thomas Woods Goldhawk stood directly in front of the painting as he married them. Elizabeth particularly enjoyed portrayals of the Madonna and later would visit the Pitti Gallery especially to see those painted by Raphael. Robert knew other paintings by West, and, with his love of art, would certainly have examined the panel on one of his visits to the church to arrange the wedding. So the painting has a part, however small, to play in the history of their lives.

West's Holy Family attracted other eyes. In 1859 a 'lunatic' drew a knife and violently slashed the wooden panel from corner to corner before being restrained. The damage was poorly overpainted and it was returned to the parish church. Through the next hundred and fifty years the varnish darkened and some of the damage resurfaced. The painting was completely restored in 2015, thanks to a generous donation in memory of an honorary member of the Browning Society, the Italian teacher and scholar, Maurizio Masetti, who died in 2013.

After restoration the painting was rededicated by the Rector of St Marylebone, our president Stephen Evans, in the presence of nearly thirty of Maurizio's English friends, his partner, Simonetta Berbeglia, and her parents. Tributes were paid to Maurizio during a moving service, during which a plaque was unveiled. The West painting now hangs in the side-chapel above its original altar,

rescued by Stephen Evans from St Giles in the Fields, where it had been placed prior to the old parish church's demolition in 1949. The Brownings' marriage is, therefore, now permanently commemorated at St. Marylebone, together with the memory of one of their Italian admirers and commentators.

NOTES

The Deptford Heritage Festival was revived in 2015 and, for the past two years, the Browning Society has been invited to contribute. In 2015 Michael Meredith gave a paper, 'Home at Hatcham', which was accompanied by readings from RB's poems and the love letters by Sue Brown and Nick Baker. The following year four members, Nick Baker, April Barrett, Jerome Wynter and Dmitry Usenco, read favourite poems by EBB and RB and then talked about them. The meetings were held in St. Nicholas' Church, Deptford, a mile down the road from the Brownings' cottage at New Cross. It proved a most sympathetic venue with features that Browning would have seen on his visits to Deptford, including some fine Grinling Gibbons wood-carving and two stone skull and cross-bones at the entrance to the churchyard. After the meetings members of the Society had lunch at the Naval Museum, Greenwich.



After the 2015 AGM, Scott Lewis talked to us most interestingly about Dr A. J. Armstrong, the inspirational Texan who created the Browning library at Baylor University, now bearing his name. This occasion was also the British launch of Scott's book 'Boundless Life', his biography of Armstrong. In 2016 we welcomed Sue Brown who gave a lively paper, 'My dearest Friend' about Julia Wedgwood and RB, based on research she is currently undertaking. This gave a fascinating introduction to her forthcoming book, which we eagerly await.

Recent speakers at our December commemoration of Robert Browning at Westminster Abbey have included Professor Isobel Armstrong in 2015 and Professor Michael Slater in 2016. Both occasions attracted large numbers of members who enjoyed themselves, in spite of some casual organization by the Abbey authorities.

On 16 May 2015 Pamela and David Sington entertained the Society at their London home to hear Simon Avery lead a discussion of a number of EBB's poems, including 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point', which attracted most attention. About fifteen members attended a delicious tea-party and there was a lively debate, sparked by Simon's informed enthusiasm. We were particularly pleased to welcome Peg and Jack Wernette, founder members, who were about to relocate to their home in America. Peg was our treasurer for a number of years.

In our last issue we remarked on the recent high prices paid anonymously at auction for letters of both Brownings. It seems that the Chinese have started to take an interest in English literary manuscripts. Letters by RB and EBB have last year been sold at auctions in Beijing for impressive sums. It is, therefore, probable that they are buying in London as well. Recent auction sales there have included the corrected proofs of RB's 'Colombe's Birthday', which was sold for £11,000 hammer-price to an English private collector. Considering its rarity, this was not expensive.

