

William Cowper (Part I)

Churchman 005/1 1881

Charles D. Bell

1. *The Life and Works of William Cowper*. By Robert Southey.
2. *English Men of Letters: Cowper*. By Goldwin Smith.
3. *Theology in the English Poets: Cowper*. By the Rev. Stopford A. Brooke.
4. *The English Poets*. Edited by T. H. Ward. *Cowper*. By the Editor.
5. *History of English Literature*. By H. A. Taine.

[The above publications are referred to in the article.]

There is, not doubt, a good deal of justice in the remarks made by the Editor of “The English Poets” in his introduction to the poems of Cowper. “It is undoubtedly true,” he writes, “that Cowper is little read by the very class with is most given to the reading of poetry, and most competent to judge it. He is a favourite with the middle classes. He is not a favourite with the cultivated classes.” I am afraid, however, that he is not much read in the present day, even by the “middle classes”—that to them his poetry is a name, and nothing more. Other poets, more musical in their diction, more dramatic in their conception, and broader in their religion, have “pushed him from his stool.” And yet, ignorance of this poet is a loss to any class, cultivated or otherwise; and whatever be the limitations of his genius, or however, what Mr Matthew Arnold calls “his morbid religion and lumbering movement,” may prevent his general acceptance, they who fail to make acquaintance with his poems deprive themselves of much pleasure and enjoyment. We certainly ought not, from any dread of his Puritanism—which is so distasteful to the preachers of culture, the prophets of “Sweetness and Light”—to neglect a poet, of whose great poem, “The Task,” M. Taine can thus write:—

At length poetry has again become life-like; we no longer listen to words, but we feel emotions; it is no longer an author, but a man, who speaks. His life is there perfect, beneath its black lines, without falsehood or concoction; his whole effort is bent on removing falsehood and concoction. When he describes his little river, his dear Ouse, “slow winding thro’ a plain of spacious meads, with cattle sprinkled o’er,” he sees it with his inner eye; and each word, caesura, sound, answers to a change of that inner vision. It is so in all his verses; they are full of personal emotions, genuinely felt, never altered or disguised: on the contrary, fully expressed, with their transient shades and fluctuations; in a word, as they are—that is, in the process of production and distinction; not all complete, motionless and fixed as the old style represented them. Herein consists the great revolution of the modern style. The mind, outstripping the known rules of rhetoric and eloquence, penetrates into profound psychology, and no longer employs words, except to mark emotions. (Vol. II p. 247).

The truth is, that few who have written the story of Cowper’s life, or have criticized his poems, have had any sympathy with his religious views, which, therefore, not understanding, they have misrepresented; and which, so far from driving him to madness and suicide, raised him often from the depths of profound dejection, and shed a light over the gloom of his despair. His was a timid and over-sensitive nature. Had he been cast in a ruder and rougher mould, the mental balance would not have been so easily destroyed. His biographers and critics, one and all, stumble against what they call his Calvinism. For instance, the editor of “The English Poets,” writes thus:—

Since we are to look to poetry for the successful application of ideas to life, we shall look in vain to “The Task”; for the ideas are those of an inelastic Puritanism, that would maim and mutilate life in the name of religion. . . . He began with the resolve to make religion poetical, and he succeeded in making poetry religious—but religious after a manner which his excellent editor, Mr Benham, himself a clergyman, calls “hard and revolting.”

Mr Stopford Brooke writes:—Cowper’s “Calvinism, which he seems to have had before meeting with Newton, combined with the tendency to madness in him, had produced a religious insanity, which, occurring at intervals through his life, finally fixed its talons on his heart, and never let him go, even in the hour of death. He believed himself irrevocably doomed by God.” But, as Mr Goldwin Smith very properly reminds us, “When Cowper first went mad, his conversion to Evangelicalism had not taken place; he had not led a particularly religious life, nor been greatly given to religious practices, though, as a clergyman’s son, he naturally believed in religion, had at times felt religious emotions, and when he found his heart sinking, had tried devotional books and prayers. The truth is, his malady was simple hypochondria, having its source in delicacy of constitution and weakness of digestion, combined with the influence of melancholy surroundings The catastrophe was brought on by an incident with which religion had nothing to do.” But while Mr Goldwin Smith allows that in Cowper’s case “religion was not the bane,” and that his recovery from madness “came in the form of a burst of religious faith and hope,” he has evidently no sympathy with Cowper’s religious opinions, and seems well pleased to think that the Evangelicalism which he professed is now ready to vanish away. It is thus he writes on this subject:—

