

STEPHEN DUCK AT KEW

BY

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IN the course of writing an article on Stephen Duck and Merlin's Cave in Kew Gardens, which was printed in *Country Life Annual* for 1961, I came across certain particulars about the poet's life at Kew which are perhaps worth putting on record. They supplement the best biographical account of Duck, that in J. S. Childers' edition of Southey's *Lives of the Uneducated Poets* (Humphrey Milford, 1925). The only full-dress biography of Duck is that by Rose M. Davis.¹

Stephen Duck, the Thresher Poet, of Charlton, Wiltshire, was discovered by two clergymen and brought to Richmond Lodge in 1730 as a protégé of Queen Caroline. There is no support for Brayley's statement that he was a day-labourer in Kew Gardens. His first wife had died and was buried at Charlton,² and in July 1733 the *Gentleman's Magazine* announced his second marriage

Mr. Stephen Duck the famous thresher poet to Mrs. Sarah Bigge house-keeper to Her Majesty at Kew Green, who gave her a purse of guineas and a fine gown.

Some further details were found at Kew Church, the original registers of which are missing, having no doubt fallen a prey to autograph-hunters; however, among other interesting documents—the Chapel of St. Ann, Kew, 1714, was attached to Kingston until 1769—is an incomplete transcript by the Rev. Daniel Bellamy, the first Vicar (d. 1788), as well as notes by a clerk in an old prayer book. While Stephen Duck's marriage is not recorded (probably it was solemnized in Richmond Lodge), there are important entries relating to his family.

Burials.	July 1736.	Caroline daughter of Sarah and Stephen Duck.
	Jan. 19, 1737/8.	Buried Mary Duck.
Christenings.	July 12, 1739.	Wilhelmina Amelia. Daughter of Stephen and Sarah Duck.
	July 23, 1740.	Elizabeth. Daughter of Stephen and Sarah Duck.
Burials.	July 26, 1740.	Elizabeth Duck, infant.
	October 29, 1741.	Sarah Ducke.

The choice of Christian names for the children suggest that even

¹ 1927, University of Maine Studies.

² *Notes & Queries*, 1869, p. 549. The *St. James's Evening Post*, 29–31 Oct., 1730, reported "On Sunday last died in Childbed at Colne (*sic*) in Wiltshire the Wife of Stephen Duck, the famous Threshing Poet whose Works have justly recommended him to the Royal Favour and the World's Esteem."

after the death of the Queen Wilhelmina Dorothea Caroline of Ansbach (to give her longer title), Duck enjoyed, or at any rate expected, patronage from her unmarried daughter the Princess Amelia.

The scene now shifts to North Welwyn, whence the Rev. Edward Young, himself a poet, wrote to the Duchess of Portland on 16 September 1744

I blessed Mr. Stephen Duck yesterday with a third wife, they were pleased to come to Welwyn for that benediction.

The occasion was a festive one and according to one of the curates, the Rev. John Jones, an odd story and smart verses were added to the Register.³ The Rector of Welwyn told me some years ago of a note in the Register

No fewer than fifteen parchment leaves appear to have been cut out of this book by what hand I know not.

J. Jones. Ap. 17. 1759.

What is not recorded is the name of the bride, Elizabeth Nevinson, whose marriage settlement is in my possession. She was born on 28 September 1694, daughter of the Rev. Thomas Nevinson, Vicar of Torpenhow, Cumberland, the friend and crony of William Nicolson, Bishop of Carlisle, whose sister Grace he had married.⁴ The settlement, dated 24 March 1743, is signed by Stephen Duck, of Kew, Gentleman, Elizabeth Nevinson of the parish St. George's, Hanover Square, with William Nevinson of the South Sea House (her brother), and Charles Carlile of Pall Mall, apothecary, as Trustees.

The Trust comprised £60 lent to her sister Mrs. Dorothy Conner who had repaid £10, £500 to Lord Brook of Beauchamp Court carrying £10 interest half-yearly, £50 to Thomas Cape of Queen's Head Court, Paternoster Row, a £100 promissory note carrying 4% interest to Edward Greenfield of Marlborough, Wilts., apothecary, and a £100 Exchequer annuity paying £3 10s.

