

## Christopher A. Stray

Scott Lewis, *Boundless Life: A Biography of Andrew Joseph Armstrong*.  
Waco: Armstrong Browning Library, 2014. xviii + 412 pp. + 16 ill.  
\$24.95.

**T**HIS IS THE BIOGRAPHY OF A MAN WHO BUILT FIRST A collection, then a building to house it. Both collection and building are remarkable, if not unique. A. J. Armstrong, born in 1873 in Louisville, Kentucky, early showed himself to be a precocious scholar, a hero-worshipper, and an obsessive collector. The determined and relentless way in which he later gathered Browningiana was prefigured in his boyhood preoccupation with collecting autographs. He sent requests for the autographs of famous people in black-edged mourning envelopes, calculating that they would not be opened by secretaries but passed directly to the recipients. Armstrong himself remembered that “it worked like a charm” (14). Determined to become a professor, he was obliged by poverty to become a bank clerk, and it was not until 1899, at the age of twenty-six, that he enrolled at Wabash College, a small liberal arts college in Indiana, where he was graduated in 1902. His teaching career began with short-term posts in small schools, until in 1904 he was appointed head of English and History at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington. It was during his three years there that he first encountered Browning: a course was offered, and he had to teach it. In 1905 he started building up a “Browning library,” presumably to support his teaching. In 1908 Armstrong gained a PhD from the University of Pennsylvania, on “Operatic performances in England before Handel,” and moved to the English department at Baylor, where he was to spend the rest of his life; he retired as chair of the department in 1952 and died two years later.

Armstrong was not only a workaholic who usually put in 14–18 hours a day; he operated on several fronts. He brought poets, singers, and novelists from far and wide to perform to students; encouraged student drama; led educational tours of Europe, including “Browning pilgrimages”; and traveled widely, with and without his wife, to destinations that included India and Africa. But the center of his activities during his long career at Baylor was the collecting of Browningiana. An important milestone came in the wake of the Browning sale at Sotheby’s in London in May 1913 after the death of the Browning’s son Pen (whom Armstrong had met in Italy). Armstrong managed to obtain a copy of the auctioneers’ marked catalogue showing details of successful bidders, and he set to work in his usual vigorous way to track them down and attempt to buy their purchases from them. In his concern for complete understanding, however, he looked not only for the Brownings’ works, but also for locks of hair, rings, furniture, domestic utensils—anything that was connected with their lives. His collection, given to the university by 1918, was housed in an alcove in a reading room in the university library from 1919; then in a separate room from 1923; and finally after World War II in the Browning Library, dedicated in 1951 after a long and difficult funding campaign during which costs continually soared beyond the available funds. This is a very American story in which a small group of generous donors gave and gave again. Any collector will enjoy reading of Armstrong’s successes and groan at his disappointments; the high point in book-collecting perhaps occurred in 1946, when he finally managed to secure a copy of Browning’s *Pauline* (the poet’s first published work, and notably rare) when Yale acquired a second copy. This was a double triumph: first Yale agreed to sell direct, and then one of Armstrong’s backers provided the money needed.

Armstrong’s greatest achievement, however, is the institution that he created and that publishes Lewis’s biography of him: the Armstrong Browning Library. Armstrong himself, with a typical mixture of creativeness and obsession, selected the models for its architecture and internal decoration. The Arab Hall in Lord Leighton’s London home (“the most beautiful room in the world,” in Armstrong’s opinion), the Taj Mahal,

the Pierpont Morgan Library, and other buildings all provided exemplars to be copied or adapted. Sixty-two stained-glass windows depicted scenes from Browning's works and other subjects associated with Browning and his wife. The Library was planned not just as the repository of the Brownings' works, but as a shrine of their cult. Though sometimes sneered at as such, it is widely admired as a building of remarkable beauty. (A recent recital by the singer K. T. Sullivan, wife of a Browning enthusiast, apparently has shown that it has very fine acoustics; something that would have pleased Armstrong, given his habit of importing famous singers to Baylor.) It is therefore surprising that Lewis's book has no images of the building, except for a fine but uncaptioned shot of the aged Armstrong sitting next to one of the "cathedral windows" in the library's McLean Foyer of Meditation. This, alas, is on the book's jacket, so will disappear in most library copies. All we have in the extensive illustration section (36 images, some in color) are photographs of Armstrong with a column and with the inscribed cornerstone.<sup>1</sup> The exemplars that Armstrong explored included other "shrines," including the Browning Room at Wellesley College. More generally, one might think of larger libraries conceived as shrines to learning, like the massive and extensively decorated Sterling Memorial Library at Yale.<sup>2</sup> In a way, such buildings hark back to the earlier tradition of cabinets of curiosities, a connection that is currently being explored in relation to the Browning Library by Derham Groves of Melbourne University. Many libraries also functioned as museums, with instruments, skulls and other body parts scattered through their stacks, until the growth of museums and narrower conceptions of the library led to divestment.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Images of the Library can be found in two earlier publications: [Jack W. Herring], *The Armstrong Browning Library* (ca. 1969), and Avery T. Sharp and Larry E. Fink, *The Armstrong Browning Library* (2007), both published by the Library.

<sup>2</sup> Yale of course also has the Lewis Walpole Library, which like the Armstrong Browning Library has an extensive collection of furniture and memorabilia. Devotees of Carlyle will not need to be reminded of the Carlyle house in Chelsea, London. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was fond of visiting there, declaring herself to be a "Carlyle adorer."

<sup>3</sup> See D. McKitterick, *The Making of the Wren Library* (Cambridge, 1995),

Lewis's account offers a detailed and reliable narrative of Armstrong's life and work. It is the story of a man gripped by a commitment shared with many others in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the later 1860s, as Browning re-emerged from obscurity with *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69), the first book on his poetry was brought out by J. T. Nettleship (1868), and the fading of Anglican faith prompted Victorians to look for alternative sources of ethical value. Browning Societies began to be founded, the first at Cornell University in 1869. The London society, founded in 1881, was the best-known of these organizations. Its leading light, the flamboyant scholar-adventurer Frederick Furnivall, was something of an embarrassment to Robert Browning. The Romantics had seen themselves as unacknowledged legislators of mankind; Browning, by contrast, was taken aback by the enthusiastic acknowledgment he received from the London society, the difficulty being exacerbated by Furnivall's boisterous personality and lack of tact.<sup>4</sup> From these beginnings, which have attracted both admiration and scepticism, grew institutions such as the Armstrong Browning Library and the continuing edition of the Brownings' correspondence (now up to volume 21 and 1855), which should surely command nothing but admiration. In his biography, Scott Lewis has summarized a large amount of unpublished material (as one might expect from his relentless pursuit of Browningiana, Armstrong's papers include thousands of letters). A book of this kind is in danger of becoming a hagiography, but Lewis is ready, when it seems appropriate, to comment critically on his subject; a man who was often difficult to deal with, but whose achievements deserve our respect.

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95–107. Examples that McKitterick provides include the ossified heart of a woman who jilted a fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge (the location of the Wren Library).

<sup>4</sup> W. S. Peterson, *Interrogating the Oracle; A History of the London Browning Society* (1969).