However obsolete Cowper’s belief, and the language in which he expresses it, may have become for many of us, we must take it as his philosophy of life. . . . He belongs to a particular religious movement, with the vitality of which the interest of a great part of his works has departed, or is departing.

Mr Goldwin Smith seems to be of the number of those who imagine that Evangelicalism—“inelastic Puritanism,” if they like the definition better—has become old and effete, and is behind the intelligence of the age, and that nothing now remains but to dig its grave and consign it honourably to the tomb. They are ready to seize the pen and write its epitaph, and to chant a requiem at its grave. We trust these prophets of a decaying Evangelicalism are mistaken in their predictions. Sad will it be if Calvinism, which lies at the root of all that is strongest and most forcible in Christian character, which has been the creed of some of the greatest men that ever lived, and which has played no unimportant part in the history of our nation, giving England the religious and political freedom she now enjoys—sad will it be if Calvinism—“the spirit which rises in revolt against untruth,” the spirit which nerves us to strive with the giant powers of evil, and which opens a refuge in times of trouble, because it makes us strong and calm in the thought of a Sovereign Will whose outgoings are love, is ever to become a dead faith of the past. If either our cultivated or middle classes are deterred from reading Cowper through dislike of his religious opinions, which were those of the men who, in the sixteenth century, overthrew spiritual wickedness, and purged England from lies, and which have been crystallized in the Articles of the English Church—then we can only mourn that it is so, and reluctantly believe that “Evangelicism has now been reduced to a narrow domain by the advancing forces of Ritualism on the one side, and of Rationalism on the other.”¹

Other reasons, however, may be given for the neglect of Cowper by the present generation of Englishmen. Other poets, of greater power and passion, of more mastery over their materials,

of deeper emotion and higher gifts of expression, have, like new stars, “swam into our ken” since his day. The popularity of Byron and Burns, of Wordsworth and Coleridge, of Keats and Shelley, of Tennyson and Browning, may account for something of the forgetfulness into which Cowper has fallen. But if these poets be more fervent in spirit and more faultless in work; if the music of their verse be more perfect, and if the themes on which they write be more generally attractive to the intellect of this century, yet has Cowper merits of his own—wit, humour, satire, a love of nature, and a fidelity to truth—which will give him a foremost place amongst our great singers while the English language endures. Besides being a poet, and one of the first to call poetry back from conventionality to Nature, and in thus being “the precursor of Wordsworth”—he is, according to Southey, “the best of English letter writers;” and these letters, written without any thought of their meeting the public eye, are entirely artless, and full of charm.

It will not be out of place, before looking at some of his characteristics as a poet, to give a brief sketch of his simple and pathetic life.

William Cowper was born on the 15th of November, 1731, at the Rectory, Great Berkhamstead. His father, the Rev. John Cowper, D.D., was rector of the parish, and chaplain to George II. His mother was Anne Donne, daughter of Roger Donne, of Ludham Hall, in Norfolk, and was descended from several noble houses—indeed, by four different lines from Henry III., King of England. The poet alludes to this in the famous piece which he wrote on receiving her picture:—

My boast is not that I deduce my birth
From loins enthroned, and rulers of the earth;
But higher far my proud pretensions rise—
The son of parents passed into the skies.

Pope, who had been the idol of his age and its poetical standard, but with whom the harmony and finish of his verse were more than the subjects on which it was employed, was lingering out his last days in his villa at Twickenham, on the side of the silver Thames. The Artificial School of Poetry, which touched the ear but did not reach the heart, fine and subtle though it was, was now to be succeeded by a newer and higher melody, which derived its inspiration from Nature.

