

A History of *The Complete Works of Robert Browning* Series, 1969–2012

By Allan C. Dooley, Executive Editor

The Complete Works of Robert Browning, known informally as “the Ohio Browning” or more accurately as “the Ohio/Baylor Browning,” was conceived by Roma King and the director of the Ohio University Press at the 1967 meeting of the Modern Language Association. Their original intention was to produce a scholarly edition of *The Ring and the Book*, but in an hour of exuberance they committed themselves to a complete edition. Professor King immediately began to recruit eminent Browning scholars to the project, the experts whose names grace our early volumes. The early roster read like the masthead of a fine scholarly journal: Park Honan, Gordon Pitts, Morse Peckham, Donald Smalley, Raymond Fitch. The shared distinction of that adventurous band of editors was that they were not inclined to follow the prevailing school of scholarly editing. Their conviction was that Browning’s works, produced and tended by the poet over nearly six decades, required a different set of editorial principles. Their gifts were their astounding erudition, their generosity, and their lightness of touch. Their hope was to produce thirteen volumes, issuing one each year and completing the project well before the centenary of Browning’s death.

Volume 1 appeared in 1969. Notice was immediately taken of the boldly-argued Preface, which deliberately flew in the face of the principles and methods of established Anglo-American textual theory and practice. To 21st century eyes, that Preface, with its emphasis on the creative process and the instability of texts, now seems prophetic. It had been largely written by Morse Peckham, who had told several scholars that his intention was to use the Browning edition to attack and bring down the school of textual criticism led by Greg, McKerrow, and Bowers. *Volume 2* was issued on schedule in 1970, by which time several leading journals had published positive initial reviews. The Preface, which had become highly controversial, was already being reconsidered. When *Volume 3* came out in 1971, its jacket copy announced a new Preface. This thorough revision was done by King and Honan. While unchanged in its principles, it is less tendentious and more persuasive, offering examples and evidence to clarify the edition’s aims and methods. The new Preface cited and incorporated the crucial research of Michael Hancher in recognizing the significance of Browning’s own final revisions to his text.

The revised Preface went a good distance toward making peace with the establishment, but a storm was brewing. In 1972, John Pettigrew published an aggressive review, pointing out misprints, errors of fact, and unacknowledged emendations in the first two volumes, many of them in Peckham’s contributions. Peckham’s reaction to the review, the alterations to his Preface, and the presence of errors in his work was defiant. And when King decided to enlist the services of a professional copy editor to improve accuracy, Peckham refused to submit his work to the process. He demanded complete control over every aspect of his contributions, and when King insisted that every contributor’s copy would be circulated to the editorial board for suggestions and corrections, Peckham resigned from the project. *Volume 4* was delayed until 1973, still listing Peckham as a member of the Editorial Board. The edition had its opponents, some (particularly in Great Britain) calling for the end of the project, but Ohio University and its press never wavered in its support. Though no volumes would be published for seven years, the

work of the contributing editors went on. There was speculation that we had ceased or suspended the project, in response to the Pettigrew attack, but the edition's survival was assured when Ohio University and Baylor University became partners in its publication.

The Armstrong Browning Library at Baylor was and is one of the preeminent collections of Browning materials in the world, and the *Complete Works* had relied on its holdings from the outset. The ties between the institutions were strong and personal: Roma King had studied at Baylor with Dr. A. J. Armstrong himself; Jack W. Herring, the director at Armstrong Library, had earned his Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania, as had several of the project's early editors. In 1976, King and Herring negotiated a contract in which Ohio University Press and Baylor would publish the *Complete Works* jointly. Beginning with the next volume, the names of the universities would appear together on the spines and title pages, their priority alternating with each volume. Jack Herring was appointed to the Editorial Board and was given major administrative responsibilities; Ohio University Press was given a subvention by Baylor to guarantee publication of future volumes.

