

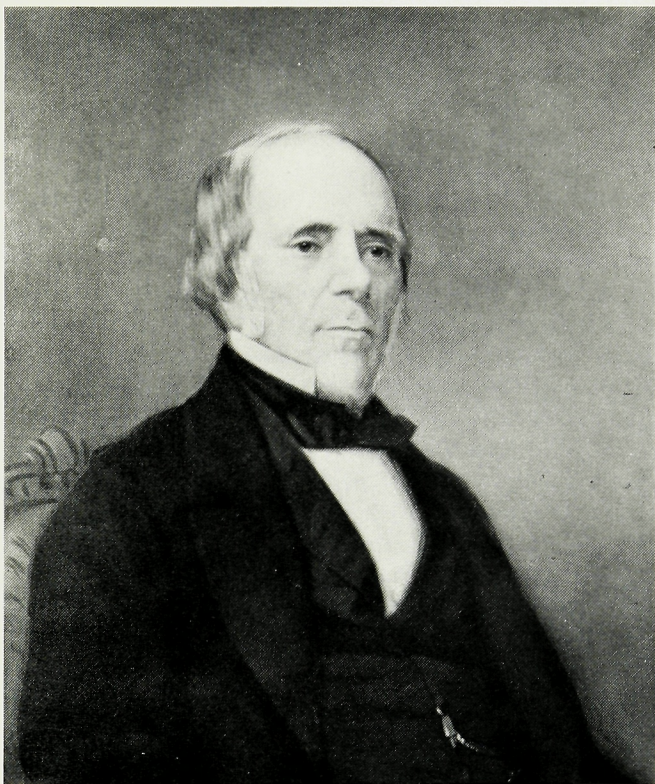


BOOKS AT BROWN

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REVEREND ROMEO ELTON, D. D.

1790-1870

Professor of Greek and Latin at Brown, 1825-1843
(Portrait in the John Hay Library)

A FINE GIFT: THE SARGENT HORACE COLLECTION

Saints, Soldiers, Presbyters, and Popes
In legions rise and disappear,
And Bards with glowing horoscopes
Oblivion garners year by year:
But on strong wings, through upper air, —
Two worlds beneath, the Old and New, —
The Roman Swan is wafted where
The Roman eagles never flew.

SO WROTE John Osborne Sargent (1811-1891), best of the American translators of Horace. Of him (and of Horace) Oliver Wendell Holmes justly remarked, "He assimilated all that was most characteristic and captivating in this delicious writer, whose fascination surpasses that of poets of far loftier pretensions."

Lawyer as well as litterateur, Mr. Sargent was as friendly with Webster as with Holmes. Henry Clay spoke of his "truth, honor, and patriotism," and Samuel Gridley Howe, though he had graduated at Brown more than a decade before Sargent graduated at Harvard, was a good friend. In Washington, Sargent managed a newspaper which supported President Taylor for a time, and later, President Fillmore. Grant did not appeal to him, and a proposal to erect a million-dollar memorial to the soldier-president drew forth a severe poem, cast in the form of a translation from Horace. (This item, now a rarity, may be seen in Brown's Harris Collection of American Poetry.) English poetry, too, engaged Sargent's pen, though here he wrote as critic. He also wrote, and learnedly, on law, but Horace was his lifelong recreation, and to his Alma Mater, Harvard, he gave an annual prize for the best metrical translation of an ode of Horace. (This prize was endowed by his daughter, and is still offered annually at Harvard and Radcliffe.) Naturally he collected editions and translations of Horace, and it is evident that he sought quality rather than quantity. His collection — ninety choice volumes — has now been presented to the John Hay Library by his grand-nephew, Professor-Emeritus Henry Barrett Huntington.

Thus the Library, which already has the Foster Collection of Horace (given by the widow of Providence's late Public Librarian, William E. Foster) takes an outstanding place in this field. (See Books at Brown, Vol. 5, No. 2. Dec. 1942.)