Cowper was but six years old when he lost his mother. In the beautiful poem called, “Lines on the receipt of my Mother’s Picture,” he has given voice to the sorrow which wrung his childish heart when news was brought him that she was dead. Her death soon made itself felt by peculiar trials. His father married again—how soon we are not told—and the child seems scarcely to have lived at home after this the first great loss of his life. At the age of six, the poor little sickly boy was sent from home to a boarding-school at Market Street, in Hertfordshire—“the first of those sad changes,” remarks Southey, “through which a gentle spirit has to pass in this uneasy and disordered world.” Many hardships had the delicate boy to contend with while at this school, and his trials were greatly aggravated by the barbarities of a cruel lad, whose delight it was to torment him. “I well remember,” he says, “being afraid to lift my eyes upon him higher than his knees, and I knew him better by his shoe-buckles than any other part of his dress.” As specks had appeared on Cowper’s eyes, and they became subject to inflammation, he was removed from the boarding-school, and placed under the care of an eminent oculist, in whose house he spent two years. The disease in his eyes did not yield to treatment, and, strange to say, he owed his recovery to a severe attack of small-pox

when he was thirteen year of age. In his tenth year he was sent to Westminster School, where he excelled, as he tells us, "at cricket and football," and became a good classical scholar. His skill in athletic games beguiled him into a novel idea. "I became," he says, "so forgetful of mortality, that, strange as it may seem, surveying my activity and strength, and observing the evenness of my pulse, I began to entertain, with no small complacency, a notion that perhaps I might never die." An incident befell him at this time which startled him out of this foolish thought. Crossing St. Margaret's churchyard late one evening, he was attracted by a glimmering light, and found a grave-digger at work, who, just as Cowper came to the spot, threw up a skull, which struck him on the leg. This gave an alarm to his conscience, and he remembered the incident as among the best religious documents which he received at Westminster. While he was passing through the fifth form, Vincent Bourne, celebrated for his Latin verse, was the usher. This man was slovenly to the point of being disgusting, and as good-natured as he was dirty. The Duke of Richmond once set fire to his greasy locks, and boxed his ears to put it out again. His indolence rendered his accomplishments useless to his pupils. "I lost," says Cowper, "more than I got by him, for he made me as idle as himself." It was while Cowper was at Westminster, and when about the age of fourteen, that he first tried his hand at English verse, in a translation of one of the elegies of Tibullus.

Amongst his school-fellows were several men of note and genius. He numbered amongst his early friends, Robert Lloyd, a minor poet and essayist; Charles Churchill, author of "The Rosciad," and Colman and Cumberland, both writers of comedies for the stage. His other remarkable contemporaries at Westminster were Elijah Impey, afterwards Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Bengal, and Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of the Province.

We next hear of Cowper in a solicitor's office. "At the age of eighteen," he says, "being tolerably well furnished with grammatical knowledge, but as ignorant of all kinds of religion as the satchel on my back, I was taken from Westminster, and having spent about nine months at home, was sent to acquire the practice of the law, with a London attorney." Here he had for a fellow-clerk the future Lord Chancellor Thurlow, who had been educated at Canterbury school. Cowper had no taste for the plodding business of the law; and the master to whom he was articled allowed him to be as idle as he wished. Upon leaving Mr Chapman's, in his twenty-first year, he took chambers in the Middle Temple, "becoming," he says, "in a manner, complete master of myself." And it was now, when he first began to live alone, that the sad malady began, which, at different times and under different symptoms, darkened so much of his life. After a year spent in terrible despondency, he at length betook himself to prayer, which brought him some consolation and ease.

Being recommended change of air, he went to Southampton, and a few days after his arrival, he walked, one bright sunny morning, to a beautiful spot about a mile from the town, and as he sat on an eminence by the sea, his heart became suddenly joyous. After this break in the cloud, his mind for a season alternated between light and gloom. He formed good resolutions—he broke them; he composed some prayers—he ended by throwing them into the fire.

