

## WALTER PATER AND OSCAR BROWNING: THE “LAST” MEETING

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Walter Pater’s friendship with the schoolmaster and Fellow of King’s College, Cambridge, Oscar Browning (1837-1923), is poorly documented. With that, it has much in common with Pater’s life in general. Was there some risk from the more censorious to Pater’s reputation involved in this friendship? Did Pater eventually break the friendship? What happened to it in the 1880s? Certainly, in terms of risk, Oscar Browning’s relationship with young boys was a matter of some discussion, even as it might seem to matter more to commentators on O.B. (as he was commonly known) now than it did in his own day. Browning’s dismissal as a Master at Eton in 1875 was, technically, for teaching more pupils than he was entitled to – a minor matter that would not normally have resulted in such drastic action (Davenport-Hines). But the hint of scandal was already there. The academic and biographer A.C. Benson, whose autobiography contains a chapter on Browning, observed that this serious response to a low-level infraction “left an impression that there must have been something much more serious in the background, and this overshadowed O.B. more or less for the rest of his life” (132) – and that “something much more” was, perhaps, Browning’s “impatience of moral restraint” when in the company of boys (131). It is hard to know what to make of such claims, and hard too to exaggerate the difficulty of understanding the sexual life, let alone sexual influence, of a figure known to us now only through words from over a century ago. There was “never any evidence that [Browning] stole even a kiss from the undergraduates he befriended,” remarks the late Noel Annan in his sane study of Oxford and Cambridge, *The Dons: Mentors, Eccentrics and Geniuses* (103). But that word “stole” is odd, leaving one wondering about kisses that are given, not stolen.

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