It is possible that Elizabeth Nevinson was associated with her sister Dorothy as a milliner in New Bond Street, but one does not picture Stephen Duck as a buyer of lace ruffles. His career was none too prosperous, his latest publications "Alrick and Isabella," and an "Ode on the Battle of Dettingen" were insubstantial, and perhaps on this account the marriage was delayed. In the mid-1740's he took Holy Orders, and the wits wrote

Quoth Stephen D— to Tom of K—w
my hermitage and verses too
begin to fail; 'tis time to preach
and Gospel in assemblies teach . . .

His first preferment was that of Chaplain to a Regiment of Dragoons, and he may also have acted as curate at Kew. In Elizabeth Duck's Will, dated 26 March 1747, she describes herself as wife of the Revd.

³ Blackwoods Magazine, May 1932.

⁴ F. G. James, *North Country Bishop*, Yale, 1956.

Stephen Duck of Kew. Naming her Trustees as Executors, she leaves Francis Lord Brook's bond on trust to be divided amongst her nephews and nieces, releases her sister of the money owed, and leaves Thomas Cape's bond of £50 and Greenfield's promissory note of £100 to her husband on condition that he delivers to Dorothy Conner, her sister, her gold watch and chain, seals and other things affixed, her Amethyst and Anchor rings, her silver salver with her father's arms, the pictures of her brother John Nevinson (who was lost at sea), of my Lady Hartford and Lady Elizabeth Smithson, her best snuff-box and all her linen and wearing apparel.

The transcript of the Kew register shows the burial of "Elizabeth Duck" on 19 July 1749, and as Elizabeth Nevinson was unlikely to have had any children, Stephen Duck probably became a widower for a third time. The Will in my possession, however, has not been proved, nor have I been able to verify the footnote in Vol. III, p. 152 of Brayley's *Surrey* about the deaths at advanced ages of Stephen Duck's children by his first marriage. It is not unlikely that his son and three daughters all came to Kew and obtained positions of some sort in the Royal Household.

In 1752, almost certainly through the agency of Joseph Spence, Duck was instituted Rector of Byfleet, and there composed what is of some interest to Surrey historians, his topographical

CÆSAR'S CAMP or ST. GEORGE'S HILL, A Poem, By the Reverend Mr. Duck, Rector of Byfleet. London (Dodsley), 1755. (25 pp. 4^o.)

Standing on St. George's Hill, the poet strains his eyes over a wide area

First chalky Wey for ravenous pikes renowned
Rolls through the meads and fructifies the ground . . .
Next gentle Mole thro' shady valley strays
And underground her silent wave conveys

The story of "Mole, once a wood-nymph, beautiful and vain" is over-long to quote, but there are verses on houses

Thy groves, O Weston, next the Muse invite
where once she Raleigh's noble soul inspir'd
when he from Business War or Courts retired . . .

on celebrities, such as Mrs. Knipe of Richmond

Who modish pleasures bravely has withstood
and dares be most unfashionably good
her pious treasures reach remotest lands
new worlds are bless'd with bounties from her hands . .

(a note reminds us that she sent religious books to America). His eye ranging more widely, Duck pays a brief tribute to the Princess Dowager of Wales described as "a Widowed Venus" at Kew.

The latter part of the poem is in the form of a prophecy pronounced by a Druid captive in Cæsar's Camp. Although beginning sublimely "Illustrious Robber, when shall Ruin cease?" (surely an anticipation of Gray's Bard) the poem soon descends to the factual

An honour'd Briton, Hamilton his name,
Shall nobly beautify that silent stream
Whose curious nymphs shall leave their native floods
To visit and admire his stately Woods.

It is explained in a footnote that the river Mole not only runs close to Mr. Hamilton's gardens, but by means of an excellent Engine of his own invention is conveyed into them.

"Cæsar's Camp" was the last poem published by Stephen Duck, and in 1756 he was found drowned in the Thames at Reading "behind the Black Lion Inn," following a fit of melancholy. There is much more to be discovered about him, since he is apt to prove an elusive figure in history, but it is hoped that these notes have added something to the picture of the Thresher Poet.