In the June of 1754, he was called to the bar, though he had taken no pains to qualify himself for his profession; for his life hitherto had been that of a careless man of the world. Two years later he lost his father; and three years after he removed to the Inner Temple. At the age of twenty-eight he was made Commissioner of Bankruptcy. He now formed an attachment for one of his cousins, Theodora Jane, second daughter of his uncle, Ashley Cowper, a woman of great beauty, wit, and accomplishments.

His cousin's affections were as deeply engaged as Cowper's; but her father, fearing, no doubt, the morbid melancholy of his nephew, absolutely refused his consent to their marriage, and they were separated. "If you marry William Cowper, what will you do?" asked the father. "Do, Sir?" she replied, with the saucy readiness of a high-spirited girl; "wash all day, and ride out on the great dog all night." She remained constant to the poet all her life, retaining a proud affection for him to the last, and died unmarried.

We must now look at Cowper when he has reached his thirty-second year, his patrimony nearly spent, and with little apparent prospect of his ever repairing the consequences of his own idleness by a fortune of his own getting. He had relations who possessed some political influence. The office of the Clerk of the Journals in the House of Lords fell vacant, and was in the gift of Cowper's kinsman, Major Cowper, as patentee. Cowper had coveted the office, expressing the hope that the Clerk of the Journals, who held the office, might die; and "God," he says, gave me my heart's desire, and in it, and with it, an immediate punishment of my crime." At the same time the joint offices of Reading Clerk, and Clerk of the Committees, which were of much greater value than the Clerkship of the Journals, were vacated by resignation; and these being also in Major Cowper's gift, were offered to the poet, who accepted them. "But with them," he says, "he at the same time seemed to receive a dagger in his heart." He felt the impossibility of executing a business of so public a nature; and after a week of much anxiety, he besought his kinsman to give him instead the Clerkship of the Journals, which fell more readily within the scope of his abilities. But fresh difficulties arose from the opposition of a powerful party among the Lords, who wished the nomination of another candidate; and as the merits of the rival claimants were to be tested by an examination at the bar of the House, Cowper's mind was clouded by terrors, and his conflicting emotions brought on a nervous fever. Under the stress and strain of an ever-increasing agitation, his mind began to give way. "I now," he says, "began to look upon madness as the only chance remaining." His great fear was that his senses would not fail him in time enough to excuse his appearance at the bar of the House of Lords, and prevent the trial for the Clerkship. He became mad, and with madness came the sore temptation of his life—suicide?²

The desire for death was succeeded by a shuddering fear of the grave. From this time he was haunted by imaginary horrors, was scared by visions, and terrified by dreams. He believed that he had sinned against the Holy Ghost, and had no longer any interest in Christ. It was at this juncture that he sent for his friend, the Rev Martin Madan; and though Cowper used to think him an enthusiast, yet he now felt that if there were any balm in Gilead, this was the man to administer it to him. The interview of the two friends was much blessed to the poet, and the wounded spirit lost something of its pain, though the mind had by no means recovered its balance. Nay, greater terrors were behind, and madness for a time made a total wreck of that fine, but too sensitive, spirit. He was removed by his friends to St. Albans, where Dr Cotton, a physician of great skill, and well-known humanity, kept a private asylum for the insane. Medical treatment and religious intercourse (for Dr Cotton was a man of piety, and a writer of hymns) restored his distempered mind to health. Seated one morning in a chair, near the window of his room, he took up a Bible, and opened it for comfort and instruction. The verse which met his eye was the 21st of the third chapter of the Epistle to the Romans: "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation, through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission (the passing over) of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God." "In a moment I believed and received the Gospel." "Oh, the fever of the brain!" he says—in one of his beautiful letters to Lady Hesketh, after his recovery—"to

feel the quenching of *that* fire is indeed a blessing, which I think it impossible to receive without the most consummate gratitude. My affliction has taught me a way to happiness, which, without it, I never should have found." On his release from the asylum, he resigned the Commissionership of Bankruptcy; and as a return to his profession was out of the question, his relations combined to raise a small income for him, just enough for his support. His brother John, who first tried to find lodgings for him at or near Cambridge, failing in this, placed him at Huntingdon, within riding distance, so that the brothers could meet once a week. He took to Huntingdon the attendant who waited on him at Dr Cotton's Asylum, and he brought from the same place a friendless boy, whose case had excited his interest, and for whom he afterwards provided, by putting him into a trade. In that charming strain of quiet humour, which was as natural to him as to breathe, he unfolds, in a letter to Hill, a difficulty he experienced in his novel task of keeping house for himself and his servant:—