Volume 22 of The Brownings' Correspondence was published in late 2015. It covers the period from November 1855 to June 1856 when the Brownings were staying in Paris. This remarkable definitive edition gets better and better, superbly edited by Philip Kelley and his team.

In the present volume RB's and EBB's responses to the disappointing reviews of the recently published 'Men and Women' are recorded; for the first time, every known review of the book has been reprinted. Such thoroughness is invaluable to the scholar, but is also interesting to the casual reader, for whom the detailed and relevant explanatory notes are also invaluable.

'Men and Women' is in the news. Lewis Carroll's copy of the first edition, stolen in the mid-1980s, has resurfaced. This important book, signed with Charles Lutwidge Dodgson's monogram on the title-page of volume 1, was lent to an exhibition at St. Marylebone Library. On its way home, it was grabbed with other RB rarities by a sneak-thief at Paddington Station. Although the thief was later apprehended, tried and imprisoned, not all his haul was recovered, including the Carroll 'Men and Women'. The book is bibliographically important, as its binding is a unique variant of about 1860, so it was with relief (and some surprise) that it was found at the Olympia Book Fair last year.

At the Fair there were few Browning bargains to be found, although there was a superb copy of EBB's Poems of 1844 priced at a very reasonable £1000. The most remarkable bargain was to be found on eBay only a few weeks ago, where a complete set of RB's 'Bells and Pomegranates' sold for £50. It had been very badly catalogued by someone who knew nothing about its rarity or potential value. It contained the very rare first edition of 'Blot in the 'Scutcheon'', which is usually represented by the second edition in complete sets.

It was good to hear a play based on 'The Ring and the Book' repeated recently on Radio 4 Extra. Originally broadcast in 2008, the play, adapted by Martyn Wade, quoted directly from the poem but also skilfully brought the story to life by reconstructing some of the scenes in prose. Robert Browning became the narrator and was convincingly played by Anton Lesser; Pompilia's youthful innocence was well portrayed by Loo Brearley, who avoided any hint of sentimentality. The narrative was shortened into two episodes of an hour each by omitting characters like the Pope and the two lawyers. The first episode is available for listening on YouTube.

Casa Guidi hosted a successful day's conference on English Poets in Italy in 2015. More recently, a more ambitious conference discussing England's contribution to the 1966 flood relief in Florence attracted an even larger audience. Well run by the Landmark Trust, Casa Guidi, the Brownings' Florentine home, is an ideal place for a family holiday. On the Oltrano, close to the Pitti Palace, it is furnished in such a way that the modern visitor can appreciate what life was like in the nineteenth century but enjoy, at the same time, modern comforts.

OBITUARY

In our last issue we recorded the death of our member Katherine Macdonald. We have received the following tribute to her:

Katherine Macdonald, who died on 1st January this year, was for many years a valuable member of the Browning Society committee and a regular contributor to our events. She last attended the Westminster Abbey commemoration in December 2013 in her 101st year, and, belying her age, gave the address there ten years previously.

Katherine was born in 1913, the daughter of John and Margaret Munro. Her father, an Oxford don and the son of the Victorian sculptor Alexander Munro, was Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford from 1919, so Katherine and her four siblings were brought up in a strongly academic environment. She, herself, read modern languages at Oxford in the early 1930s before beginning social work in the depressed Durham and Northumberland coalfields. Her attempt to work as a volunteer nurse in Spain during the Civil War was thwarted when she learned she had contracted tuberculosis, which kept her in and out of a sanatorium for a few years.

In 1941 Katherine married Norman Macdonald, a young doctor she had known since her student days. By then she was working for war intelligence and in 1945, when employed at Chatham House, she published a book on the future of post-war France. Later, Katherine, who by now had two children, worked for the British Council and was secretary of the London Conference of Overseas Students. Her love of languages and travel continued throughout her life: at the age of 77 she made a journey to China on the Trans-Siberian Express, and she regularly visited the South of France well into her

nineties.

