

ROBERT BROWNING

ROBERT BROWNING, one of the greatest English poets of the nineteenth century, and the most uncompromising of them all, was born in Southampton Street, Camberwell, an extensive parish in South London, on May 7th, 1812. Although this event was of comparatively recent date, it is believed that the house has disappeared from human ken. Browning's father, after whom he was named, was a man of considerable culture and taste. Engaged in one of the departments of the Bank of England, he was enabled to give free play in private life to his love of letters, scholarship and art. The poet's mother was the daughter of William Wiedemann, a German who carried on a modest shipowning business in Dundee and had taken unto himself a Scottish wife.

Browning was an apt and precocious child, and a dame who conducted a local infant-school, to which he was sent for a while, is credited with having detected the signs of his budding genius. The spell which music laid upon him in his tenderest years never lost its influence, and his veneration for poetry and painting was also innate. His education did not follow conventional lines, if we except the brief period during which he attended the school kept by the Rev. Thomas Ready, of Peckham. Stimulated by the poems of Shelley and Keats, which he first read in his fourteenth year, he showed plainly his intense sympathy with creative work, and his parents determined to educate him at home under a tutor. If he missed the advantage of a public school and University training, he was far from being reared as a milksop, for he was regularly taught riding, boxing and fencing, in all of which he became proficient, and among his other accomplishments were dancing, singing and music. His father departed from the plan of study so far as to allow him to attend for one session (1829-30) Professor George Long's Greek Class at University College, London.

When the question of a career grew urgent, Browning learned that his sister, Sarianna—the only other child of his parents—would be provided for and that no responsibility rested upon him in respect of her future. Thereupon he boldly chose the vocation of poet. Happily he was assured of a competence, and his father wisely decided to let the