By 1977, our fifth volume was being assembled, but its publication was delayed by the withdrawal of a contributing editor; Jack Herring took over that assignment, but two more years would elapse before a manuscript of the volume could be assembled. Finally appearing in 1981, its Preface revised again to incorporate recent scholarship, *Volume 5* represented a regeneration of the Ohio/Baylor Browning project, which was now expected to require fourteen volumes. Emphatically positive reviews appeared in important Victorian journals, and our latest publication was greeted with praise for its accuracy and thoroughness. To keep momentum up, the Board decided to forego sequential publication and issue volumes as they were completed by the contributors. This allowed for the triumphant release of Browning's masterpiece, *The Ring and the Book*, in *Volumes 7, 8, and 9* in the 1980s. The centenary of Browning's death passed without a publication, but two important editorial conferences were held at Kent State University, during which the Board and contributing editors vowed to finish their task in honor of Roma King and Park Honan, our two surviving senior colleagues. *Volume 13* followed in 1995, the long-delayed *Volume 6* in 1996, *Volume 16* in 1998, and *Volume 10* in 1999. In 1990, Roma King asked for relief from his responsibilities, and a grateful Board divided his work into two positions: Jack Herring became the project's General Editor and Allan Dooley its Executive Editor. Upon reexamination, the complete edition was now seen to require seventeen volumes. Though rival editions had been started, the Ohio/Baylor Browning had become a landmark by persisting in putting out one authoritative volume after another. Scholars and critics cited our texts; the bibliography of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* listed us as the standard edition of Browning.

In 1999, after providing the edition with a steady hand and Baylor's support, Jack Herring retired as Director of the Armstrong Library and stepped down as General Editor. On his recommendation, the Board appointed Allan Dooley as General Editor. As a new century arrived, decades beyond what the founding editors would have thought plausible, there were five volumes to finish. It became possible to imagine completing the project, and the remaining contributors worked steadily toward the goal. What remained was some of Browning's most challenging poetry, filled with his lifetime's accumulated learning and artistic skill. 2001 saw the publication of *Volume 12*, followed by *Volumes 14 and 15* in 2003 and 2007. The problematic

and often-reassigned eleventh volume finally appeared in 2008, and preparations for the concluding book began. Sadly, some of our colleagues had fallen: Jack Herring in 1999, Paul Turner in 2005, Susan Dooley in 2008, and Roma King in 2009.

With the appearance of *Volume 17* in 2011/2012, *The Complete Works of Robert Browning* is completed and the promise of its founders fulfilled. Literary studies eventually caught up with the edition's philosophical perspective: theoreticians dissolved the authority out of authorship; the very identity of the creative artist came to be seen as fluid, not fixed; variations and apparent errors in texts became occasions not for correction or emendation, but for deep interpretation. The Ohio/Baylor Browning edition provides a truly useful balance between an author's attempt to say exactly what he wished to say (the poem above the line on the page) and the process by which his words reached that state (the variant readings below the line). It is, as one reviewer said, a sort of analytical kit by which a reader can see whichever version of poem and poet she wants to examine.

It has taken more than four decades, and the efforts of nineteen contributors, to complete this edition, gathering a wealth of poetry, history, and scholarship in one place. There is arguably less need now to put Browning all in one place, for in the digital age the world of reading has become virtually all one place. Yet the well-bound, paper-and-ink book has its uses, and its pleasures. Readers—expert and casual alike—will still find it much easier to browse freely in a set of books than in a database. Nothing can equal the power of digitized manipulation when it comes to making or tracing a suspected connection. But for serendipitous discovery, for intuiting an author's mind and its movements, a complete, annotated edition with a consistent organizational plan has advantages. Browning composed and arranged his books carefully and meaningfully; paging through *Men and Women* or *Jocoseria* reveals the subtlety of the poet's associations, within the collection and beyond it. In *Asolando*, for example, "Development" looks back from Browning's 75th year to his childhood, recalling how his father guided his understanding of Homer. Pursuing the poem's substance and rhetoric, the Editorial Notes connect "Development" to six other poems, all readily available to a reader with *The Complete Works* at hand. In turn, the notes to two of those poems will carry the reader into Victorian controversies about the authority of intellectual tradition. Following one book to another is still at the very heart of reading.

The Complete Works of Robert Browning, Volume XVII

Edited by Ashby Bland Crowder and Allan C. Dooley

509 pages, 6 × 9.

ISBN 978-0-8214-1981-6, Hardcover, \$79.95

Published winter 2012 by Ohio University Press and Baylor University

1969–2012
**The Complete Works
of Robert Browning**

All seventeen volumes
available.

To order books: Ohio University Press, University of Chicago Distribution Center, 11030 South Langley Ave., Chicago, IL 60628. Call: 773-702-7000. FAX: 773-702-7212. **In the U.K. and Europe:** contact Eurospan Group, c/o Turpin Distribution, Pegasus Drive, Stratton Business Park, Biddleswade, Bedfordshire SG18 8TQ, UK; Tel: +44 (0) 1767 604972, Fax: +44 (0) 1767 601640; Email: Orders and customer service: eurospan@turpin-distribution.com; All other information: info@eurospan.co.uk or www.eurospangroup.com/bookstore.