## Appendix V

# The Brownings in Florence

by Mary Ayrault Craig, as recorded by Helen Zimmern

Mary Ayrault Craig (*née* Brown, 1830–1900) settled in Florence with her mother and siblings soon after the death of her father, Thompson Skinner Brown (1806–55), American civil engineer. Through her friend, Isa Blagden, she met the Brownings. Her recollections of the Brownings were reported by German-born author Helen Zimmern in *The Colorado Springs Gazette*, 20 July 1890. The article, augmenting accounts given elsewhere in this volume, is reprinted with slight omissions.

Florence, July 7 [1890]. "You must have preserved many precious memories of the Brownings' residence here in Florence," I said one day to my friend Mrs. Craig, the accomplished wife of the painter, Eugene Craig, as she was talking of the past days of this city when English and American residents made it even more than now a days a centre of art and culture. "Alas! they are a little dimmed by lapse of time," she replied; but on my pressing her still further, I elicited not a few interesting particulars, touches of the kind that help to complete a picture; and believing that my readers will agree with me in thinking that about certain personages we can never hear enough, I here put these recollections, as near as possible, in the lady's own words.

Robert Browning as a poet, as a dweller among men, as a musician, a savant, even as a sculptor, for he worked in Story's studio while at Rome, it being his conviction that the education of a poet was not complete without some acquaintance with at least one of the plastic arts; none of these Robert Brownings is more interesting than Robert Browning as a husband, and it is as such than we Florentines knew him. In these days when people are questioning the advisability of marriage even for ordinary mortals, contending that for such the suppression of individuality which it entails is a serious drawback to the entering of this "holy estate," it is surely of more than common interest to bring to recollection the marriage of two poets of true and rare genius, of two human beings of strong and sharply-marked individuality. What did marriage do in their case? Eye witnesses can vouch that it destroyed the individuality of neither, that neither was hampered by the other in his intellectual growth. It was a constant joy and study to see how, while the tenderest and most powerful affection, the warmest passion and the most faithful friendship, united them, each retained a distinct individuality with which the other

never attempted to interfere. Not that the right of comment was not preserved and acted on, and somewhat sharply too at times. On many points they differed by the breadth of all the skies.

There is an example: I refer to Mrs. Browning's interest in spiritualism which Browning abhorred, as see "Sludge, the Medium." Again they were not of one mind about Napoleon III. The husband could not share the wife's profound belief in and intense admiration for, the emperor of the French. (See "Prince Hohenstiel Schwangau.") It would almost seem as if he felt called on to answer all these divergences by some poem. …

Certainly there was in that Browning household none of the intellectual "coddling" with which George Eliot was treated by her life companion, George Henry Lewes, and no doubt it was a much healthier state of things for both. If Elizabeth's poems were pulled to pieces, she was the first to read the criticisms. That they did not worry her, cannot be said, for she was sensitive and was always anxious lest any such utterances should impair the value of her work for humanity; but she would have thought it cowardly not to have made herself acquainted as far as she could with what was said of her. She used always, however, to get into a state of indignation against criticism upon her husband's work; just like any other wife in the world. There was an agreement between them, at the time of their marriage, that they would never interfere with each other in the matter of publishing anything which it seemed good to them to write, an agreement strictly adhered to.

Mrs. Browning was very kind and indulgent with regard to the work of young verse-writers, especially those of her own sex. I remember some lines of my own, which I wrote after my first reading of "Aurora Leigh" which were shown to her by her friend, Isa Blagden, as I did not know then Mrs. Browning well enough to speak to her on the subject myself. The lines were based upon a complete misapprehension of the book to which they referred, and were illogical and uncritical in the highest degree. But how good naturedly indulgent to them she was! She said they had "aspiration and swing," and that the writer ought decidedly not to neglect her gift. What things one does when one is young! The very idea of having allowed any one to show those lines to Mrs. Browning gives me a shiver, now. I wrote other poems, I thought them poems at least, about her, and after her death they were shown to Mr. Browning.

The last time I saw Robert Browning was in the Piazza Pitti. He was passing, rushing along in his usual impetuous way, with a book under his arm; but when he caught sight of me he stopped and so did I. Then he took hold of both my hands, and told me that he had read my lines and was glad to find that I had so truly loved and appreciated his wife. He said "My Wife" I remember. Then he bade me good bye, for he was leaving Florence in two days. That was the only time I saw him since her funeral and I never saw him again.

