

Biographical note

Poet, the son of the Rev. John Cowper, Rector of Great Berkhamstead, Herts, and Chaplain to George II. His grandfather was a judge, and he was the grand-nephew of the 1st Earl Cowper, the eminent Lord Chancellor. A shy and timid child, the death of his mother when he was 6 years old, and the sufferings inflicted upon him by a bullying schoolfellow at his first school, wounded his tender and shrinking spirit irrecoverably. He was sent to Westminster School, where he had for schoolfellows Churchill, the poet, and Warren Hastings. The powerful legal influence of his family naturally suggested his being destined for the law, and at 18 he entered the chambers of a solicitor, where he had for a companion Thurlow, the future Chancellor, a truly incongruous conjunction; the pair, however, seem to have got on well together, and employed their time chiefly in “giggling and making giggle.” He then entered the Middle Temple, and in 1754 was called to the Bar.

This was perhaps the happiest period of his life, being enlivened by the society of two cousins, **Theodora** and Harriet Cowper. With the former he fell in love; but his proposal of marriage was opposed by her father, who had observed symptoms of morbidity in him, and he never met her again. The latter, as Lady Hesketh, was in later days one of his most intimate friends. In 1759 he received a small sinecure appointment as Commissioner of Bankrupts, which he held for 5 years, and in 1763, through the influence of a relative, he received the offer of the desirable office of Clerk of the Journals to the House of Lords. He accepted the appointment, but the dread of having to make a formal appearance before the House so preyed upon his mind as to induce a temporary loss of reason, and he was sent to an asylum at St. Albans, where he remained for about a year.

He had now no income beyond a small sum inherited from his father, and no aims in life; but friends supplemented his means sufficiently to enable him to lead with a quiet mind the life of retirement which he had resolved to follow. He went to Huntingdon, and there made the acquaintance of the Unwins, with whom he went to live as a boarder. The acquaintance soon ripened into a close friendship, and on the death, from an accident (1767), of Mr. Unwin, Cowper accompanied his widow (the “Mary” of his poems) to Olney, where the Rev. John Newton was curate. Newton and Cowper became intimate friends, and collaborated in producing the well-known *Olney Hymns*, of which 67 were composed by Cowper. He became engaged to Mary Unwin, but a fresh attack of his mental malady in 1773 prevented their marriage. On his recovery he took to gardening, and amused himself by keeping pets, including the hares “Tiny” and “Puss,” and the spaniel “Beau,” immortalised in his works. The chief means, however, which he adopted for keeping his mind occupied and free from distressing ideas was the cultivation of his poetic gift.

At the suggestion of Mrs. Unwin, he wrote *The Progress of Error; Truth, Table Talk, Expostulation, Hope, Charity, Conversation, and Retirement* were added, and the whole were published in one vol. in 1782. Though not received with acclamation, its signal merits of freshness, simplicity, graceful humour, and the

pure idiomatic English in which it was written gradually obtained recognition, and the fame of the poet-recluse began to spread.

His health had now become considerably re-established, and he enjoyed an unwonted measure of cheerfulness, which was fostered by the friendship of Lady Austin, who had become his neighbour. From her he received the story of John Gilpin, which he forthwith turned into his immortal ballad. Hers also was the suggestion that he should write a poem in blank verse, which gave its origin to his most famous poem, *The Task*. Before it was published, however, the intimacy had, apparently owing to some little feminine jealousies, been broken off. *The Task* was published in 1785, and met with immediate and distinguished success. Although not formally or professedly, it was, in fact, the beginning of an uprising against the classical school of poetry, and the founding of a new school in which nature was the teacher. As Dr. Stopford Brooke points out, "Cowper is the first of the poets who loves Nature entirely for her own sake," and in him "the idea of Mankind as a whole is fully formed."

About this time, he resumed his friendship with his cousin, Lady Hesketh, and, encouraged by her, he began his translation of *Homer*, which appeared in 1791. Before this he had moved with Mrs. Unwin to the village of Weston Underwood. His health had again given way; and in 1791 Mrs. Unwin became paralytic, and the object of his assiduous and affectionate care. A settled gloom with occasional brighter intervals was now falling upon him. He strove to fight it by engaging in various translations, and in revising his *Homer*, and undertaking a new edition of Milton, which last was, however, left unfinished. In 1794 a pension of £300 was conferred upon him, and in 1795 he removed with Mrs. Unwin, now a helpless invalid, to East Dereham. Mrs. Unwin died in the following year, and three years later his own death released him from his heavy burden of trouble and sorrow.

His last poem was *The Castaway*, which, with its darkness almost of despair, shows no loss of intellectual or poetic power. In addition to his reputation as a poet Cowper has that of being among the very best of English letter-writers, and in this he shows, in an even easier and more unstudied manner, the same command of pure idiomatic English, the same acute observation, and the same mingling of gentle humour and melancholy. In literature Cowper is the connecting link between the classical school of Pope and the natural school of Burns, Crabbe, and Wordsworth, having, however, much more in common with the latter.