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## Edward FitzGerald and Bernard Barton: An Unsparing Friendship

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# Edward FitzGerald and Bernard Barton: An Unsparring Friendship

BY JEFFREY P. MARTIN

Edward FitzGerald (1809–1883), English poet and translator of *The Rubaiyat* by Omar Khayyam, was also a genial host and ready critic to a wide circle of literary acquaintances and correspondents. His letters show an industrious concern for the welfare of his friends (often men of published fame) among whom he counted Tennyson, Thomas Carlyle, and Thackeray—to mention only some major figures. Financially independent, he had the time and the means, as well as the genius and inclination, to insert himself effectively into nineteenth-century English literary society. Included, perhaps surprisingly, at the intimate heart of this august coterie was the “Quaker poet” Bernard Barton (1784–1849), whose verse FitzGerald championed and probably had a hand in correcting.

The Alfred McKinley Terhune Collection in the George Arents Research Library is an outstanding source of material on Edward FitzGerald and his associates. In addition to forty-five letters by FitzGerald, there are letters by his friends (such as Barton), which shed light on various aspects of the contemporary literary life. The collection also contains other extensive research materials (such as research notes, correspondence files, and the collected photostats of all FitzGerald's letters) that Professor Terhune used in writing his biography, *The Life of Edward FitzGerald*, and editing *The Letters of Edward FitzGerald*. This paper makes use of some of the riches from this collection.<sup>1</sup>

1. Materials cited in this article that are found in the Alfred McKinley Terhune Collection will be noted as such. Any irregularities in grammar, spelling, or capitalization are present in the originals. Alfred McKinley Terhune (1899–1975), for many years professor of English at Syracuse University, was the author of *The Life of Edward FitzGerald* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1947). After his death his widow, Annabelle Burdick Terhune, persevered in the editing of FitzGerald's correspondence. The completed, four-volume *The Letters of Edward FitzGerald* was published by Princeton University Press in 1980.

Bernard Barton and Edward FitzGerald met in Woodbridge, Suffolk, where FitzGerald lived and entertained in his comfortable cottage, while Barton (a widower and FitzGerald's senior by twenty-five years) labored to keep afloat by clerking in a bank to support his child Lucy and his passion for poetry. Though his childhood and youth had been marred by tragedy, Bernard Barton's life, by this time, was sufficiently settled and calm to nourish the home-loving tone of his poetry. Barton's biographer, Edward Verrall Lucas, describes his "quiet pilgrimage" through life:<sup>2</sup>

a plain man, unselfish and undistinguished whose every word was gentle, whose leisurely walk through life lay along sheltered lanes and over level meads; a man, none the less, of fine judgment, broad sympathies, generous toleration, and rich humour—attributes which have been missed by many who have risen to far greater eminence.

But Barton's lanes and meads were perhaps not quite so sheltered or level as they appeared to be. Despite his self-deprecating demeanor, he had piercing poetic ambitions that quite eluded his actual capabilities, though those were not trifling. In a moment of grandiose illusion, Barton considered leaving the bank in order to devote himself exclusively to poetry. At this point, his friend and correspondent Charles Lamb wrote to him:<sup>3</sup>

Keep to your bank and the bank will keep you. Trust not to the public: you may hang, starve, drown yourself for any thing that worthy personage cares.

As did Byron:<sup>4</sup>

Do not renounce writing, but never trust entirely to authorship. If you have a profession, retain it, it will be like Prior's fellowship, a last and sure resource.

2. Edward Verrall Lucas, *Bernard Barton and His Friends: A Record of Quiet Lives* (London: Edward Hicks, Jr., 1893), 28–29.

3. Quoted in Edward FitzGerald, "Memoir of Bernard Barton", in *Selections from the Poems and Letters of Bernard Barton*, ed. Lucy Barton (London: Hall, Virtue, 1849), xx.

