
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Cowper.—I.[1]

By the Right Rev. the LORD BISHOP of DURHAM.

WILLIAM COWPER (his name is certainly to be pronounced Cooper) was born November 26, 1731, and died April 24, 1800. His life was thus lived entirely within the eighteenth century, closing at the gate of the nineteenth. His birthplace was the Rectory of Berkhampstead, in green Hertfordshire; he died at East Dereham in Norfolk, and there lies buried. His father, Dr. John Cowper, rector of Berkhampstead, was son of Spencer Cowper, Judge of the Common Pleas, younger brother to the first Earl Cowper. Spencer Cowper, junior, Dean of Durham, "placed in golden Durham's second stall," was cousin to the poet.

Dr. Cowper married Anne Donne, of Ludham Hall, in Norfolk, a descendant of Dr. Donne; the family traced their line back to King Henry III. In the formation of William Cowper's character and thought many pure influences would thus be combined; a long inheritance of cultivation and distinction, an environment at once simple and perfectly refined, and, I may add, that almost automatic contact with many sides and sorts of common life, including the life of the poor, which comes with his very breath to the son of the parochial clergyman —a contact so admirably exemplified later in the case of Tennyson.

William was fourth of seven children. Of the six, all died quite early except one, the youngest, John—in later and sorrowful years his brother's faithful friend; fellow of Corpus Christi College (then commonly called Benet College), Cambridge; a fine scholar, notably in Greek, not a common attainment then, and a good man. Over him in his dying days, in 1770, William in his turn watched with devoted love. He saw him depart in

[1] A lecture delivered at the summer gathering of "Extension Students" at Cambridge, August, 1906.

the peace of Christ, and he has laid on his grave the amaranth of a noble elegiac tribute in the second book of "The Task":

> "All are not such; I had a brother once:
> Peace to the memory of a man of worth,
> A man of letters, and of manners too—
> Of manners such as virtue always wears
> When gay good-nature dresses her in smiles."

The mother died at her last baby's birth, in November, 1737. She lives as long as English poetry can live, in that most moving elegy of all our literature, "On the Receipt of my Mother's Picture," a poem written fifty-three years after her death. To her little son of six years old the bereavement was agonizing at the time; and through all his growing years the loss was incalculable. Dr. Cowper, who survived till 1756, was good and kind, "a most indulgent father"; but he lacked, I should fear, the tenderness of insight, and the boy, at once spirited and pensive, was too much shut in upon himself. The memory of the mother, like an embodied influence of deep and tranquil love, shone with an abiding light, pathetic and consoling, upon his life of many sorrows.

Quite soon after her death he was sent to a private school a few miles from home, and there he was unmercifully bullied. At ten he was removed to Westminster, where he was happy. He was a good cricketer, as cricket was played in 1741, and he was schooled by classical masters, notably by Vincent Bourne, who had their oddities, but who also knew how to inspire boys with a true love of letters, classical and English alike. Cowper had some schoolfellows of after-note. One was Warren Hastings; another was Charles Churchill, a man whose style of verse was to exercise later a strong influence on Cowper. His name is now nearly forgotten, but it was brilliantly familiar about the middle of that century. Churchill was almost a second Dryden for his careless skill and force in satire and invective.

From Westminster the lad went, in compliance with his father's wishes, to an attorney's office, in Ely Place, Holborn.

Often he was a guest at No. 10, Southampton Row, a house still standing, the home of his uncle Ashley, whose charming daughter Theodora would certainly have become Mrs. William Cowper if her father had consented. Perhaps the veto was for the best, with all that was to come. She was his friend to the last in thought and in deed, even when he was too ill to know it. Thurlow, afterwards Lord Chancellor, was his fellow-clerk in Ely Place and his fellow-guest at Southampton Row; they read poetry as well as law together; both loved Milton well. At Ashley Cowper's house, so William tells us, the two friends, of such widely different destinies, sometimes "giggled and made giggle from morning to night."