The last time I saw Mrs. Browning was just before. It was in her final illness at Casa Guidi, in the morning. The room was full of light, and her boy was sitting on the sofa beside her. A very handsome child he was at that time, with fair curls falling on his shoulders. We were both in despair at the loss of Cavour, who had died a few days before, and we spoke of nothing else. She talked of his end, and how he had expired in the arms of an Englishman (Sir James Hudson); how he kept saying over to himself "La Cosa Va," and muttered something about ships, or a ship. It was an awful blow to her, this death of Cavour. As a dear friend of hers said once, "She never could bear anybody to die," and Cavour's death meant so

much more than that of an ordinary mortal, to one that loved Italy; and no one ever loved Italy more than she did. Abstract, ideal, potential, Italy, I mean; the Italy of the poets and the poetic patriots; a land of brave and virtuous beings who should "assume among the nations of the earth that independent and individual existence" to which it was entitled by its past exploits and its sufferings, its greatness and its glories.

How we all believed in that Italy! How we all thought it would be a model and an example to the world! And even if at moments when one began to be doubtful and depressed one had only to go to Mrs. Browning, and all one's convictions and aspirations were strengthened and braced anew. But then she believed in the Emperor Louis Napoleon too. Alas! I do not wish to draw the analogy and I hope I need not. I believe in Italy's future even now, although the country is passing through a difficult moment of its development.

The first time I saw Mrs. Browning, and her husband together, was at the Baths of Lucca in September, 1857. I went to call on Miss Blagden who was living at the Bagni alla Villa. As it happened, Owen Meredith as he was then called in literature was living, indeed had not long before been supposed to be dying, at the same place, tended faithfully by the kind Isa who had been the dearest friend of his lost sister. On the day on which I made my visit, Owen Meredith came down stairs for the first time, looking very pale and weak and ethereal. He talked in a most charmingly philosophic strain of all things and much besides, and while he talked, Browning came in ruddy, happy "full of health, and strong and free," as the hymns have it, but not a bit overpowering. Sometimes when a big healthy man comes into the room with an invalid, he seems to fill it all up, and to take all the oxygen for himself; but Browning was not like that. He seemed to impart, not to absorb, life and strength. Then, soon after, there entered a tiny being, bearing a basket of flowers, a creature with fairy hands and feet, and a voice sweeter than any sound I ever had heard before. "Dear Ba, how good of you to come,["] said Isa, and then I knew it was Elizabeth Browning that I saw. For Ba is the "name, the little name uncadenced to the ear," of which the poem sings, the "pet name" which the woman in the Portuguese sonnet bids her lover call her by.

Owen Meredith was one of the pall bearers at Mrs. Browning's funeral, Adolphus Trollope was another, and Browning was accompanied by the father [Henry Cottrell] of the child called "Lily," in "A Child's Grave at Florence." Peni, as the boy Browning was always called in his childhood, and is called by his intimates to this day, motherless little Peni clung to Miss Blagden's arm. I could see in the background many poor people, and tradesmen, Italians who wept, not for the poet whom they knew not, but for the kind and charitable woman who had helped and sympathized with them for so many years. I do not think any foreign funeral was ever so largely attended, and at that time it was most unusual for any Roman Catholic to attend any kind of religious service other than their own. It was evident that these people were really attached to Mrs. Browning and grateful for her charity and kindness to them. "Tanta buona, tanta buona" was heard on every side. I saw Peni for the first time without his curls that day at his mother's funeral. She could not bear to have them cut off, while she lived. Yet he was getting too big a boy to wear them. Who knows but what they had been cut off to be laid in the coffin beside her.

