

**LETTERS
ABOUT SHELLEY**

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Letters about Shelley by R. S. Garnett

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R. S. GARNETT

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LETTERS ABOUT SHELLEY

INTERCHANGED BY THREE
FRIENDS—EDWARD DOWDEN
RICHARD GARNETT AND
WM. MICHAEL ROSSETTI

EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY
R. S. GARNETT



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The thanks of the Editor are due to his wife for her assistance in putting this volume together, and to Mr P. J. Dobell for lending, in aid of the notes appended to the Letters, material collected by his father, the late Bertram Dobell

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INTRODUCTION

THIS long series of letters—the first is dated 1869 and the last 1906—between three distinguished men of letters is brought together by the co-operation of Mr W. M. Rossetti, Mrs Dowden, and the Editor, the eldest son of the third correspondent. The main object of Wm. Michael Rossetti, Edward Dowden, and Richard Garnett was the interchange of information and ideas respecting the poet Shelley. It is a delightful picture that their letters give of these busy men finding rest and refreshment in work as arduous as that by which they gained their bread, and chatting with each other over subjects that when unilluminated by the glow of enthusiasm might have become arid as dust. The brotherhood of letters and scholarship has rarely been more pleasantly shown.

We see Mr Rossetti taking up his pen to announce to Garnett the "turning up of a great Shelley curiosity for which the Shelley family and the British Museum ought to outbid one another"; we see him threatening to prove "stolid and obstinate respecting my biographic point of view in my Memoir of Shelley"; reporting a conversation of 4½ hours with Trelawny "when he handed me the original MSS. of Shelley's poems to Mrs Williams with scraps of messages thereon and exhibited a Shelleyan enthusiasm which was most refreshing." Again he sends a mysteriously important letter from Swinburne; and discovers a whole mine of Shelley letters 1811-12 in the possession of Mr

Slack addressed to "the Brown Demon." He writes, "You have done me a world of good—not measurable by the mere number of corrections, but by the nearer total approach to accuracy which I have striven hard for and delight to get less endlessly distant from. I must, now that the Shelley job is approaching its close, again express my great obligation to you, and strong sense of the generous readiness with which you have imparted matter, precious to yourself, to one whom the circumstances might have led you—or another man in your place—to regard as a rival and interloper." We find him exploding with wrath when he discovers that "some beast" has printed "Grant" for "Garnett" in the printed-off sheet of his Shelley Memoir, and alluding to other "pestiferous misprints after all"; receiving a call from Browning of two hours anent Shelley's alleged "insanity" on his return from his first continental trip with Harriet; introducing "a Whitman enthusiast Edward Dowden" and "a Mr J. D. Campbell¹ of the Mauritius," announcing a SHELLEYAN DISCOVERY in the Record Office—but Rossetti's matter for his letters and enthusiasm were alike inexhaustible.

We see Professor Dowden, the man of many enthusiasms, working in his "Roman Villa," looking out on the apple and elm trees of his garden and surrounded by his beloved books. He writes of his "Life of Shelley" to Garnett, "Other men laboured and ye have entered into their labour"—it is not without some pain as well as some happiness that one who has not been the sower becomes the reaper. You who sowed ought also to bring home the sheaves. If I try to bring them, it will never be in forgetfulness of your labours or of your generous surrender." And of "a singular accident. I picked up on a perambulating book-cart in Dublin for 2d. Shelley's presentation copy of 'Refutation of Deism' to Mary

¹ Mr J. Dykes Campbell, afterwards widely known as chief authority on Coleridge.

Shelley. It is bound in calf, with 'Mary' on the cover. No inscription, but the Errata (as given in printed list) all carefully written in what I doubt not is Shelley's handwriting." And again, "I have lately got for a few shillings a copy of Hogg's 'Alexy Haimatoff.' My boy was zealous enough to telegraph for me after nightfall to the bookseller's in whose catalogue I saw the book." And yet again, "Did I tell you that I picked up a perfect copy of Willobie's 'Avisa,' 1635? B.M. copy, supposed to be the only perfect one." But we must refrain from making any further extracts. Garnett's letters were almost invariably written in reply to Rossetti's and Dowden's, and are packed with information which he rarely appears to have had to look up; but he very seldom announces a discovery, save indeed the important one of "Victor and Cazire," and never a lucky find on a bookstall. His letters were often written in a moment snatched from the crowds besieging him in the Reading Room, but one would hardly guess that such was the case.

It can scarcely be necessary to enlarge on the Correspondents' claims to be heard on the subject of Shelley; but time quickly passes, and a few biographical notes may be of interest. To begin with the eldest of the three friends, William Michael Rossetti is happily still among us. He was born in London in 1829. His father, Gabriele Rossetti, was an eminent Italian poet and man of letters, who had taken refuge in England from political persecution, and supported himself in exile by teaching languages. His mother's maiden name was Frances Mary Lavinia Polidori, and she was sister of the Dr Polidori who was Lord Byron's physician and travelling companion. On the failure of the father's eyesight and consequent retirement from work, the family circumstances were greatly reduced, and in 1845, when he was only fifteen, William became a clerk in the Inland Revenue Office, where his working life was spent mainly in the position of Assistant Secretary. At a very

early age he was also writing regularly for the "Spectator" as its art critic. Coming of a family of poets and artists, his own love of poetry and art was the guiding spirit of his career, and perhaps no name of his day has been more constantly before the public as a critic and man of letters. He is no doubt best known as recorder and biographer of his illustrious brother and sister; but had Christina Rossetti never published a poem, or the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood never stirred the waters of English art, the list of his works would still have been a full one. When Moxon, towards 1869, projected a new edition of Shelley, he could think of no one fitter than Rossetti to edit it and write the prefatory memoir, Rossetti having proved himself a competent authority by the publication in "Notes and Queries" of various notes and emendations to Shelley's works. Later on Rossetti became chairman of the Shelley Society. He married, in 1874, Miss Lucy Madox-Brown, elder daughter of the artist, who died in 1894; and retired from Government service in the same year.

Richard Garnett was born in 1835 at Lichfield, where his father, born 1789, was then Priest Vicar in the Cathedral. This father, also a Richard Garnett, who had held a preferment in Lancashire previously, was an eminent philologist. Attention being called to his learning by Robert Southey, he was offered an appointment as Assistant Keeper of Printed Books in the British Museum. Consequent on this the family settled in London. The elder Garnett died in 1850, but his friend, Sir Anthony Panizzi, then Principal Librarian of the British Museum, kept his eldest son in view, and, when only sixteen, procured him an appointment in the national library, where the work of his life had its setting. Richard Garnett, junior, though not such a profound scholar as his father, far surpassed him in the breadth of his general information. His aptitude for languages was very great; there were few in Europe with which he