In 1752 we find him in chambers in the Temple, and in 1754 he was called to the Bar. "William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esquire," is still his designation later, upon the title-pages of his two successive volumes of poems. But he was much less busy with the law than with light literary work, as a member of "The Nonsense Club," and as a contributor to the newly-founded *St. James's Magazine*. So more than ten years passed, little to his satisfaction as he looked back in later life. He was evidently without vice, but also without purpose; certainly he was as innocent as possible of the thought that he had a poetic calling, although he was frequently producing both prose and verse which showed a charming alertness of thought, fancy, and diction. All the time, now and again, he felt on a sudden a mysterious depression, sad prelude of the pathetic future. The first attack of this sort of any serious degree occurred in 1752; it amounted unquestionably to mental derangement, and formed a very dark crisis for life and mind. Eleven years later, family interest, powerful in matters of patronage in those days, procured him an almost sinecure clerkship in the House of Lords. But interest unhappily clashed with interest around poor young Cowper: a party in the Lords hostile to the family opposed the nomination, and the nominee was desired to give an account of his qualifications at the Bar of the House. The prospect was horrible to him. After weeks of nervous

misery the sensitive brain gave way, and repeatedly and by various means he attempted his life. Through a series of accidents, as we call them, the desperate purpose was averted, and then his friends placed him, evidently deranged, in what would now be called a private asylum, the house of Dr. Cotton at St. Albans. There the treatment, for those days, was humane, though some elements of great severity seem to have entered into it at first. The cloud of delusion had already taken the terrible shape of a persuasion of coming perdition; and that persuasion was to darken mysteriously all his later years. But at present, by degrees, it broke, and the radiant light of spiritual peace and hope burst upon the young man's heart at last out of the shadows; conveyed to Cowper immediately by his casual perusal of those great words of the Apostle (Rom. iii. 25): "Him God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood." As to Augustine at Milan, so to Cowper at St. Albans, the Epistle of pardon, holiness and heaven proved the voice of Heaven upon the earth.

From St. Albans, in 1757, he moved to Huntingdon, the little cheerful town of the sweet meadowy country of the Ouse. It lay not far from Cambridge, and so not far from John Cowper, and there, living on his own very small private means, generously supplemented by friends, he passed two quiet years, first in lodgings, then as an inmate in the house of Mr. Unwin, one of the clergy of the town. His son, a candidate for Holy Orders, won the newcome Templar's heart, and proved a charming younger companion. And Mrs. Unwin, Mary Cawthorne, daughter of an Ely draper, "with the manners of a duchess," became his friend for life. The Unwin home was a home typical in many ways of the Methodists, or, as they would now be called, the Evangelicals, of those days. A great simplicity of habits, a genuine exercise of mental culture and activity, and customs of frequent devotion and private religious conference, marked every day. Perhaps this pious uniformity was a strain upon Cowper's sensitive being; but I do not read that he felt it to be so. The domestic picture is a beautiful

one. I could wish that it were not so long and so wholly out of date.

But in 1767 old Mr. Unwin was killed by a fall from his horse, and the home broke up. The son had his curacy. Where should Mrs. Unwin go, and where Cowper? Just then there appeared a visitor at Huntingdon, one John Newton, curate-in-charge of the small Buckinghamshire town of Olney, lying also on the pleasant Ouse. And it was at length arranged that William Cowper and Mary Unwin should migrate, as Newton's neighbours, to Olney—to Orchard Side, a large old house in the broad market-place, the house now happily secured from destruction by private liberality, and converted into a most interesting "Cowper Museum." That house, and Olney, and the fair rural neighbourhood, are well worthy of a pilgrimage; few regions of middle England have suffered less change in a hundred and forty years than this. I have traversed Olney, and stood upon its bridge, and visited Orchard Side and the vicarage, and I have perambulated Weston Park hard by; and, using Cowper's "Task" for my local guide, I have found almost every memorable point in the place and the landscape visible and delightful still. There Cowper lived for nineteen years—from 1767 to 1786. There he wrote his hymns; there every poem of the first volume; there the whole of the "Task" and its adjuncts in the second volume; there he began his translation of Homer. There too he wrote countless letters, the most delightful letter-literature in our tongue, admirable for an art and a nature always in harmony, touching the commonest subjects into bright occasions for humour, wit, wisdom, and ceaseless kindness; sometimes simply playing and laughing about a trivial theme; sometimes, alas, speaking of the sorrows of the soul, of spiritual clouds, of spiritual despair. But always, on every topic, from the lightest to the most tremendous, the phrase is "English undefiled," perfect in point and form, and the writer's mind sees everything in a way quite unaffected, but always his own. Within the past four years Mr. Wright of Olney, the unwearied literary student of Cowper, has published