4. Quoted in FitzGerald's "Memoir", xix.



Samuel Laurence's portrait of Barton, frontispiece to *Selections from the Poems and Letters of Bernard Barton*. FitzGerald arranged for the sitting, purposely misquoting the price to Barton in order to spare him some expense. In a letter to Laurence, dated 29 June 1847, FitzGerald wrote, "Barton pretends he dreads having his portrait done; which is 'my eye'" (cf. *The Letters of Edward FitzGerald*).

It seemed the common conviction that Barton should keep his feet on the ground. He wisely submitted to the general judgment and remained with the bank until a scant two days before his death.

Victorian biographical information is both superficial and unin-

quiring in its assessment of the man Barton. He emerges simplistically from the extant opinions of his friends as a saint. Modern scholarship, as might be expected, takes a more psychological approach:<sup>5</sup>

Although he remained a faithful Quaker, Barton was far from representing the gloomier reaches of his persuasion, and other Woodbridge Quakers were said to distrust him because he had 'Mr.' on his brass doorplate, wore embroidered waistcoats, bought pictures, wrote poetry, and was the most genial of hosts, serving liberal gin and water to his frequent guests. Only at FitzGerald's constant pipes and cigars did he draw the line, insisting the tobacco smelled remarkably like guano.

Interestingly, though Barton heartily disapproved of cigars and their smoke, he himself was an inveterate snuff-user.

His letters, which are often lively and full of fresh opinion, are (thankfully) still valued today, both for the subjects they deal with and for the people they address. As one critic has stated, "Barton never considered his own letters as literary productions. Rather he felt that his poetry was his sole claim to literary fame."<sup>6</sup> It was a sad misjudgment that Barton had made, but one perhaps that kept him in the magic circle, letter-writing to his august friends for our subsequent edification.

In a letter dated 6 August 1846 to George Crabbe, Jr. (son of George Crabbe, the poet), Barton complains about the protracted period of heat, but then reveals a penchant for fun by citing an anecdote that FitzGerald was fond of telling. Barton says: "I longed to follow the example of Edward Fgd's friend Squire Jenney who heroically doffs the trowsers, & sits with only calico drawers on—so I am told".<sup>7</sup> It is easy to see how with such ready humor he might have inspired the affection of FitzGerald.

In another letter to George Crabbe, Jr., dated 1 February 1845,

5. Robert Bernard Martin, *With Friends Possessed: A Life of Edward FitzGerald* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 106–7.

6. James E. Barcus, "Introduction" to *The Literary Correspondence of Bernard Barton*, ed. James E. Barcus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1966), 18.

7. Bernard Barton to George Crabbe, Jr., 8 June 1846, Alfred McKinley Terhune Collection, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University, Box 2.

he teases him, calling him a “libeller” for having dared “to insinuate that I tippled away at that Port inordinately!”<sup>8</sup> Barton then goes on to discuss what is really on his mind:<sup>9</sup>

but the odour of that room after the first hour or two from the time of lighting up was really awful. talk of my tippling Port! marry the clouds such a trio as yours can & do blow would do more to make me drunk than all the wine I could ever be induced to swallow. All through that pitiless driving Snow I smelt that perilous weed—all night, whenever I woke, I still smelt & tasted it; it linger’d on my palate next morn, it flavor’d my bohee at Breakfast, my Veal & Bacon at dinner—and when, as I had company to keep my Birthday, to tea, I went to put on the Coat & Waistcoat I wore in your august presence—had I taken ’em out of Pandora’s Box, they could not have borne a worse odour!

Looking again at the Arents Library letter to George Crabbe, Jr., we are made aware of Barton’s fine critical sense, which must also have appealed to the discriminating FitzGerald. In it, Barton is discussing his recent reading of Dickens’ *Martin Chuzzlewit*:<sup>10</sup>

It is equal in power and divinity of genius to any work I have read of the Author’s—but for all that it is a harrowing, revolting, & excruciating Book . . . —but the bad and the base so awfully preponderate in the main I really felt relieved when I had got through the Book—which I am, spite of all I have said against it, glad to have read—though it is somewhat like having sate through an anatomical dissection of a murderer—or having a tooth drawn.