A man cannot always live on sheeps' heads, and liver and lights, like the lions in the Tower; and a joint of meat in so small a family is an endless encumbrance. My kitchen bill for last week amounted to four shillings and tenpence. I set off with a leg of lamb, and was forced to give part of it away to my washerwoman. Then I made an experiment upon a sheep's heart, and that was too little. Next, I put three pounds of beef into a pie, and this had like to have been too much, though my landlord was admitted to a share in it. Then, as to small beer, I am puzzled to pieces about it. I have bought as much for a shilling as will serve at least a month, and it has grown sour already. In short, I never knew how to pity poor housekeepers before; but now I cease to wonder at that politic cast, which their occupation usually gives to their countenance, for it is really a matter full of perplexity.

The result of what he called his "good management," and clear notions of economical affairs, was that in three months he spent the income of a twelvemonth. He then came to the conclusion that, to avoid bankruptcy, he must be boarded as well as lodged. He also began to feel the want of companionship. The visits of his neighbours were not frequent; and as "cards and dancing were the professed business of the inhabitants," he would have derived no pleasure from a closer intercourse with the gayer portion of the community. Under these circumstances, he was induced to take a step which had the happiest influence on his future life.

At Huntingdon he formed a strong and lasting friendship with the Unwin family, consisting of the Rev William Unwin, a clergyman, his wife, a woman of accomplishments and intelligence, and their son and daughter. To Mrs Unwin he was strongly drawn from the first; and his happiest hours were those spent in the society of these agreeable Christian friends.

After a time Cowper found a place in this family as a boarder, and in the November of 1765 he became an inmate of their house. He had hardly been two years with these friends when Mr Unwin was killed by a fall from his horse. But Cowper still continued to live with Mrs Unwin, and the friendship between these two—the man of thirty-six, and the woman of forty-three—as calm and sober as it was beautiful, remained unbroken till death. The death of Mr Unwin was soon followed by the removal of the whole family to Olney, in response to the proposal of that remarkable man, the Rev John Newton, who was curate of the parish, and happened to be passing through Huntingdon at the time of Mr Unwin's death. A close friendship soon sprung up between the poet and the curate. Newton thus speaks of Cowper, in a memoir of him which he began but never finished:—

For nearly twelve years we were never separated for twelve hours at a time, when we were awake and at home. The first six I passed in admiring and attempting to imitate him; during the

second six I walked pensively with him in the “Valley of the Shadow of Death.” . . . He loved the poor; he often visited them in their cottages, conversed with them in the most condescending manner, sympathized with and comforted them in their distresses; and those who were seriously disposed were often cheered and animated by his prayers.

Nor was Cowper without some intellectual employment congenial to his taste and suited to his poetical talents; for Newton was compiling a volume of hymns, and engaged the valuable help of his friend. The hymns were undertaken “with the hope of promoting the faith and comfort of sincere Christians, and of perpetuating the remembrance of an intimate and endeared friendship.” Whatever was the motive, the Church has to thank God for these sacred songs—the breathings of genius, sanctified by devotion.

For a few years the life of the poet flowed calmly on, and its even tenour was only interrupted by the death of his dear and only brother in the year 1770. But the shadow of the coming malady fell at times on his path; and in the January of 1773 the terrible darkness returned. Again he was plunged in the profoundest dejection; again he attempted suicide. In one of his solitary walks through the fields near Olney, and before the disease had reached its height, a mysterious presentiment took possession of his mind, and returning home he composed the last of the hymns contributed to the Olney Collection:—

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

For seven years his harp was mute and its chords unstrung. His mind was little better than a sad and melancholy discord—

Like sweet bells jangled, out of time, and harsh.