the first really complete edition of these letters. They are a collection, in their way, inimitable. I am a life-long admirer of Gray as a poet, and his letters, now being edited by my friend, Mr. Tovey, are indeed admirable reading. But I do not hesitate to say that Cowper's letters easily surpass Gray's in literary quality.

At Olney, for long years after his death, Cowper was remembered by the poor as "the Squire." Hugh Miller, in the forties of the last century, found old people there still full of Squire Cowper's kindly words and ways.

And who was the John Newton who thus led Cowper and Mrs. Unwin away to Olney? He was born five years before Cowper, the son of a captain in the merchant service. He went early to sea, careless and profane, and had a rough life of escapes and hardships, including a time of practical slavery to a trader in Sierra Leone. Thomas à Kempis, and a terrific storm at sea, and then Whitefield's preaching, changed, under God, Newton's heart and life. He accepted command of a slave-ship, strange to say, and plied his unhappy calling humanely, but with many misgivings, though the public Christian conscience was still almost entirely asleep about slavery. Then he was tide-surveyor at Liverpool; and later, having managed somehow to study diligently and to excellent purpose, he was ordained. In 1764, at the age of thirty-eight, he was appointed to the charge of Olney, where the vicar was non-resident. Olney he served with the utmost pastoral diligence for sixteen years, and then migrated to the city church of St. Mary Woolnoth, where he ministered with a great influence till his death in 1807, at the age of eighty-one. Newton was a noble member of that illustrious group of Christian pastors and preachers to whom the debt of England is incalculable, the Church Methodists of the great Revival. He was not an itinerant apostle, like Wesley or Whitefield; he was essentially the pastor, but a pastor always in quest of hearts and lives for God, and unwearied in his work of edification and instruction. Intellectually he was no common man. The sea-boy, the slaver's skipper, managed to make

himself, by thirty-five or so, a very fair classical scholar ; he had read considerably in theology ; and he wrote, both in prose and verse, admirable English. Some of his hymns are immortal—for example, " How sweet the name of Jesus sounds," " Glorious things of Thee are spoken," " Come, my soul, thy suit prepare," " Begone unbelief"—and their diction is as pure and strong as their faith and truth. As to Newton's temper, he was a forceful man, and probably he was not always tender ; but, if I read him aright from his writings, and from his friends, he was the antipodes of the Pharisee and of the despotic dogmatist. He had a great deal of kindly humour ; he was a son of consolation rather than of thunder ; and he much loved, to Cowper's amused displeasure, his pipe of tobacco :

> " A theosophic pipe with Brother B.,
> Beneath the shadow of his favourite tree ;
> And then how happy I, how cheerful he !"

These are not the words of a harsh and sour sectarian. One thing I affirm with confidence—Newton was not Cowper's evil genius. Rather, his strong and cheerful faith was often Cowper's best comfort in his mental sorrows. Mr. Wright has made it likely that if Cowper at Olney had an evil genius at all it was Teedon, the schoolmaster, a man ardently pious, perfectly sincere, but distinctly an enthusiast. He claimed to guide Cowper, even in literary undertakings, by light given to himself from Heaven. Cowper often laughed at Teedon, and often was revolted by him ; but he listened to him, sometimes to unhappy issues. Still, it is possible that a too exclusive companionship with even Newton was not good for Cowper, simply because it was so exclusive. It is to be noted certainly that his serious literary activity began only when Newton was gone to London.

