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Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning

Martin Garrett
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General Editor’s Preface

Most biographies are ill adapted to serve as works of reference – not surprisingly so, since the biographer is likely to regard his function as the devising of a continuous and readable narrative, with excursions into interpretation and speculation, rather than a bald recital of facts. There are times, however, when anyone reading for business or pleasure needs to check a point quickly or to obtain a rapid overview of part of an author’s life or career; and at such moments turning over the pages of a biography can be a time-consuming and frustrating occupation. The present series of volumes aims at providing a means whereby the chronological facts of an author’s life and career, rather than needing to be prised out of the narrative in which they are (if they appear at all) securely embedded, can be seen at a glance. Moreover whereas biographies are often, and quite understandably, vague over matters of fact (since it makes for tediousness to be forever enumerating details of dates and places), a chronology can be precise whenever it is possible to be precise.

Thanks to the survival, sometimes in very large quantities, of letters, diaries, notebooks and other documents, as well as to thoroughly researched biographies and bibliographies, this material now exists in abundance for many major authors. In the case of, for example, Dickens, we can often ascertain what he was doing in each month and week, and almost on each day, of his prodigiously active working life; and the student of, say, David Copperfield is likely to find it fascinating as well as useful to know just when Dickens was at work on each part of that novel, what other literary enterprises he was engaged in at the same time, whom he was meeting, what places he was visiting, and what were the relevant circumstances of his personal and professional life. Such a chronology is not, of course, a
substitute for a biography; but its arrangement, in combination
with its index, makes it a much more convenient tool
for this kind of purpose; and it may be acceptable as a form
of ‘alternative’ biography, with its own distinctive advan-
tages as well as its obvious limitations.

Since information relating to an author’s early years is
usually scanty and chronologically imprecise, the opening
section of some volumes in this series groups together
the years of childhood and adolescence. Thereafter each
year, and usually each month, is dealt with separately.
Information not readily assignable to a specific month or
day is given as a general note under the relevant year or
month. The first entry for each month carries an indication
of the day of the week, so that when necessary this can be
readily calculated for other dates. Each volume also con-
tains a bibliography of the principal sources of information.
In the chronology itself, the sources of many of the more
specific items, including quotations, are identified, in order
that the reader who wishes to do so may consult the
original contexts.

Norman Page
Introduction

Much more is known about Elizabeth Barrett’s childhood and adolescence than about Robert Browning’s. He destroyed much of his own juvenilia and family correspondence while he, she, and her family carefully preserved hers. And even if more of Browning’s early writing had survived, the disproportion would remain; clearly he produced nothing to rival Barrett’s remarkable output of letters, stories, short plays or dramatic scenes, and poems published and unpublished. Much of this material remains comparatively little known and is therefore covered in some detail in the Chronology. (For a detailed catalogue of the manuscript material see Philip Kelley and Betty A. Coley’s The Browning Collections: a Reconstruction.)

As knowledge of Browning’s doings from the early 1830s steadily increases, the advantages of chronicling both lives together become clearer. Where Barrett can still say in October 1843 (to R.H. Horne) that ‘Most of my events … have past in my thoughts’, Browning is to be seen, as often later, more deeply engaged in the world: theatre-going, bothering Macready about his plays, dining with friends, travelling in Russia and Italy, attending functions. There are some interesting juxtapositions: in the autumn of 1836 Barrett and Browning work at the same time on pieces as different as The Seraphim and Strafford; in May 1836 Browning meets Wordsworth at a crowded theatrical supper and two days later Barrett meets him in the quiet of John Kenyon’s home. And then, with the aid of some hindsight, the lives of the two poets begin to converge. Their views on Tennyson’s volume of 1842 can be compared, for example. More importantly, Barrett becomes increasingly fascinated by Browning’s work, increasingly aware of their common membership – in the face of the simple directness
of utterance demanded by her correspondent Mary Mitford and the like – of ‘riddledom’.

From January 1845 mutual contact and discussion replace mere convergence, correspondence becomes even more important as a source, and a new disproportion occurs: 1845 and 1846 fill many more pages than other years. The courtship letters, especially when set in the context of other relationships and preoccupations, reveal more about the authors than any other writing. For a time we know almost as much about what Barrett and Browning are thinking – or at least want to be thought of as thinking – as we do about what Browning is doing in the 1880s. And fortunately for students of the poetry, one of the main subjects of the continually evolving dialogue is the composition and revision of _Dramatic Lyrics and Romances_, _Luria_, and _A Soul’s Tragedy_.

Once the Brownings marry and stop writing to each other, dating more often involves detective-work. But thanks especially to Barrett Browning’s many letters to her sisters, Mitford, Anna Jameson, and others, it is possible to chart their movements in Italy, France, and England fairly precisely. Sometimes the writing and publication-process of poems can also be traced in some detail. This is especially true for _Aurora Leigh_, Barrett Browning’s most important work in these years, and to a fair extent for Browning’s _Men and Women_ (although dating of the individual poems in the volume is usually less certain). At the same time visitors like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Anne Thackeray (later Ritchie) helpfully record their impressions of life at Casa Guidi and more temporary residences.

