

DID SIR THOMAS BROWNE WRITE "FRAGMENT ON MUMMIES"?

BY SAMUEL SWETT GREEN.

Listen to an extract from the "Fragment":

"Of their living habitations they made little account, conceiving of them but as *hospitia*, or inns, while they adorned the sepulchres of the dead, and planting thereon lasting bases, defied the crumbling touches of time, and the misty vaporousness of oblivion. Yet all were but Babel vanities. Time sadly overcometh all things, and is now dominant, and sitteth upon a Sphinx, and looketh unto Memphis and old Thebes, while his sister Oblivion reclineth semisomnous on a pyramid, gloriously triumphing, making puzzles of Titanian erections, and turning old glories into dreams. History sinketh beneath her cloud. The traveller as he paceth through those deserts asketh of her, Who builded them? and she mumbleth something, but what it is he heareth not."

Emerson, as is well known, after quoting this extract, in his essay "Poetry and Imagination," writes: "It would not be easy to refuse to Sir Thomas Browne's 'Fragment on Mummies' the claim of poetry." Every man of taste echoes Emerson's estimate. But did Sir Thomas Browne write these eloquent and impressive lines?

Senator Hoar called my attention, a few months ago, to the following passage in the sketch of Sir Thomas Browne, by A. H. Bullen, in the great English work, Dictionary of National Biography:

"The 'Fragment on Mummies' which Wilkin received without suspicion and printed in the fourth volume of Browne's works (1835), was written by James Crossley (1800-1883)." Mr. Crossley was born in Halifax, England,

but "when he left school," according to the writer of the sketch of his life in the aforementioned Dictionary of National Biography, "in 1816 went to Manchester, and in the following year was articled to Thomas Ainsworth, solicitor, father of the novelist, W. Harrison Ainsworth, whose literary mentor he became. . . . In 1823 Crossley was admitted a partner with Mr. Ainsworth and he continued in practice until 1860." Mr. Crossley lived in Manchester until he died, and was a very important factor in the literary life of that place. He was especially interested in the writings of Sir Thomas Browne. He wrote many articles for Blackwood's Magazine and the Retrospective Review. Several of these, including his first contribution to the former periodical, written before he was out of his teens, were on Sir Thomas Browne and his works.

"In 1822," writes his biographer, "he edited a small duodecimo volume of 'Tracts by Sir Thomas Browne, Knight, M. D.,' of which five hundred copies were printed. He intended to bring out a complete edition of Browne's works, but was forestalled by Mr. Simon Wilkin. When Crossley heard of that admirable editor's projected work, he offered some valuable suggestions. One of the pieces which he sent as being copied from a manuscript in the British Museum was, however, undoubtedly written by Crossley himself. This was the clever 'Fragment on Mummies,' which Wilkin printed in good faith (Browne, *Works*, 1835, IV. 273)."

Noticing that the sketch of Mr. Crossley was written by an old acquaintance of mine, Mr. Charles W. Sutton, of Manchester, England, I wrote to him to ask for the evidence on which his statement regarding the authorship of the "Fragment" rested. He answered kindly and fully, and it is for the purpose of enabling you to share the information which he has given me that I have written this little paper.

I append copies of Mr. Sutton's letter to me and the extracts which he has courteously sent to me. His letter and the type-written extracts received from him I shall place in the Free Public Library, Worcester.

I will only remark in the way of comment that it is hard to understand how Mr. Crossley, if he wrote the magnificent passage read and the rest of the "Fragment," could refrain from claiming their authorship.

I also add to the paper a copy of a letter from the eminent critic, our associate, Sir Leslie Stephen. The letter was written to our deceased associate, John Bellows, and sent by him to Mr. Hoar. Mr. Stephen was editor of the Dictionary of National Biography when the volumes containing the sketches of Browne and Crossley were contributed to it, and believes the "Fragment" to have been a forgery.

Free Reference Library, King St., Manchester,

Nov. 1st, 1902.

My Dear Mr. GREEN:

With reference to the authorship of the Fragment on Mummies you will be interested in the enclosed extracts. I think the evidence of Dr. Crompton is good enough. I knew the Doctor very well, as I did Mr. Crossley, and he was a shrewd man, not likely to make a mistake on such a matter. The fact that the Fragment disappeared from the later edition (Bohn's) of Wilkin's Browne shows that Wilkin had sufficient reasons to leave it out, or at least was not satisfied as to its genuineness.

I am sorry you could not get to Manchester when you were in England. It would have been pleasant to have again shaken you by the hand. Mr. W. E. A. Axon, of this city, asks me to remember him to you, though he fears he may have past from your memory. With kind regards,

Yours truly,

CHARLES W. SUTTON.

[From a communication by Dr. Samuel Crompton in the *Palatine Note Book*, Oct., 1883, vol. iii., p. 228.]

There can be no doubt that the "Fragment on Mummies," in Sir Thomas Browne's Works, 1835, vol. iv., page 273, was not written by Sir Thomas, but by Mr. Crossley. Wilkin, the editor of Browne, says he gives it "on the authority of Mr. Crossley; but has not been able to find the volume in the British Museum which contained it; nor could he inform me, having transcribed it himself in the Museum, but omitted to note the volume in which he met with it" (vol iv., 273, note).