As for the poet he appeared suddenly to have grown grey and old and bent. It seemed as if he could not stand; he literally clung to his companion's arm and once

he flung himself forward almost as if he would have thrown himself into the grave. While driving to the cemetery that companion told me Mr. Browning never shed a tear; but once he screamed in a wild way as if he did not know what he was doing. But I do not know if I have a right to repeat this. It seem[s] too sacred some how. I remember distinctly that there was an exception made in Mrs. Browning's favor with regard to the hard and fast rule about leaving a corpse over night in the house. She was not buried for three days and was borne to the cemetery in a hearse, in the afternoon with carriages following like an English funeral, instead of after dark or very early in the morning as the Italian custom is. There was a large wreath of bays as well as a wreath of flowers on the top of the coffin. The bay wreath was placed in the grave, the garland was left lying on the top.

Mrs. Browning died, as she had lived, in Casa Guidi, that strange old house, with the sharp pointed corner, at the top of Via Maggio, where she wrote the poem called by its name, and others besides, and where grateful Florence has placed above the door a graceful inscription to her memory. It is a spot all foreign visitors of English tongue visit as a shrine, and the Florentine coachmen taking the tourists around, stop of their own accord at Casa Guidi porch and point to the tablet. Mrs. Browning's monument in the Protestant cemetery has been greatly criticized, and the execution is very faulty, but the design for it which I saw, was beautiful. It was Sir Frederick [sic] Leighton who drew it. Pilgrims from other lands, chiefly women, haunt the spot. One western enthusiast begged me to accompany her to a shop, where I interpreted her wish to purchase a marble vase, which she filled with flowers and placed upon the platform underneath the tomb. The custody objected, saying that he could not be responsible for its safety. Indeed it was there but a very little while. …

Somehow Browning seems nearer now he is dead, than when he was alive. Alive and absent, I mean. When he was here, he was often to be seen flying along with that swift step of his, and looking out upon all things with his bright observant eyes. I remember at a Shakespeare lecture given by Montgomery Stuart, that gentleman reading "The Italian in England", after the lecture was finished. I was not aware that the author was present, as he was sitting in the deep embrasure of a window; but his nervous motions, which began as soon as Mr. Stuart commenced to read his poem (Mr. Stuart read most beautifully, by the way), soon betrayed his whereabout. He used to stay sometimes after these lectures were over and talk. It seemed as if he knew everything. Not a question could one ask that he could not answer, and he was most good natured about answering. I was told that at this time, he was very impatient of contradiction; personally I can say nothing on the subject for I would as soon have contradicted Jove the Thunderer; but some people did disagree with him and came to grief. He entirely outgrew this weakness. I never saw a trace of it.

I once heard him telling in a most drolly grave fashion, a story of a man who had said to him that it was a positive disgrace that "We English in Florence," he said "We English," knew so little of Dante, and that "We" ought to find some clever Italian to tell "us" something about him. Professor Bianciardi, afterwards well known for his connection with the old Catholic movement, was the person chosen to instruct the Florentine English and Americans on this theme. Mr. Browning probably, at that time, knew as much about Dante as any man living, but no one would have guessed it, to hear him tell that story. The lectures took place and I attended them, and most interesting and instructive they were. But though

Mr. Browning subscribed to them, he did not come very often, indeed I don't think I ever saw him at them at all.

Browning's memory was marvellous. He could always tell exactly the place of any quotation or fragment of a quotation which was referred to him. He was impatient, too, of misquotation, as all accurate people are. I never heard him on the subject of the misquotation of his own works. I am sure if he would have spoken there would have been plenty for him to say. In those days, however, he was neither so well known nor so often referred to as he has been since. His wife's poems were much more in people's mouths than his.

He loved Siena greatly, especially her art and her history. He was very amusing about the old world attitude of Siena towards Florence, and the funny story of the Sienese mayor, who in '48 was afraid to come to Florence and walk in the procession described in Casa Guidi windows "because of that great victory of ours over the Florentines, you know." He feared lest the popular jealously of the Florentines might take a distinctly hostile form.

Browning was a very restless personage, always getting up and sitting down again and walking about the room in marked contrast to his wife's tranquil ways; tranquillity far removed from languor however. I wish very much I could have seen Browning once more before his death, he must have changed so greatly from what he was at the time he lived in Florence. The perpetual reference of all the actions of his life to a standard based as to their feasibility upon his wife's health, from day to day made him quite a different being from the London Robert Browning of later years. But to have known him and to have known her, in that early time, was to see an experiment in marriage, triumphant and conclusive.

Such is a resume of the conversation which I had with Mrs. Craig.

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