This excerpt, which deals with the treatment of thieves and rascals, is, in fact, part of a favorable assessment. Barton’s overall feelings about Dickens reflect the critical opinion of the day: that he was an

8. Barton, *Literary Correspondence*, 115.

9. *Ibid.*, 116–7.

10. Bernard Barton to George Crabbe, Jr., 6 August 1846, Alfred McKinley Terhune Collection, Box 2.

FFG  
MASS 193



Dear Crabbe Woodbridge 8/14/46  
I have gone through *Chuzzlewit*, but not having the Book at this moment in my study, I have very likely felt the yellowish *Waste* wrong - it is equal in horror, and derisive of genius, to any work I have read of the author's - but, for all that, it is a narrowing, very (long) & excruciating work - (cutting sharply) after *Tom & the Analyst*, and I all my *Waste* (the mysterious *Robbery* of the half-eggs) elder *Chuzzlewit* - the whole) *Trametes* *permeate* our *tools*, *knives*, & *files* - Can I *Stanzas* *back* *and* *equilibrium*, (for they will) *stick* to you like *leeches*, there is no shaking em off - and be the answer, better, or rather? *frank* *hints*, and some of it will *stick* to you - *answer* was a *hypocrite* better

Bernard Barton's letter to George Crabbe, Jr., 6 August 1846, in which he discusses *Martin Chuzzlewit* and the hot summer weather.

Courtesy of Syracuse University Library.

outstanding writer in the difficult position of having to wrestle with unsavory materials.

But gossip and jokes and literary discussions by post were secondary to Barton's love of poetry, which was the driving force in his life. He labored hard for his laurels. In the end he achieved enormous popularity, though the reputation of his poems has not survived the exactions of time. The modern reader finds them unsuccinct, pious, and cumbersome. But so keen was Barton to become a recognized poet, that he could defer with an almost conniving extravagance when interacting with influential reviewers. He seemed to feel that critics and reviewers were "formidable personages who could help a struggling poet in a number of small ways and that no hopeful poet should neglect any reasonable means of securing a favorable review".<sup>11</sup>

In a wheedling letter of 5 December 1828, Barton addressed an unknown critic of *The Athenaeum* who had reviewed some of his poetry. Barton, clearly upset, reveals here a not quite so attractive side of his personality, one, certainly, which is not in tune with modern sensibilities.<sup>12</sup>

[your statement] has puzzled me prodigiously. If the article be thy own, might I beg the favor of a line or two referring to the piece, & supposed Party? I will receive it gratefully & answer it frankly, if thy leisure allows of thy according me such an indulgence.

Every publication, one imagines, was an uphill battle for a poet of Barton's unexciting endowment. Today, his poetic works are largely neglected, mere footnotes to the survey of English literature. The current view is generally unflattering:<sup>13</sup>

Most of his poetry was hastily written and would be considered verse rather than poetry by most critics. His diction is obscure and vague, and he relies on suggestion rather than

11. Barton, *Literary Correspondence*, 25.

12. Bernard Barton to "Est. Friend", 5 December 1828, tipped into the Arents Library copy of Barton's *Napoleon and Other Poems* (London: Thomas Boys, 1822).

13. Barton, *Literary Correspondence*, 17.

preciseness in most of his lines. Many of his rhymes are forced, while his meter is frequently irregular and thumping. In addition to these faults, Barton's love of the homely and edifying frequently caused him to write didactically and morally rather than poetically.

Although this evaluation of Barton's poetic skills generally holds true, there are, nevertheless, some poems of considerable appeal. An example from the Terhune Collection is a holograph copy of the poem "A Christian Dirge", which was enclosed in a letter of 20 May 1841 to his friend Jane Biddell.<sup>14</sup> The poem itself had been published more than two decades previously.