Katherine's main interest in her later life was researching the work of her grandfather, Alexander Munro. She had hoped to complete and publish a catalogue raisonné of his sculpture, but difficulties in obtaining information about his scattered works, particularly from Russia, prevented this. It is hoped that another scholar will be able to use her notes and complete the project. Her knowledge of the Brownings, therefore, came mainly through Munro, who was a friend of both poets and sculpted their young son Penini. Katherine lent important items from her collection of Munro's books and papers to the 1986 exhibition 'Meeting the Brownings' at Southwestern College, Winfield, Kansas, and attended the opening hot-foot from Yale and Harvard, where she had been working on Munro. Later, in 2001, she gave a lecture at the Armstrong Browning Library in Texas and was photographed next to her grandfather's bust of Penini in the entrance hall of the library.

Katherine was warm and modest, interested in others and always playing down her own considerable talents. She provided a voice of progressive commonsense at committee meetings of the Browning Society. She was at her happiest with her many friends. Few of those will forget her glorious 90th birthday party, given at Wightwick Manor and attended by some leading members of the art and literary worlds, eager to play tribute to this remarkable lady. All who knew her will miss her greatly, none more so than those of us in the Browning Society.

ASOLO

Nine members of the Browning Society, including the President, Stephen Evans, paid a memorable visit to Asolo in the Veneto in April 2016, seeing many of the places to which Browning had travelled on his first visit there in 1838, when he journeyed alone, and on later visits in his last years, when he and his sister, Sarianna, came to Asolo as guests of their American friend, Mrs Kay Bronson. His son, Pen, settled in Asolo after Browning's death and built a house there, La Torricella. Asolo was always a magical place for Robert Browning. As he recorded in the Prelude to his final collection *Asolando* (published in London on the day he died in Venice), this was the place where he first got a clear sense of the immensity of the poetic challenge ahead of him and was transfixed by its beauty and the historic richness of its surround-

ings. *Pippa Passes*, Browning's first wholly successful long poem, and a favourite of Elizabeth's, was set in Asolo.

Asolo is little changed from the small hillside town, guarded by its thirteenth century Rocca at the top of the hill overlooking the town, that Browning knew. It has attracted several famous residents, including the great Italian actress, Eleonora Duse, (whose grave we visited) and the British explorer and writer, Freya Stark (who is still vividly remembered



there). As we discovered during our four days in Asolo the town still attracts a lively local and international community while Browning's connection with it is cherished.

A highlight of our stay was the opportunity to see two of the houses most closely associated with the Brownings: La Mura, where Mrs Bronson regularly entertained Browning and his sister at the end of long days exploring the surrounding countryside; and La Torricella. Three of Mrs Bronson's direct descendants took the trouble to come specially to Asolo to welcome us at La Mura and show us around the house with its lovely view over the town from the Loggia, where Browning spent many happy evenings. Pen's house with its splendid tower has magnificent gardens, including a grotto decorated with a characteristically eclectic collection of statuary chosen by Pen.

Like Browning, we also visited the Tempio in Possagno where the great Italian neo-Classical sculptor, Antonio Canova, is buried. His museum close by gives an informative account of his way of working, as well as containing many examples of his sculptures. One place that Browning was particularly keen to revisit was

San Zenone degli Ezzelino, where the Ghibelline warrior, Alberico, took his last stand. Despite Mrs Bronson's qualms the elderly poet insisted on climbing the isolated tower. We did the same, grateful that the staircase to the top is now much less rickety, and were rewarded with an extraordinary view and the sight of falcons still swooping and circling below the tower.

Another high point in our visit was the morning spent in Castel Franco, where we were welcomed to the new Casa Giorgione museum celebrating Castel Franco's most famous son. It is beautifully conceived and executed. Close by is a site, which, in itself, would have justified our visit to Italy: the only known altarpiece by Giorgione still in situ in a side chapel in the Cathedral. The tranquil beauty of his Madonna between St Francis and St Nicasius is unforgettable.