The Sargent collection is varied. It contains six editions not otherwise known. There is, for example, a folio printed at Venice in 1549 by

the heirs of P. Ravanus — one of those fine old volumes in which a small island of text is surrounded by waves of minute (in every sense) commentary. There are some mere (yet great) curiosities, like the learned edition (no other copy recorded, in the U. S. at least) by Stephen Weston, published at London in 1805, and planned, according to the Latin preface, to please “those who are lovers of Eobanus Hessus, Fulvinus Ursinus, and Ludovicus Casparius Walckenarius.” A small select audience indeed — who could qualify today? — or even in 1805? But it is more surprising that the 1864 copy (Berlin) of the commentary of Acron and Porphyrio may be the only one in the United States. At least it is not listed either in the Mills College or the Library of Congress Horace bibliographies.

For sheer oddity, the Paris edition of 1774 — here, too, Mr. Sargent’s copy appears to be unique — deserves a brief paragraph, for though many have “improved” Horace, perhaps this editor (anonymous) is the only one to have rewritten the poet in the fashion in which Bentley rewrote *Paradise Lost*. Horace’s Lalage, poor girl, is expurgated altogether, the second Satire has only twenty-five lines, some of the Epodes are truncated without explanation, and, certain poems having been omitted, the rest are renumbered so as to conceal that fact. The result is undoubtedly decorous, but hardly Horace.

All in all, this is a connoisseur’s collection. Mr. Sargent was indeed a connoisseur. But though his scholarship could be minute (in one footnote on a Horatian line he once cited more than thirty editors), what is more important is that he loved the poet with a rare understanding. This collection is evidence — but no one who has looked into Sargent’s Horatian Echoes will need any, nor will he quite accept the translator’s modest words —

He who would echo Horace’ lays
Aspires to an Icarian fame.

COLLEGE PROFESSOR, OLD STYLE

Reverend Romeo Elton (1790–1870) graduated at Brown in 1813. For the next nine years his history is somewhat of a blank, but from 1822 to 1824 he was pastor of the Baptist church at Windsor, Vermont. In the latter year he resigned, whereupon a committee of the church wrote to him, “We regard this event as a frown of Divine Providence, and would humble ourselves under this mark of His displeasure.” What they meant appears to be that attendance had been unsatisfactory during Elton’s pastorate, and they add, “We should have been more happy under your faithful preaching if we had improved our privileges

aright." In the following year he was called to Brown as Professor of Greek and Latin, but President Messer recommended that he spend two years in foreign study before taking up his duties. This Elton did, at his own expense. The arrangement seems odd to us today, but it may be noted that when H. W. Longfellow was appointed to the Smith Professorship at Harvard (in 1834), President Quincy wrote him, "Should it be your wish previously to entering upon the duties . . . to reside in Europe at your own expense a year, or eighteen months . . ." etc. Longfellow interpreted this correctly as a "request" and not a "permission." (*Harvard Library Bulletin*, IV. 3. Autumn 1950).

From 1825 to 1843 Elton taught at Brown, though in 1833 he was given a unanimous call to the pulpit of the Second Baptist Church in Newport. The reason he gave for declining was his poor health, but he was a popular teacher, and that fact probably had weight in his decision. When he resigned his professorship, in 1843, it was to re-enter the pulpit. His former pupil, M. A. DeWolfe Howe of the class of 1828, thought this might be a mistake. Himself now a clergyman, he nevertheless wrote frankly, to Elton, "A scholar who would be a popular preacher, and to be useful he must be popular, finds himself compelled to meet and gratify a vitiated public taste, which he despises." Elton, however, would not be dissuaded, though Howe also wrote, "If I have any scholar-like taste for the literature of the ancients, I owe its development almost wholly to you."

On leaving, Elton sent a somewhat plaintive letter to the Corporation, in which he recalled that during two years in England and Europe "I received no salary, and my expenses were entirely defrayed by myself." They replied in formal, but cordial and complimentary terms. Not to be outdone, he then informed them (September 9, 1843) that, whatever his future lot, "the approval of the wise and good will be among the richest rewards of my labors."

This stately epistolary minuet, like the church committee's letter, and Dr. Howe's warning, and very much matter equally instructive and entertaining, may be read in the highly various pages of a large scrap-book, carefully maintained by Dr. Elton, and recently purchased from an English bookseller by the John Hay Library. The Library already owned a similar but less extensive scrap-book of Dr. Elton's, which was presented in 1928 by John Prince Elton. The two supplement one another, and from them we may trace a career which, in a sense, was only beginning at the professor's retirement in 1843. Yet he was then, at 49, the oldest member of the Brown faculty. Undoubtedly, too, he had been one of the most popular; on his return from an English visit, in 1844, to the Brown Commencement, he was greeted with cheers.