The hour is come, the solemn hour,  
When earth to earth we give;  
Our hope, our stay, the Saviour's power,  
Who died that man might live.

Though dear the form, and lov'd the heart  
We now commit to dust,  
No virtues of the dead impart  
Our spirits' holiest trust.

Those virtues memory oft shall trace  
With pensive placid brow,  
But Christian faith and Christian grace  
Must be our refuge now.

The light they lend alone can cheer  
The dark and silent tomb.  
Can hush the sigh, make bright the tear,  
And glory give for gloom.

We would not mourn as those who see  
No hope beyond the grave;  
Before thee, Lord! we bend the knee,  
The Comforter we crave.

14. Bernard Barton to Jane Biddell, 20 May 1841, Alfred McKinley Terhune Collection, Box 2.

His power can make the soul rejoice,  
Tho eyes with grief be dim,  
And bid us raise with grateful voice  
A Christian's funeral hymn.

It is easy to criticize this poem from the perspective of modern attitudes. Nevertheless, Barton's thought is sincere. This type of poem, in celebration of a particular season or event, predominates in Barton's work, and it is quite possible that the consequent aura of contrivance, combined with the accumulation of poetic infelicities, is what renders Barton's poetry so alien to the modern ear.

In contrast to his "Christian Dirge" is the dedicatory poem that Barton inscribed "To Anne, Hannah, Phebe, and Eliza" in a copy of his collection *Napoleon and Other Poems*. Here, we see him in a playful mood, and certainly more at ease. The last two lines speak to the point of his special 'Quaker' appeal:<sup>15</sup>

Whether these Pages win for me,  
In other eyes, a Poet's fame,  
Or not;—allow them still to be,  
In yours'—a pledge of Friendship's claim.

And if they have the added power  
To lend me, in your partial eyes,  
The Name of Poet; 'tis a dower  
Too grateful for me to despise.

The proudest Fame the World can give  
Scarce pays the Bard whose wishes roam;  
The Fame for which 'tis sweet to love,  
Must come from eyes and lips at Home.

5th Mo., 10th 1822.

Bernard Barton was a well known minor poet in his own age. Though religion, humility, duty, and love of home were deeply ingrained in his personality, humor and generosity of spirit were also present, as was the hunger for fame. It was his devotion to the arts

15. This poem is written on the front free endpaper in the Arents Library copy of Barton's *Napoleon and Other Poems* (London: Thomas Boys, 1822).

To Anne, Hannah,  
Phebe, and Eliza.

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Whether these Pages win for me,  
In other eyes, a Poet's Game,  
Or not; — allow them still to be,  
In yours a pledge of Friendship's claim.

And if they have the added power  
To lend me, in your partial eyes,  
The name of Poet; 'tis a dower  
I'm grateful for me to despise.

The kindest Fame the World can give  
Scarce pays the Bard whose wishes roam;  
The Fame for which 'tis sweet to live,  
Must come from eyes and lips at Home.

St. No. 10 1822

Bernard Barton

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Bernard Barton's dedicatory poem "To Anne, Hannah, Phebe, and Eliza", inscribed in his *Napoleon and Other Poems*. Courtesy of Syracuse University Library.

that provided for him the sparkle to an otherwise drab and lonely life. His friend FitzGerald was the key to that vibrant otherworld. Despite the enormous difference in age they became close friends, the younger man playing host, mentor, and critic to the older one and deriving thereby, quite possibly, a satisfaction that he could not find among his own true and competitive equals. The pair had common interests in both literature and art, but in addition, “there was an easy camaraderie between Barton and FitzGerald that allowed them to tease each other affectionately without being offensive”.<sup>16</sup> Other aspects of Barton’s personality that must have delighted FitzGerald were his easygoing, unassuming nature and his unpretentious ways. Both disliked the trappings of high society.