When Barrett Browning dies and Browning returns to London there is a change of emphasis; ‘RB dines with …’ is in danger of becoming a monotonous refrain in the 1860s to the 1880s. His letters and the letters, diaries, and biographies of his contemporaries show him lunching, dining, going to plays, parties, concerts, weddings, funerals, the International Inventions Exhibition, the shows at the Royal Academy and the Grosvenor Gallery. In the process, he
often sees such people – to name only a few of the better known – as Dickens, George Eliot, Tennyson, Carlyle, Arnold, Trollope, Gladstone, Ruskin, Leighton, Burne-Jones, Arthur Penrhyn Stanley (Dean of Westminster), and the great violinist Joseph Joachim. He meets Clara Schumann and Turgenev and the American Jewish rights campaigner Emma Lazarus and the Shah of Persia. In his later years he knows Henry James and Thomas Hardy. Famously, Browning often strikes people he dines with as sensible, insensitive, hearty, anything but poetic, and yet the composition continues apace: James’s ‘two Brownings’ becomes a familiar perception. But there are also, especially in the 1880s, recorded moments of greater intimacy, self-doubt, or creativity in encounters with those whom he trusts – with Edmund Gosse or Katharine de Kay Bronson for instance. Occasionally he even discusses his poems, although nowhere in the sort of detail reserved for his debate with Julia Wedgwood, at the end of the 1860s, on the morbidity or otherwise of *The Ring and the Book*. (The private Browning perhaps talked most freely about his work to his sister, whose importance in his life is made unusually noticeable by the chronological approach with its frequent ‘and SB’ additions.) More frequently we know (particularly from his correspondence with Eliza FitzGerald) what he has been reading. (EBB and RB were both such enthusiastic, determined, and rapid readers, that my coverage of this area is both extensive and at times, of necessity, rather selective.)

Continuity with the past was not completely lost in these later years. A chronological approach shows Browning much involved in editing or arranging publication of his wife’s work, showing visitors including George Eliot her books, tables and chair, trying to protect her memory from the biographers, taking an interest in the doings of her deceiver Sophie Eckley, finding his late father ‘worthy of being Ba’s father’. And, as has often been remarked and chronological coverage confirms, Browning’s involvement in, anxiety for, and love of their child, Pen, remained a
constant feature of his life in 1861–89. Browning’s attitude to the women in whom gossip said he took a more than friendly interest remains much more a matter of surmise; earlier biographers’ verdicts have needed to be modified since, in the mid-1980s, Virginia Surtees proved almost conclusively that Lady Ashburton proposed to Browning, not he to her.
List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EBB</td>
<td>Elizabeth Barrett Moulton-Barrett; Elizabeth Barrett Browning</td>
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<tr>
<td>HSB</td>
<td>Hugh Stuart Boyd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RB</td>
<td>Robert Browning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SB</td>
<td>Sarianna Browning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRM</td>
<td>Mary Russell Mitford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT</td>
<td>Alfred Tennyson</td>
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Henrietta Moulton-Barrett (later Cook) is often referred to simply as Henrietta, Arabella Moulton-Barrett as Arabel, and Robert Wiedemann Barrett Browning as Pen.

Works by EBB:

- **AL**: *Aurora Leigh*, 1857
- **CGW**: *Casa Guidi Windows*, 1851
- **EM**: *An Essay on Mind with Other Poems*, 1826
- **Glimpses**: ‘Glimpses into My Own Life and Literary Character’, 1820–1
- **LP**: *Last Poems*, 1862
- **PB**: *Prometheus Bound, Translated from the Greek of Aeschylus; and Miscellaneous Poems*, 1833
- **PBC**: *Poems Before Congress*, 1860
- **Seraphim**: *The Seraphim and Other Poems*, 1838
- **Sonnets**: *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (in *Poems*, 1850)
- **1844**: *Poems*, 1844
- **1850**: *Poems*, 1850

Works by RB:

- **Balaustion**: *Balaustion’s Adventure: Including a Transcript from Euripides*, 1871
- **A Blot**: *A Blot in the ‘Scutcheon*, 1843
- **BP**: *Bells and Pomegranates*, 1841–6

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DL
Dramatic Lyrics, 1842

DP
Dramatis Personae, 1864

DRL
Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, 1845

Druses
The Return of the Druses, 1843

Ferishtah
Ferishtah’s Fancies, 1884

Fifine
Fifine At the Fair, 1872

Hohenstiel
Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society, 1871

Idyls (I)
Dramatic Idyls, Part One, 1879

Idyls (II)
Dramatic Idyls, Part Two, 1880

King Victor
King Victor and King Charles, 1842

MW
Men and Women, 1855

Pacchiarotto
Pacchiarotto, and How He Worked in Distemper, With Other Poems, 1876

Pauline
Pauline: a Fragment of a Confession, 1833

Pippa
Pippa Passes, 1841

Red Cotton
Red Cotton Night-Cap Country; or Turf and Towers, 1873

Ring
The Ring and the Book, 1868–9

Saisiaz
La Saisiaz; The Two Poets of Croisic, 1878

Soul
A Soul’s Tragedy, in Luria; and A Soul’s Tragedy, 1846

1849
Poems, 1849

Other abbreviations:

Correspondence
The Brownings’ Correspondence, ed. Philip Kelley, Ronald Hudson and Scott Lewis, 13 vols so far, Winfield, Kansas, 1984–

Forster
Margaret Forster, Elizabeth Barrett Browning: a Biography, London, 1988

Gridley

Karlin

Markus