Some years ago I happened to read this Fragment, and I felt sure that it was a forgery. The next time I saw Mr. Crossley

I said, "Oh, Mr. Crossley, about that fragment of Sir Thomas Browne's on 'Mummies'?" He said in reply what I have above quoted from Wilkin. I replied, "Nonsense, sir, it is a forgery, and you wrote it yourself." He seemed startled and then said, "You are the first that ever suspected it." He asked me how it was that I had arrived at my opinion, and I explained. In the course of conversation he said that Bulwer quoted a passage from it as one of the finest things Sir Thomas ever wrote.

I may cite a passage from the Fragment in order to correct a misprint, and to show how admirably Mr. Crossley imitated the style of the almost inimitable Sir Thomas.

"Of their living habitations they made little account, conceiving of them but as hospitia, or inns, while they adorned the sepulchres of the dead, and planting thereon [read, them on] lasting bases, defied the crumbling touches of time and the misty vaporousness of oblivion. Yet all were but Babel vanities. Time sadly overcometh all things, and is now dominant, and sitteth upon a Sphinx, and looketh unto Memphis and old Thebes, while his sister Oblivion reclineth semisomnous on a pyramid, gloriously triumphing, making puzzles of Titanian erections, and turning old glories into dreams. History sinketh beneath her cloud. The traveller as he paceth amazedly through these deserts asketh of her, Who builded them? and she mumbleth something, but what it is he heareth not."

I have little doubt that the "Dialogue between two twins in the womb, concerning the world they were to come into," alluded to in page 267 of Dr. Greenhill's exquisite edition of *The Religio Medici*, 1881, is also by Mr. Crossley. But as I never saw this tract, I never in person challenged Mr. Crossley with it, though I may have done so in a letter to him.

[From the "Books and Bookmen" column in *Manchester Guardian*, Dec. 14, 1901.]

While we are speaking of Sir Thomas Browne and mummies, the occasion seems favourable to ask whether any reader will be so kind as to give us the reference to the full text of that stately writer's "Fragment on Mummies" to which Emerson, when quoting it in his essay on "Poetry and Imagination," thinks it difficult to refuse "the claim of poetry." Emerson's extract is clearly taken from a longer passage, but we have been unable to find it in Bohn's reprint of Wilkin's edition of Browne. Here is the passage quoted by Emerson, which has always seemed to us to be one of Browne's finest things, and not far from the high-water mark of this particular kind of stately, sombre, and gorgeous prose. (Quotation follows.)

[From *Manchester Guardian*, Dec. 17, 1901.]

SIR THOMAS BROWNE ON MUMMIES.

Sir,

In your exceedingly interesting "Books and Bookmen" column in to-day's paper it is asked whether any reader will supply the reference to the full text of the "Fragment on Mummies." The text will be found in the original issue of Simon Wilkin's edition of Sir Thomas Browne's Works, 1835, vol. iv., page 273. It is there given from a copy in the handwriting of Mr. James Crossley, of Manchester. In a footnote Wilkin says:—"I have given this fragment on the authority of Mr. Crossley, but have not been able to find the volume in the British Museum which contained it; nor could he inform me, having transcribed it himself in the Museum, but omitted to note the volume in which he met with it." It is no wonder that it could not be found, for Crossley was hoaxing the learned editor of Sir Thomas Browne, the "Fragment" being a *jeu d'esprit* from our townsman's own pen. It is a marvellously clever imitation of Browne's style.

Yours &c.

C. W. SUTTON.

Sir,—

The true history of the "Fragment on Mummies" included in the works of Sir Thomas Browne will be found in the "Palatine Note Book" (vol. III., pp. 222-4, 228). The evidence there cited leaves no doubt that it was written by the late Mr. James Crossley, F.S.A., of Manchester. It is a fine echo of Browne's style, and yet curiously unlike the genuine passage about mummies to be found in his "Letter to a Friend."

Yours &c.

A.

[From *Manchester Guardian*, Dec. 21, 1901.]

We are much obliged to Mr. Charles W. Sutton and the correspondent who signs himself "A" for clearing up a long-standing uncertainty about the "Fragment on Mummies" which Emerson attributed to Sir Thomas Browne. We should never have guessed that it was not a genuine piece by the author of the "Urn Burial," and are inclined to place Mr. James Crossley, who wrote it, among the most skilful imitators of other men's style of whom literary history tells us. At the same time we wish that he had been less modest and had been willing to claim his *jeu d'esprit*, instead of passing it off on Wilkin and a whole generation of students as a genuine fragment of Browne's work. A great deal of time must have been wasted in hunting for the original of the fragment, which might have been turned to more profitable use. Surtees, of Mainsworth, who was himself one

of the most audacious of literary impostors, tells us that "to literary imposition, as tending to obscure the path of inquiry, Ritson gave no quarter"; and few students will deny that Ritson, for all his eccentricity, was right in this particular.

(Copied.)

22 Hyde Park Gate,
29, 1, 02

My Dear Mr. Bellows,

I find from the Dict'y of Nat'l Biography that the "fragment on Mummies" was certainly written by James Crossley (1800-1883), a well-known antiquary at Manchester. (See both lives in the D. N. B.) Crossley gave the fragment to Wilkin, the editor of Browne's works saying that he had copied the passage from some book in the British Museum and forgotten where he had found it. Wilkin states this in a note to the "fragment" and must have been very simple if he did not suspect the mystification. Crossley was a remarkably clever & learned man & it is no disgrace to be taken in by his sham.

I am sorry to hear of your illness. I have heard of you from my sister once or twice. She is going through a very sad time at Richmond but her health seems to be pretty good and she is certainly a great comfort to her cousin.

With all good wishes that you may get off "your beam ends" again I am

Yours very sincerely

(Signed)

L. STEPHEN.

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