So too are the Veronese frescos in the Villa Barbara at Maser with their brilliant trompe l'oeil effects. Our visit there came after a brief call at the melancholy remains of Caterina Cornaro's country retreat and pleasure gardens, Il Barco della Regina, now well off the beaten track. Also on our itinerary were visits to the Civic museum and gallery in Bassano and a walk across the picturesque covered bridge designed by Palladio, as well as a call at the museum and library in Asolo, which has interesting displays on the Brownings', Freya Stark's and La Dusa's connections with the town.

Although Browning did not re-visit Asolo for forty years after his first stay there, he found its imaginative appeal irresistible, constantly dreaming of returning there. One of his first acts when he did in 1889, aged 78, was to climb up the steep path to the Rocca hoping to rediscover the echo within the castle walls he had first found in 1835. We looked up at the castle from the terrace in front of our hotel, promising ourselves that, at some point, we too would climb up to the Rocca, but never managed it. Next time perhaps ... There will be another reason, too, for returning to Asolo, apart from its irresistible beauty and tranquility. In the Museum there we saw a portrait of Sarianna by the American artist, Charles Forbes, still striking but now in rather poor poor condition. Sparky, down-to-earth Sarianna is in many ways the unsung heroine of the Browning story. She took care of her father in his exile in Paris, gave Browning the domestic stability he needed in his later years and kept tabs on Pen after his father's death. As a small thank you for the very generous welcome the Browning Society members received in Asolo, we

volunteered to pay the costs of restoring this rare image of Browning's indispensable sister. Going back to see it when the work has been completed will be yet another incentive, if any were needed, for returning to magical Asolo.

The restored portrait by Charles Forbes



Michael Meredith, working closely with Vittorio Zaglia, brought all the wealth of his Browning expertise to planning our visit and arranging the various meetings with people in Asolo and roundabouts that enriched it. Our visit will always be a precious memory for which we owe Michael and Vittorio sincere thanks.

Dr Sue Brown

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY IN 2017

An Afternoon with the Brownings

20th May 2017 to be confirmed

Eton College, Berkshire

An Afternoon with the Brownings at Eton College: Afternoon Tea, Talk and Treasures from the Browning Collection with Michael Meredith

Browning Day during the St Marylebone Music Festival

25th July 2017

St Marylebone Parish Church, London NW1 5LT

1.10 pm Lunchtime Concert. *Browning Songs, Soprano and Piano*

3 pm A showing of the 1934 film *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*

6.30 pm Pre Concert Talk

7.30 pm *Robert & Elizabeth: An Extravaganza with Rosumund Shelly & Julian Forsyth*

Annual Commemoration of the Marriage of the Brownings at St Marylebone on 12th September 1846

10th September 2017

St Marylebone Parish Church, London NW1 5LT

11 am Choral Eucharist and Poetry Reading

<https://stmarylebone.org>

ABOUT THE BROWNING SOCIETY

The Browning Society was 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 journal and regular interchanges of news and information. In addition to activities and events in England, the Browning Society supports the efforts of the Friends of Casa Guidi to restore and maintain the Brownings' home in Florence, Italy.

SOCIETY WEBSITE

The Society Website has recently been refreshed and is always looking for news and information which will be of interest to members. You can visit the website at:

www.browningsociety.org

OFFICERS OF THE SOCIETY

President

The Revd Canon Stephen Evans

Vice-Presidents

Robert Browning Esq.
Norman Collings Esq.
The Revd Clive Dunnico
Dr Philip Kelley

Secretary

Jim Smith Esq.

Treasurer

Dr Nick Baker

Committee Members

Dr Simon Avery
Robert F. Browning Esq.
Norman Collings Esq.
Dr Scott Lewis
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DECEMBER 2016 WREATH-LAYING IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY'S POETS' CORNER



The Society's President with Professor Michael Slater, the Revd Clive Dunnico and Cynthia Burgess of The Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor Texas