How, on the whole, were the first sixteen years at Olney, the years with Newton, spent ? In a life busily quiet. Mrs. Unwin was always at his side, in a blameless and never once misunderstood friendship ; he was engaged to her in 1772, but an access of his malady broke it off for ever. Newton was in the vicarage, one field and one garden distant ; and another

excellent friend was not far away, at Newport Pagnell—the wise, witty, and holy William Bull, an Independent minister, the "Brother B." of Newton's nonsense rhyme. Cowper had his garden, his greenhouse, his summerhouse, to amuse him. He had his books, a tiny library, the wreck of his old literary possessions; some twenty volumes for several years made the whole extent of it. Correspondence was always going on; and he delighted in long walks by field, and river, and gentle hill, and so kept his well-knit frame firm and healthy. And many a visit did he pay to the poor people of Olney, comforting their bodies and their souls; and sometimes his voice was heard in uplifting words at the prayer-meeting. Meanwhile, during two happy years, a series of hymns was coming to his heart and to his pen, some of which are now treasures for ever in the Church: "Hark, my soul, it is the Lord," "O for a closer walk with God," "There is a fountain filled with blood," "Ere God had built the mountains." He read aloud in the winter evenings to his friend, or friends; he tended his hares and his birds; he wove nets; he handled pencil and brush; and all the while there was not the faintest intimation to his own mind as yet that he was to be an English poet.

One tremendous shadow during that domestic time fell upon this dear man's path, and it never quite left it again till almost the last breath. Let me speak of it here once for all; it is a cloud of almost unique blackness and also of unique glory, as we look on it from this side or from that. In 1773, nine years after his arrival at Olney, Cowper had an access of the old and dreadful melancholy; and one night in that February he dreamed a dream. The details of the dream he never told. He thought little of dreams in general; but *the dream* was the black epoch of his life, for it left him, whatever it was, with a conviction, quite unreasonable but quite immovable, save for one or two transient intervals, that he was cast off with a dreadful aversion by his Maker, to be lost for ever. The impression had nothing to do with his creed; indeed, it contravened it. In theory he believed that the Divine life, once given to man,

never dies out of him, but lasts into the heavenly glory. And he was sure that he had himself received the Divine life. But he believed—a belief which would have bordered on blasphemy if he had been sane—that the Eternal Will, in his solitary case, was pleased to be inconsistent with itself; his second and spiritual life had been Divinely given, but now it was Divinely killed. Never was there a more unmistakable instance of the most awful type of mania; and never was mania more true to its lamentable law in its refusal to be removed by reason, however cogent, however imploring. At times the symptoms were visibly terrible; once he literally fled, as from fiends, to Newton's house out of his own, and remained there for many weeks, refusing to move, in a state infinitely distressing to himself and to others. Then, in a certain sense, the acute horror passed away; he could garden again, he could carpenter, he could read, he could write his charming letters, and at last he could produce his poems, steadily, collectedly, and with the highest aim in view. But always, or very nearly always, when the immediate activity, mental or muscular, was intermitted, the awful consciousness as of an eternal desertion awoke at once again. And sometimes it was accentuated by supposed voices from the air. Cowper was what is called, I believe, a *clair-audient;* and what he heard seemed almost always eloquent of a destiny of destruction.

(*To be continued.*)

The Baptismal Controversy.—I.

A PLEA FOR CAREFUL DEFINITION.

By the Rev. N. Dimock, M.A.

IF there is any truth at all in the Bible, it can hardly be questioned that the tendency of what we now call human nature is to deprave religion and to corrupt the truth of revelation. It seems strange that scientific criticism should so often seem to ignore this significant fact. Is it not a fact attested by