

# The Life of William Cowper

by William Cowper

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*William Cowper was a poet and hymn writer who struggled with mental health, but found solace in literature and poetry, and left a lasting legacy in the English language.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 30:5, Psalm 34:18, Psalm 40:1, Psalm 42:11, Isaiah 41:10, Matthew 11:28, Romans 8:28, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Philippians 4:6, 1 Peter 5:7

**Topics:** "Faith And Suffering", "Christian Biography"

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## Description

William Cowper, a poet of noble ancestry, faced early hardships and struggles, including the loss of his mother at a young age and a period of cruel treatment at school. Despite being apprenticed to a career in law that he did not enjoy, he found solace in literature and writing. Cowper's life was marked by periods of intense melancholy and despair, leading to a deep struggle with mental illness. Through the care of friends and his own faith journey, he found moments of peace and creativity, producing renowned works like 'The Task' and 'John Gilpin.' Despite his personal struggles, Cowper's poems, characterized by humor, pathos, and Christian sentiment, have left a lasting impact on English literature.

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## Transcript

William Cowper was born on the 26th of November 1731, at Berkhamstead, Hertfordshire, of which village his father, the Rev. John Cowper, was rector. He was of noble ancestry, and many of his immediate relatives moved in the upper ranks of life. His mother, Ann Donne, a daughter of Roger Donne, Esq., of Ludham Hall in Norfolk, died when he was only six years of age, leaving two children,--William, the subject of this memoir, and a younger brother, John. Her affection and tenderness made a deep impression on his young mind. Fifty years afterwards, on receiving her picture, he dwells as fondly on the cherished features as if he had just mourned her death. He writes to his cousin, Mrs. Bodham, who had sent him the portrait--"I received it the night before last, and viewed it with a trepidation of nerves and spirits somewhat akin to what I should have felt had the dear original presented herself to my embraces. I kissed it, and hung it where it is the last object that I see at night, and, of course, the first on which I open my eyes in the morning." His feelings, indeed, were all of the intense kind. "I never received a little pleasure from anything in my life," he writes; "if I am pleased, it is in the extreme."

Few incidents of his early life have been preserved, and much obscurity rests on the circumstances which made him a stranger from his father's house almost immediately after his mother's death. Though his father lived to the year 1756, Cowper appears never to have lived at home, excepting for a brief period of

nine months, when he was eighteen years of age.

When only six years of age, he was sent to the school of Dr. Pitman, in Market Street, on the borders of Hertfordshire. Here he continued two years--a period embittered by the cruelty of a boy of fifteen years of age, "whose savage treatment," says Cowper, "impressed such a dread of his figure upon my mind, that I well remember being afraid to lift up my eyes upon him higher than his knees; and that I knew him by his shoe-buckles better than any other part of his dress." It is characteristic of the gentle spirit of the poet, that he refrains from mentioning the name of his persecutor.

In consequence of an affection in the eyes which threatened to deprive him of sight, he was sent to an eminent oculist in London, in whose house he remained until he was ten years of age, when he had so far recovered as to be able to attend Westminster School. An attack of small-pox, three years afterwards, completed the restoration of his eyesight. At Westminster he continued till he was eighteen, having acquired a considerable knowledge of the Latin and Greek classics. He was then apprenticed for three years to an attorney; but, in an uncongenial employment, and under a careless master, he derived few advantages from his situation. "I was bred to the law," he writes; "a profession to which I was never much inclined, and in which I engaged, rather because I was desirous to gratify a most indulgent father, than because I had any hope of success in it myself." "I did actually live three years with Mr. