

RECORDS OF BUCKINGHAMSHIRE.



THE POETS OF BUCKINGHAMSHIRE.— WILLIAM COWPER.

An Address delivered by the VEN. ARCHDEACON BICKERSTETH, D.D., at the Annual Meeting of the Archæological Society at Chicheley Hall, July 15, 1869.

THE COUNTY of BUCKINGHAM can claim the honour of an association with several poets of distinction.

EDMUND WALLER, born at Coleshill, a detached portion of Hertfordshire in the parish of Amersham, March 30, 1605, was essentially a Buckinghamshire man. His father held a considerable estate in that parish. His mother was of the family of Hampden. The poet represented Amersham in two or three successive parliaments. He was successful as an orator, more so than as a statesman. In this latter capacity, if we may accept Clarendon's estimate of him, he was timorous and vacillating. He died at Hall Barn in Beaconsfield, October 21, 1687, and was buried in the churchyard of that parish. According to the inscription on his tomb, said to have been written by Rymer, the compiler of the "Fœdera," Waller appears to have retained his powers as a poet to extreme old age:—

*"Edmundi Waller hic jacet id quantum morti cessit,
Qui inter Poetas sui temporis facile princeps,
Lauream quam meruit adolescens,
Octogenarius haud abdicavit."*

A far more illustrious name than Waller's is that of his contemporary, JOHN MILTON.

Milton was born in London, December 9th, 1608, about three years after Waller, though Waller outlived him thirteen years. He was descended of a good family, to which Milton in Oxfordshire gave its name. His father, a scrivener by profession, and a man of learning and accomplishments, provided carefully for the education of the future poet. He sent him to St. Paul's, and afterwards to Christ's College, Cambridge. Milton the father possessed at this time a small estate at Horton in this county, where his son resided with him for five years after leaving Cambridge. During those years he read diligently the Greek and Latin authors; and laid the foundation of his future fame by producing his "Comus and Lycidas," and perhaps also his "L'Allegro and Il Penseroso." After this he went abroad for some time; and it was in the course of his travels that he used those memorable words: "I hope by labour and intense study, which I take to be my portion in this life, joined with a strong propensity of nature, to leave something so written to after times as they should not willingly let it die." Milton was a striking example of the combination of lofty genius and intense application.

About the age of thirty-six his eyesight began to fail him, and at forty-six he was blind. But his spirit and his genius triumphed over this formidable obstacle to literary distinction.

His thoughts were at this time concentrated, it is said, upon three or four great objects: 1, A Latin Dictionary or Thesaurus; 2, An Epic Poem; 3, A History of England; and 4, A Body of Divinity. As for the epic poem, "Paradise Lost" seems to have been upon his mind from a very early period. It was first set forth in a dramatic form, after the manner of the ancient Mysteries. A sketch of it, in this its rudimental state, is printed in "Johnson's Lives of the Poets." Milton's blindness certainly retarded his progress in his other great literary pursuits; but it was no bar to his powers of imagination; and so the epic poem advanced while the other great works stood still. It is probable that the great poet gave his last finishing touches to this inimitable poem during his residence at Chalfont St. Giles's, whither the Plague in London had driven him in 1665. It was at Chalfont also that he received from his

friend Elwood, the Quaker, the suggestion which led to the production of "Paradise Regained." It is probable that much of this poem was composed at Chalfont.

It may be interesting, in these days of multiplied authorship, to know what was the kind of remuneration that the most gifted authors received for their writings. The MS. of "Paradise Lost" was sold, April 27, 1667, to a publisher named "Samuel Simmons," for the sum of £5, with the understanding that the author was to receive £5 more when 1300 copies had been sold.

Milton died November 10, 1674, and was buried in the Church of St. Giles, Cripplegate.

One more poet must receive a passing homage before we come to William Cowper. THOMAS GRAY, like Milton, the son of a scrivener, was born in Cornhill, in the City of London, November 26, 1716. He was educated first at Eton, and then at Cambridge, where he entered as a pensioner at Peterhouse at the age of eighteen. There he spent almost the whole of his life; but from 1741 to 1758, his summer vacations were passed with his mother and aunt at Stoke Poges in this county. He was first publicly known as a poet in 1742, in which year he wrote his "Ode on Eton College." In 1750 he produced his far-famed "Elegy in a Country Churchyard." More than one churchyard is claimed as having inspired this beautiful composition; but there seems sufficient reason for giving the preference to Stoke. Mr. Gray was much esteemed by his contemporaries as a man of great learning and varied accomplishments; and it is no small praise of him, that Cowper pronounced him to be the only poet, since Shakspeare, entitled to the character of sublime. Gray died at Cambridge, July 30, 1771; and was buried, by his own desire, in the same vault with his mother, in Stoke Churchyard. Nearly eighty years afterwards a monument was erected to his memory by Mr. John Penn in the adjacent grounds.

Thus, while South Buckinghamshire is identified with the sweetness and smoothness of Waller, the strength and originality of Milton, and the flowing cadences of Gray, the North of the County has its compensation in being enriched with the pleasing measures of the amiable, gifted, and pious Cowper.

WILLIAM COWPER, the son of Dr. Cowper, Rector of

Great Berkhamstead, and great nephew of Lord Chancellor Cowper, was born at his father's rectory, November 15, 1731. His mother, who died when he was six years old, was a Miss Donne, of a Norfolk family, well known through the learned and accomplished Dean of St. Paul's of that name. If it be true that genius is generally transmitted through the female side, it is to his mother that Cowper may have been indebted for his exquisite sensibility and refined talents. Indeed, Cowper seems to acknowledge the obligation. At all events, she must have been a very remarkable person to have left such an impression as she did upon her little son, whose verses upon her picture, written many years afterwards, are amongst the most beautiful of his minor poems :—

* * * * *

“My mother! when I learned that thou wast dead,
Say, wast thou conscious of the tears I shed;
Hovered thy spirit o'er thy sorrowing son,
Wretch even then, life's journey just begun?
Perhaps thou gav'st me, though unseen, a kiss,
Perhaps a tear, if souls can weep in bliss.
I heard the bell toll'd on thy burial day,
I saw the hearse that bore thee slow away,
And, turning from my nursery window, drew
A long, long sigh, and wept a last adieu.”

Soon after this, his first great sorrow, the little William was sent to a boarding school at Market Street in Herts, where he was exposed to very savage treatment from a schoolfellow of fifteen years of age, one of the detestable race of cowardly bullies. The cruelty of this boy deeply affected him. In his own words he was so afraid of him that “he never dared to look higher up than his knees, and knew his dreaded approach better by his shoe buckles than by any other part of his dress.” It is probable that this treatment, acting upon a child of a peculiarly gentle and sensitive nature, may have stimulated the growth of that mysterious malady which clung to him all his life, and at times altogether over-mastered him.

From Market Street he was removed to Westminster, where he remained till he was eighteen. He was popular as a schoolboy, and excelled in football and cricket. At eighteen he was placed in the office of a solicitor, Mr. Chapman, with whom he remained for three years. He

had for a companion in this office, Thurlow, the future Lord High Chancellor. There could have been little congeniality between young men of such very different temperaments. But they were bound together by a mutual esteem; and it is greatly to the credit of Thurlow that he could appreciate the moral worth as well as the abilities of Cowper. Upon leaving Mr. Chapman's office in 1752, Cowper took chambers at the Middle Temple, where he had been entered April 29, 1748.

He was now twenty-one years of age, and at this period he became subject to a deep dejection of spirits—to that morbid melancholy which darkened so much of his after life, and from under the shadow of which he seldom, if ever, entirely emerged. He became from this time, to use his own figure, “as a stricken deer.”* At first he found some relief from reading “Herbert's Poems.” He then tried change of air in the South of England; and when looking upon some beautiful prospect near Southampton one calm and fine morning, the brightness and stillness of the scene seems to have penetrated him. All at once the weight of his misery was removed, and he became light and joyful.

Three years afterwards he moved from the Middle to the Inner Temple, about which time he was made a “Commissioner of Bankrupts.” But the study of the law was not to his taste; and even then he was beginning, as he says, “to ramble from the thorny paths of jurisprudence into the primrose paths of literature and poetry.” His biographer Southey informs us that he was at this time associated with several literary persons of distinction, as Colman, Churchill, Lloyd, and others; but he adds that his mind just then was “probably more on love than on literature.” He formed an attachment to a first cousin, Theodora Cowper, sister to the wife of Sir Thomas Hesketh. But the attachment was objected to for more reasons than one; and the engagement was broken off, though the two cousins never ceased to love one another.

About this time Cowper obtained, through family interest, the “Clerkship of the Journals of the House of Lords.” But the anxiety of preparation for the

* “I was a stricken deer, that left the herd
Long since.” “Task,” Book III.

duties of this office, and the dread of the publicity into which it would bring him, caused a return, in an aggravated form, of his old malady.

It now became necessary to remove him altogether from London; and through the interposition of that kind and tender Providence which never failed him, he was placed under the care of Dr. Cotton, an intelligent and most humane physician, then living at St. Alban's. In a few months the disease yielded to Dr. Cotton's judicious treatment; and again the afflicted poet recovered for a time peace and comfort of mind.

It is impossible to compare without deep emotion the sapphics in which he describes his state of mind while under the full influence of this dark and diseased melancholy, with his first Christian effusions of thankfulness upon his amendment. Let a stanza or two from each be quoted.

In his miserable dejection, when he looked upon himself as lost, and saw the light of hope gradually receding from him and fading in the distance, he thus writes:—

“Hard lot! encompassed with a thousand dangers,
Weary, faint, trembling with a thousand terrors,
I'm called in anguish to receive a sentence
Worse than Abiram's.”

But on his recovery, his feelings of gratitude gush forth in words which must penetrate every heart:—

“How blessed Thy creature is, O God,
When with a single eye
He views the lustre of Thy Word,
The Day-spring from on high.

The soul a dreary province once,
Of Satan's dark domain,
Feels a new empire formed within,
And owns a heavenly reign.”

Cowper remained with his kind friend Dr. Cotton for about eighteen months, and was then removed to Huntingdon, in order that he might be within easy reach of his brother, Mr. John Cowper, then residing upon his fellowship at Cambridge. This removal took place in 1765; and he entered his lodgings at Huntingdon, on June 22nd, in that year.

There was a family settled at that time at Huntingdon,

of the name of Unwin, consisting of father, mother, son, and daughter. Morley Unwin, the father, was an elderly man, a clergyman, occupying a commodious house in the High Street, in which he received a few pupils, and prepared them for the University. Mrs. Unwin, whose fortunes were from this time so interwoven with those of Cowper, and who became, in fact, a kind of second mother to the poet, is described as "a person of lively talents, with a sweet and serene countenance." The daughter was no less pleasing than the mother. The son, equally good and agreeable, was a student at Cambridge. To this family Cowper was at once drawn as by instinct; and, in a very short time, we find him settled as a lodger in their house. But two years brought a sad and sudden change to the family. Mr. Unwin the elder was killed by a fall from his horse, in July 1767, and the little establishment at Huntingdon was broken up. Cowper and the Unwins had now another home to seek; and by the advice and persuasion of Rev. John Newton, the curate of Olney, who had some knowledge of the Unwins, and through them of Cowper, they were induced to settle at Olney. Here a house was taken for them, so near the Vicarage, that, by opening a doorway through the garden-wall, the two families could communicate without going into the street.

Mr. Newton's life had been an eventful one. He was formerly the captain of a Liverpool slave-ship; and having gone through many dangers and vicissitudes, he became deeply impressed with religion, and entered holy orders. Much has been said and written upon the question how far Mr. Newton's particular religious teaching was adapted to a person of Cowper's delicately organized mental constitution. And certainly the change from the calm and soothing influences of the daily service at Huntingdon, which Cowper regularly attended, to the excitement of prayer and class meetings, and of visiting the sick and dying at Olney, in all of which Newton required him to take a part, must have been very trying to such a tender mind, and such "a wounded and yet lively imagination" as Cowper's. Some have been of opinion that the life which Cowper led during his first years at Olney, had a tendency to increase the morbid propensity of his delicately balanced constitution,

while others have thought that the best remedy for his disease of mind, was the powerful counter-stimulant of enthusiasm. For my own part, I am contented to believe that he was all along under the influence of a kind Providence, ever leading him "by the right way" to his heavenly rest. Certainly no one will question the strength and earnestness of Mr. Newton's religious convictions; and, doubtless, the circumstances in which Cowper was thus placed, tended to develop the moral beauty of his character. His religious spirit responded to real piety in any form; while his retirement, made pleasant to him by the society of those who loved and appreciated him, was favourable to the cultivation of his poetic powers.

During his residence at Olney, Cowper became acquainted with Lady Austen, widow of Sir Robert Austen, Bart., and sister to the wife of a clergyman then living at Clifton Reynes. She was a person of a lively sprightly wit; and though the acquaintance was not long continued, she helped greatly for a time to cheer him in some of his hours of melancholy. It is to this lady that we are indebted for the diverting "History of John Gilpin." One evening, when the poet was unusually depressed, she amused him with the outlines of the story, as one that she had heard in her childhood. The story was eagerly assimilated by Cowper; and it so tickled his fancy, that in the course of the night, he turned it into that ballad which has since been the source of merriment to thousands.

Cowper was an admirable letter-writer, an art which has certainly not profited by the penny postage system. In his letters his playful humour manifests itself continually. I cannot refrain from giving you one specimen, of about the date of 1783. A fire had taken place at Olney. In the confusion following the fire, a riot occurred, and many robberies were committed. A culprit was convicted of having stolen some iron-work, and was sentenced to be whipped at the cart's tail, from the stone house to the high arch, and back again. Cowper thus amusingly describes the operation:—

"He seemed to show great fortitude; but it was all an imposition on the public. The beadle who whipped him, had filled his left hand with red ochre, through which, after every stroke, he drew the lash of his whip,

leaving the appearance of a wound upon the skin, but in reality never hurting him at all. This being perceived by the constable, who followed the beadle to see that he did his duty, he (the constable) applied his cane without any such management or precaution, to the shoulders of the beadle. The scene now became interesting and exciting. The beadle could by no means be induced to strike the thief hard, which provoked the constable to strike harder; and so this double flogging continued, until a lass of Silver End, pitying the pitiful beadle, thus suffering under the hands of the pitiless constable, joined the procession, and placing herself immediately behind the constable, seized him by his capillary club, and pulling him backwards by the same, slapped his face with a most Amazonian fury. This concatenation of events has taken up more of my paper than I intended; but I could not forbear to inform you how the beadle thrashed the thief, and the constable the beadle, and the lady the constable, and how the thief was the only person concerned who suffered nothing."—*Letter to Rev. J. Newton, Nov. 17, 1783.*

In 1780, Mr. Newton left Olney, having been appointed to the Rectory of St. Mary Woolnoth, in London. But Cowper's genius was continually creating new friendships for him. In 1784, he made the acquaintance of Sir John and Lady Throckmorton, of Weston. In 1786, Lady Hesketh, now a widow, came to Olney, and took lodgings in the Vicarage; but not long after her arrival, arrangements were made for the removal of Cowper to Weston. Mrs. Unwin was still to him as a mother, and Lady Hesketh as a sister; and here, in their companionship, he fed upon the simple beauties of the park and neighbourhood, scenes which had always delighted him, and which he had constantly visited with Mrs. Unwin, while they lived at Olney.

Cowper's two greatest works are probably the "Task," and the "Translation of Homer." Of these, the "Task" is perhaps the most interesting and popular, because it reveals so much of the poet's mind, and illustrates his power of discovering the beauties of Nature in her simplest attire. It would not do to contrast Olney and its neighbourhood with some of the beautiful scenery of the West or North of England. The sedgy and sluggish Ouse will not bear comparison with the rushing Severn, or the sparkling Trent. But, nevertheless, Cowper has given a charm to this neighbourhood, and made it poetic ground. He does not describe the most beautiful scenes in Nature; but he discovers what is most lovely in ordinary scenes. And thus his poetical eye,

and his moral heart, could detect beauty even in the low flats of the valley of the Ouse.

How beautiful, because how true to Nature, is that description in the "Task," where he says, addressing Mrs. Unwin :—

"Thou know'st my praise of Nature most sincere,
 And that my rapture is not conjured up
 To serve occasions of poetic pomp ;
 But genuine ;—and art partner of them all.
 How oft, upon yon eminence our pace
 Has slackened to a pause, and we have borne
 The ruffling wind, scarce conscious that it blew ;
 While admiration feeding at the eye
 And still unsated, dwelt upon the scene.
 Thence with what pleasure have we just discovered
 The distant plough slow moving, and beside
 His labouring team, that swerved not from the track,
 The sturdy swain, diminished to a boy.
 Here Ouse, slow winding through a level plain
 Of spacious meads, with cattle sprinkled o'er,
 Conducts the eye along his sinuous course
 Delighted. There, fast rooted in his bank,
 Stand, never overlooked, our favourite elms
 That screen the herdsman's solitary hut ;
 While far beyond and overthwart the stream,
 That as with molten glass inlays the vale,
 The sloping land recedes into the clouds ;
 Displaying in its varied side the grace
 Of hedgerow beauties numberless, square tower,
 Tall spire, from which the sound of cheerful bells
 Just undulates upon the listening ear,
 Groves, heaths, and smoking villages remote.
 Scenes must be beautiful which daily viewed
 Please daily, and whose novelty survives
 Long knowledge and the scrutiny of years."
 "Task," Book I. l. 150, etc.

Or again :—

"My charmer is not mine alone, my sweets
 And she that sweetens all my bitters too—
 Nature, enchanting Nature, in whose form
 And lineaments Divine I trace a hand
 That errs not, and find raptures still renewed,
 Is free to all men,—universal prize."
 "Task," Book III.

Or, once more, those touching lines on the Poplar Field :—

"The poplars are fell'd, farewell to the shade,
 And the whispering sound of the cool colonnade ;
 The winds play no longer and sing in the leaves,
 Nor Ouse on his bosom their image receives."

Twelve years have elapsed since I last took a view
Of my favourite field, and the bank where they grew,
And now in the grass behold they are laid,
And the tree is my seat, that once lent me a shade.

The blackbird is fled to another retreat,
Where the hazels afford him a screen from the heat,
And the scene where his melody charmed me before,
Resounds with his sweet-flowing ditty no more.

My fugitive years are all hastening away,
And I must ere long lie as lowly as they,
With a turf on my breast, and a stone at my head,
Ere another such grove shall arise in its stead.

The change both my heart and my fancy employs,
I reflect on the frailty of man and his joys ;
Short-lived as we are, yet our pleasures we see
Have a still shorter date, and die sooner than we."

Cowper's translation of Homer was the result of long acquaintance with the original. He had studied Homer with interest when a boy at Westminster. He read him again, with a friend named Alston, during his residence in the Temple. On this occasion the two students compared the original with Pope's translation ; and they both came to the conclusion, confirmed by the general judgment of the literary world since, that Pope, notwithstanding his great merits as a laborious scholar and most elegant writer, had failed in doing justice to Homer. Indeed, it was Cowper's admiration of the original, together with his dislike of Pope's rendering of it, that induced him to entertain the idea of a new translation. Pope's version is indeed a paraphrase or imitation rather than a translation. It is, as has been well said, "Pope's Iliad rather than Homer's Iliad, a happy adaptation of the Homeric story to the spirit of English poetry."* Pope's failure must be attributed to the measure which he chose. He was an excellent rhymist and most polished versifier ; but in his translation he has too often sacrificed the original to the exigencies of his rhyme and his metre. Cowper, in selecting blank verse for his measure, allowed himself greater freedom ; and the result is that he made a great step towards recovering the spirit of the original. It

* Lord Derby, Preface to his Iliad.

remained for a great statesman and scholar of our own age, not only to surpass Pope, but to rival Cowper in the exactness, the elegance, and the simplicity of his translation.

But I must not any longer weary your patience. Mrs. Unwin's declining health and Cowper's increasing melancholy obliged them to leave Weston; and they quitted Buckinghamshire in the summer of 1795. A little incident shows how much the poet felt his removal from these familiar and much-loved scenes. While the final preparations were making for his departure, he wrote on the panel of the window-shutter in his bed-room the couplet, still shown to the visitor:—

“Farewell, dear scenes for ever closed to me,
Oh! for what sorrows must I now exchange ye.”

July 22

— 28, 1795.

Norfolk was now their destination; and under the guidance of Mr. Johnson, a relative of Cowper's on his mother's side, they finally settled at East Dereham, where in the following year Mrs. Unwin died. Four years afterwards (April 25, 1800) the poet breathed his last, still under a cloud of delusion, which proves that not to all faithful Christians is it granted to die in conscious hope. But the calm expression of happy surprise to be seen on his countenance after death, seemed like a reflection of the brightness into which he had passed from out of the shadows of mortality.

It is impossible to contemplate the life of Cowper and not be moved to sympathy and admiration. Struggling, as he did, through all his life, with disease of mind, through some mystery of his original organization, he was nevertheless most mercifully preserved, and enabled to cultivate successfully those higher gifts which God had bestowed upon him. His piety, his genius, and his sorrows attracted to him the warm sympathies of the good, the gifted, and the gentle. Most men owe much to the ministries of women; but perhaps there never was an instance of one more indebted to these ministries than Cowper. In Mrs. Unwin and Lady Hesketh more especially, he found gentle spirits who could soothe him in his despondency, and by whose support he was

enabled to exercise powers which might otherwise have been extinguished. Sad as is his history, he was, through his faith in God, yet able to hold on to the end. It is refreshing to notice how, when at times he saw Revelation through a dark and troubled medium, and was haunted by the delusion that he was the victim of a horrible decree, the bright countenance of living Nature could calm his mind, and give him a peace and a hope which he was altogether right in ascribing to the Spirit of God. The places frequented by such a man are consecrated places. His spirit seems still to hover around them; and as we pass amongst them, we tread with lighter step, and speak with softer tones. The poet's history can never be separated from the scenes which we have this day been visiting; and this must be my excuse for having introduced a subject which some might possibly deem to be irrelevant. But surely antiquarians and archæologists may learn a lesson from the scenes of Cowper's literary labours. It has been well said that:—

“ Past and Future are the wings
On whose support, harmoniously conjoined,
Moves the great spirit of human knowledge.” *

It is true that our business lies chiefly with the past. The objects which we investigate are objects which derive their interest from their antiquity—objects which have come down to us from remote ages, and have hitherto escaped the ravages of time. But there is a Present, as well as a Past and a Future; and to the Present, not less than to the Past or the Future, belong the triumphs of genius and the victories of grace. Their influence is undying. They live in every age in the hearts of those who can appreciate them, and who strive, however humbly, to imitate them. Moreover, the face of Nature, in which Cowper beheld the reflections of Deity, is no less pleasant to all those who look on it aright, than it was to him. It has still the same intrinsic power. It looks on sad hearts to cheer them, on intellectual hearts to elevate them, on faithful hearts to strengthen them. Nay more, in its continual renewal, it is the type of an unfading Spring, and the pledge of an everlasting Day; the

* Wordsworth.

earnest of the reunion in the world to come, of all those
in every age who have loved what is BEAUTIFUL, and fol-
lowed what is TRUE. E. B.