That Barton meant a great deal to FitzGerald is certain. FitzGerald was attracted to and (after the father’s death) would marry Lucy Barton. Though it was not to be a happy union or even very long-lasting, the season of the developing mutual interest must have fired up a special relationship. FitzGerald, who could be quite abrasive in his guardianship of literature, was apparently tender when it came to the saintly musings of the Quaker poet.

It is interesting to compare FitzGerald’s criticisms of Tennyson (whose fame still holds strong) with those he made of Barton. Tennyson had been a friend since youth. They had met as undergraduates at Cambridge University, and the interaction had been both combusive and rewarding. In later years, however, they rarely saw each other and limited their correspondence to an annual exchange. FitzGerald followed Tennyson’s career through letters to other acquaintances, notably Tennyson’s brother Frederick. In spite of the close connection, or possibly because of it, FitzGerald could be, though was not always, scathingly critical. On 1 January 1848, FitzGerald wrote a letter to John Allen in which he attacked Tennyson’s most recent work:<sup>17</sup>

I have bought his [Tennyson’s] new poem; which I cannot read through: nor is my first impression concerning it altered. I am really grieved that such a man, who should now be

16. Martin, *By Friends Possessed*, 143.

17. *The Letters of Edward FitzGerald*, ed. Alfred McKinley Terhune and Annabelle Burdick Terhune (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), 1: 588–89.

doing something like Dante and Milton, should have dwindled to such elaborate trifling as “the Princess.” . . . His idle, selfish, and unheroic way of life has wasted away the heroic poetical faculty, I doubt: I nevermore expect a great work from him.

Many years later, FitzGerald ‘evaluated’ Tennyson’s most recent play. In the letter dated 29 December [1876] to his friend Anna Biddell, he wrote:<sup>18</sup>

I will only say of “Harold” [the play] that I think AT [Alfred Tennyson] had better been of mind, in not writing, or publishing, more. These latter Inferiorities will temporarily, though not justly, cloud his present Reputation and be a drag upon those words of his which are to live.

But when it came to Barton, FitzGerald was unfailingly kind. On 21 February 1842, FitzGerald wrote a letter in which he compared his own, self-confessed lack of poetic skill to Barton’s abilities:<sup>19</sup>

I have not the strong inward call, nor cruel-sweet pangs of parturition, that prove the birth of anything bigger than a mouse. With you the case is different, who have so long been a follower of the Muse, and who have had a kindly, sober, English, wholesome, religious spirit within you that has communicated kindred warmth to many honest souls.

In addition to this evidence of glowing warmth, is his memoir of Bernard Barton, published soon after the poet’s death, when FitzGerald himself was working closely with Lucy on an edition of selections from her father’s works. Here, understandably, he glossed over the less than perfect Bartonian prosody:<sup>20</sup>

The Poems . . . were probably as little elaborated as any that were ever published. Without claiming for them the

18. Edward FitzGerald to Anna Biddell, 29 December [1876], Alfred McKinley Terhune Collection, Box 1.

19. FitzGerald, *Letters*, 1: 308.

20. FitzGerald, “Memoir of Bernard Barton”, xxxv.

highest attributes of poetry, (which the author never pretended to,) we may surely say they abound in genuine feeling and elegant fancy expressed in easy, and often very felicitous, verse. These qualities employed in illustrating the religious and domestic affections, and the pastoral scenery with which such affections are perhaps most generally associated, have made Bernard Barton, as he desired to be, a household poet with a large class of readers—a class, who, as they may be supposed to welcome such poetry as being the articulate voice of those good feelings yearning in their own bosoms, one may hope will continue and increase in England.

FitzGerald's judgments were known to be clouded by the emotion he threw into his friendships. He was unable to divorce his strong feelings for a writer from his own critical analyses of the work under examination. It was a flaw that disbalanced his assessment of both exalted and lowly writers. Surely FitzGerald did not fail to see the faults in Barton's poetry; indeed, he was enough aware of them to endeavor to fix them.

