

## Elizabeth Barrett-Browning (6 March 1806 – 29 June 1861) Sidmouth



Elizabeth Barrett Browning was one of the most prominent poets of the Victorian era. She was best known for her love poems, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and *Aurora Leigh*, and her marriage to fellow poet Robert Browning.

Members of the Barrett family had lived for centuries in Jamaica and their wealth relied on slave labour. The family wished to hand down their name as well as their wealth, stipulating that Barrett should be held as a surname. Elizabeth was an intensely studious, precocious child. She writes that at six she was reading novels and at eight she was studying Greek. At about 15 she began to battle with a lifelong illness, which the medical science of the time was unable to diagnose. She was prescribed opiates for the pain, then morphine, becoming dependent on them for much of her adulthood. Their use from an early age would have contributed to her frail health.

When she was 26, Elizabeth moved with her family from Worcestershire to Sidmouth where they lived at Cedar Lawn between 1832 and 1836. During 1837–8 the poet was struck with illness again, with symptoms today suggesting Tuberculosis. In 1838, at her physician's insistence, the family moved from London to Torquay but returned to Wimpole Street in 1841.

At Wimpole Street Barrett Browning spent most of her time in her upstairs room, and her health began to recover, though she saw few people other than her immediate family. She received comfort from her spaniel named "Flush", which had been a gift from Mary Mitford. Between 1841–4 Barrett Browning was prolific in poetry, translation and prose. The poem *The Cry of the Children*, published in 1842, condemned child labour and helped bring about child labour reforms. She opposed slavery and published two poems highlighting the barbarity of slavers and her support for the abolitionist cause.

Her 1844 volume *Poems* made her one of the most popular writers in the country at the time and inspired Robert Browning to write to her. They eventually met on 20 May 1845, in her rooms, and so began one of the most famous courtships in literature. Elizabeth had produced a large amount of work and had been writing long before Browning had. However, he had a great influence on her writing, as did she on his. Some critics, however, point to him as an undermining influence. Their courtship and marriage were carried out secretly as she and her siblings were convinced their father would disapprove. Browning imitated his hero Shelley by spiriting his wife off to Italy, in September 1846, which became her home almost continuously until her death. Mr. Barrett disinherited Elizabeth, as he did each of his children who married. As Elizabeth had some money of her own, the couple were reasonably comfortable in Italy, and their relationship together was harmonious. Elizabeth grew stronger and in 1849, at the age of 43, between four miscarriages, she gave birth to a son, Robert Wiedemann Barrett Browning, whom they called Pen. At the death of an old friend, G.B. Hunter, and then of her father, her health faded again. She died on 29 June 1861 in her husband's arms.