It was not until the year 1780 that the mind, which had wandered into the region of eclipse, again emerged into the sunshine. And even then the light was often chequered and broken. Though his letters and verses breathe a spirit of humour and playfulness, yet a deep undertone of sadness may be heard running through all, as the sobbing of the storm lingers on the ear even after the heavens have resumed their blue, and the thunder has died amongst the distant hills.

When he began to recover, his health was promoted by gradual amusement and occupation. He employed himself in his garden, he built houses for his plants, he made some landscape drawings, he played with his tame hares—pets and companions which grew up under his care, and continued to interest him nearly twelve years, when the last survivor died quietly of old age.

About the time that Cowper’s mind regained its wonted balance, John Newton was called from Olney to a parish in London. Henceforth the intercourse of the two friends was carried on by letters. Cowper’s feelings flowed down to his pen, and his letters to Newton are the outpourings of his heart. Some are grave, some are playful; some that have the appearance of prose to the eye, have the sound of rhyme to the ear; and others are perfect poems in themselves; for often, in the midst of a letter to his friend, he would throw his thoughts into harmonious and spontaneous verse.

Mrs Unwin was the first who prevailed on him to undertake something of greater pith and moment than he had as yet produced.

She urged him to write a poem of considerable length; and as moral satire was equally congenial to his taste, and in accordance with his views, she suggested as his theme, "The Progress of Error." He acted on her advice, and speedily followed up "The Progress of Error" with three other poems of the same serious nature: "Truth," "Table Talk," and "Expostulation." On sending "Table Talk" to Mr Newton, he said:—

It is a medley of many things, some that may be useful, and some, for aught I know, may be very diverting. I am merry, that I may decoy people into my company; and grave, that they may be the better for it. Now and then I put on the garb of a philosopher, and take the opportunity that his disguise procures, to drop a word in favour of religion. In short, there is some pith; and here and there are bits of sweetmeat, which seems to entitle it justly to the name of a certain dish the ladies call "a trifle."

He was fifty years of age when his first volume of poems was published.

(To be continued. – See Churchman 005/2 1881 for Part II)

CHARLES D. BELL

Endnotes:

- 1) "Cowper," by Goldwin Smith.—The fact is, Cowper's Calvinism was not of a harsh, rigid, or ugly type; for, as he held the doctrine, it was but the cloud resting on the Marcy-seat, while out of the cloud there came the voice, "God is Love." This shall be shown in a second article by some *quotations* from his poems.
- 2) He has told us, with the utmost minuteness, the story of his attempts at self-destruction. We see the whole scene, as he tries to reason himself into the belief that suicide is lawful; as he buys from the apothecary a half-crown phial of laudanum; as he hurries into the fields with the intention of swallowing it; and, as the strong love of life again returning, he resolves rather to fly to France, change his religion, and enter a monastery, and thus escape the ordeal which he dreads. Again, we see him in another mood, bent once more on self-destruction, and hurrying in a hackney coach to the Tower wharf that he may throw himself into the river. But as the tide is low, and a porter seated on the quay, he returns to his chambers, and tries to swallow the laudanum; but here he is interrupted by his laundress and her husband, and at length the poison is thrown away. On the night before the day appointed for the examination before the Lords, he lies with an open penknife pressed against his heart, but his courage fails, and he dares not drive it home. His last effort was to hang himself, and using his garter he forms it into a noose, and placing it about his neck, he fastens it to the top of his bed-frame. He makes three several attempts at suicide, all of which fail from the slipping of the noose, or the breaking of the frame; but on the last occasion, when consciousness is gone, and he comes to himself, only after he has fallen on the floor, it is seen how near he has been to death by the stagnation of the blood under one eye, in a broad crimson spot, and by the red circle which extends round his neck. Horror-stricken, he staggered back to bed, an overwhelming conviction of sin seized upon his soul, and his conscience was harrowed by a sense of God's anger.