FitzGerald's encouragements included a participatory pen. In private, his sympathetic generosity seems to have taken the practical turn of incisive editing, derived perhaps from the way that he used to repaint or cut up the paintings he obsessively purchased.<sup>21</sup> As far as is known, his remodelings of Barton's works were his first efforts of that nature in the literary domain.

Not surprisingly, FitzGerald's critical eye was able to improve on some of Barton's poems. One example is the poem "Winter Evenings". Barton's version has eight sestets. FitzGerald has stripped it to three, honing those to clarify the rougher sections and to bring out the logical sense. For example: Barton's line "Dark clouds round us hover" becomes "Dark clouds o'er us hover" in FitzGerald's rendition. Where the tone errs, FitzGerald adjusts it. Barton, in this homely poem, says:<sup>22</sup>

The bright fire is flinging  
Its splendour around;

21. Martin, *By Friends Possessed*, 124.

22. Bernard Barton, *Poetic Vigils* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1824), 195.

The kettle, too, singing,  
And blithe is its sound.

The choice of “splendour” in this poem undoes the feeling of homelessness and intimacy, which are what the poem is truly about. FitzGerald’s version changes the second line to: “Its happy warmth around”.<sup>23</sup> This is not a large change but it helps to strengthen the mood of the poem.

In “Leiston Abbey by Moonlight” FitzGerald takes an even firmer hand in revising Barton’s initial effort. He cuts the thirteen stanzas to twelve and invigorates the passive landscape that Barton was prone to adopt for describing nature. Barton writes:<sup>24</sup>

Methinks I hear the matin song,  
From those proud arches pealing;  
Now loud and clear,—now borne along  
On echo softly stealing.

FitzGerald’s revision is:<sup>25</sup>

Methinks I hear the matin song  
From those proud arches pealing;  
Now in full chorus borne along,  
Now into distance stealing.

The continued presence of the second “now” clause, though certainly effective, is ironic in that FitzGerald allowed it. Barton himself was inclined to repeat, though in his case the cause was inadvertency—failure to focus on word choice—as well as an overriding aversion to revision.

Barton ends the poem with the following two stanzas:<sup>26</sup>

How spirit-soothing is the sound  
Of night-winds softly sighing

23. *Selections from the Poems and Letters of Bernard Barton* (London: Hall, Virtue, 1849), 195.

24. Barton, *Poetic Vigils*, 67.

25. Barton, *Selections*, 200.

26. Barton, *Poetic Vigils*, 68.

Through roofless walls and arches round,—  
And then in silence dying.

Oh! Let thy charms be what they would,  
When first thy towers were planted,  
A nobler still, in thought's best mood,  
Is to thy ruins granted.

With a few internal changes, FitzGerald's version ends with the original penultimate stanza:<sup>27</sup>

More spirit-stirring is the sound  
Of night-winds softly sighing  
Thy roofless walls and arches round,  
And then in silence dying.

Though FitzGerald noticeably improved on Barton's poetry, the finished product remained earthbound. Nevertheless, the poems reflect the era, which was an important one in the history of English literature, and occasionally mount to a Cowper-like quality. At any rate, FitzGerald did Barton's reputation a great service by his strategic incisions and rearrangements. His editing was so radical on occasion that it constituted a manifest rewriting. "It was the first public appearance of [FitzGerald's] remarkable ability at reshaping other men's works, seeming in retrospect to have been a preparation for his later translations."<sup>28</sup>

Although Bernard Barton was only a minor poet, his correspondence, so often about or addressed to the literary luminaries of the time, is enlightening under examination. His insights into literature and the doings of his belletristic friends, as well as his accounts of specific events, all induce fresh views of early-nineteenth-century England. He is a man of whom it could be said that he is well worth knowing.

27. Barton, *Selections*, 200.

28. Martin, *By Friends Possessed*, 154–55.