At that time there remained before him twenty-six years, which were to be spent chiefly in England, in leisurely study, and in cultivating a wide variety of social contacts and an extensive correspondence. Scrap-book Number One (as we may call it), shows him as a "joiner," especially of societies which fostered historical studies; it shows him also as a popular lecturer, on such topics as Pompeii, Dighton Rock, and British nomenclature — this last from a (vaguely) etymological point-of-view. Some of the lectures also appear in the scrap-books, and of their general tenor one may best say what the late Professor E. B. Delabarre said of the historical writings of President Ezra Stiles of Yale: "He was appealed to by the more speculative rather than the more conservative possibilities" (and his conjectures) "offer rather an illuminating exhibit of the limitations of knowledge and the kind of evidence widely accepted as valid in his day." The lecture on Pompeii naturally offered splendid opportunity for preaching, and Dr. Elton was, after all, a preacher. He was also easily shocked, and in his discourse on surnames, when it befell him to discuss Crookshanks, Curson, Stringfellow, Longbottom, etc., he explained that "many surnames belonging to this class cannot be etymologically discussed without some violation of existing notions of decorum, although through the influence of custom they are daily pronounced by the most pure lips without any sense of indelicacy."

If this is rather unmodern-sounding, the preface to Elton's book on Roger Williams is more so. Of Knowles's excellent memoir, to which he admitted being "largely indebted," Elton said contemptuously, "It is a work of great research, and very useful for reference, but too much encumbered with documents, and too minute in its local details to interest general readers." He follows Knowles very closely, but where, for instance, Knowles says that "About the middle of January, 1636, in secrecy and haste" Williams left Salem for Rhode Island, in Elton this becomes, "About the middle of January, 1636, the coldest month of a New England winter, a solitary pilgrim might have been seen wandering amidst primeval forests, inhabited only by savages and beasts of prey, in quest of a refuge from the hand of ecclesiastical tyranny. He was forced to leave his wife and young children, and to depart in secrecy and haste" etc., etc. We smile, for today we prefer Knowles's technique, but Elton's book was popular, and what is more important, it contributed new and significant material for those interested in Williams's life and times. The important Sadleir-Williams correspondence was first published by Elton, though modern editors do not give him credit for this. Now how did a man so contemptuous of research as Elton was come across this material?

Scrap-book Number Two shows that Elton was an indefatigable correspondent, especially with the learned and with friends of learning, *e.g.* Longfellow and G. W. Greene, Professor Gammell, Nicholas Brown (who called Elton's Roger Williams "by far the most compleat narrative of his life which has fallen into my hands," and added, "The new matter was very interesting. I always, before, doubted whether Williams was really an élève of Coke's.") Did Elton cultivate George Bancroft? There is no letter in the scrap-books to show this, (unless item IV at the end of this sketch does so), but in Duyckinck's *Cyclopedia of American Literature* (1856) we read that George Bancroft told Elton about the Sadleir letters, and Elton then copied them from the originals in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge. At all events, from the publication of the little memoir, in 1852, Elton was recognized as an authority on Williams, and in Scrap-book Number Two we find a letter of 1861 from James Savage to Elton seeking more precise information about Williams's dates, and adding, "a large collection of his letters to Governor Winthrop has come into the possession of my friend Robert C. Winthrop which have never seen the light."

The Reverend Romeo Elton was certainly an early Friend of the Library. In the early sixties Reuben Guild, the Librarian, wrote to him, "The books (you gave) grace our shelves. I frequently show them to your old pupils and friends, who during the thirteen years that I have had charge of the library have often inquired concerning you." At this time Elton was living in England, and had acquired property there; in 1862 Charles Francis Adams wrote to thank him for contradicting some story about an anti-Union speech by Lord Shaftesbury, but added (the letter is in Scrap-book Number Two) "I very much regret that the course of that distinguished statesman throughout our severe trials has been such as to give us little reason to count on much of his sympathy." During the sixties Elton gave a scholarship to Brown; a letter from President Caswell (Scrap-book Number Two) gives Dr. Elton some information concerning the incumbents and adds, "I can foresee that you would naturally wish to connect your name with a Greek Professorship." (What came out of this, however, was the Romeo Elton Professorship of Natural Theology.)

In addition to letters of personal and of Brunonian interest, Dr. Elton amassed — and we now have, in his scrap-books — autographs of such personages as Oliver Wolcott (Signer of the Declaration), John Hancock, Alexander Hamilton, Albert Gallatin; autograph letters of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Andrew Jackson — this sounds like the beginning of a series, but it does not continue. There are also some autograph letters of early New England divines.

Elton's *Life of Roger Williams* is a moderately rare little book today. His monument (erected by the Brown Corporation) is at Swan Point, and his portrait may be seen on the main stairway of the John Hay Library. But a better picture of the man may be drawn from the two huge scrap-books. (Incidentally it should be said that very many of the items included seem to show a sense of humor which Elton's writings would by no means indicate.) A few final quotations (from *Scrap-book Two*) may indicate the variety of this material, and the range of Dr. Elton's interests.

I.

On October 4, 1798, President Willard of Harvard wrote to Reverend Doctor Hitchcock in Providence, saying (*inter alia*) "I am much obliged to you for your mention of cyder to Judge Sullivan. Upon his return to Boston he has furnished me with some very excellent which has been exceeding grateful to me."

II.

On September 18, 1838, Benjamin Waterhouse wrote Elton from Cambridge that he and his son-in-law (Henry Ware) had been visiting John Quincy Adams in Quincy and had been to church with Adams. (Ware preached the sermon.) The "respectable church," said Waterhouse, was "embellished with as much taste and ornament as even a Providence church, and more need not be, and less I should regret."

III.

On September 18, 1845, Reverend Dr. J. M. Peck wrote Elton from the office of the American Baptist Publication Society. What Elton thought of the epistle one would like to know. Anyhow, he kept it, and here it is, much abridged (for the original is most diffuse) but still a model of how not to write to an author.

"We are so deficient in our library as not to have a copy of your 'Life and Remains of Dr. Maxcy.' I forgot when I met you in Providence to solicit your influence with your publisher that he might give us a copy . . . I would now inquire whether he might not find it to his interest to do it. I will write a full respectful notice for the Baptist Record if a copy is sent to my name as Corresponding Secretary and I think can very probably open sales for at least a few copies through our colporteurs in the South and West . . . I shall obtain the work for my own library before I retire from my present station."

Since Elton, as his scrap-books show, was courteous almost to the point of eccentricity, we may perhaps assume that he did not send the sort of reply that Dr. Peck's letter so loudly calls for.

IV.

Boston, December 4, 1838.

I take the liberty to send you an historical article which appeared in the *Post* . . . I hope you will take some notice of this matter in your Providence papers and send me a copy . . .

With sincere regards,

Yrs,

George Bancroft.

V.

(Nov. 6, 1825.)

(President Asa Messer of Brown wrote a "To-whom-it-may-concern" letter for Elton) . . . "Learned, liberal, and orthodox, he, wherever he preaches, gratifies the candid and the judicious, and he gives offense to neither Jew nor Gentile."

VI.

(Nov. 27, 1854.)

In a long and interesting letter to Elton (who was in London), Mr. Brown said with apparent regret that Henry Stevens, the London bookseller, had "not of late sent me any considerable additions to my *Bibliotheca Americana*." There is a hint that Elton might look Mr. Stevens up — and perhaps Mr. Brown thought that this would jog Stevens's memory. But the most remarkable sentence in the letter has to do with President Franklin Pierce, who is gloomily described as "a second-rate New Hampshire lawyer and entirely under the control of bad men."

DESIDERATA

Will some Friend or Friends enable us to buy any or all of the following items?

Aldrich, Putnam. *Musical Ornamentation in the 17th and 18th century* (2 volumes).

Also our file of the *New Yorker* leaves much to be desired. It is the old issues, Volume 1 through Volume 17 (1925-1942), which we should be most pleased to receive.

BENJAMIN C. CLOUGH, *Editor*

Address mail and make checks payable to

BROWN UNIVERSITY, *Friends of the Library, John Hay Library, Providence 12, R. I.*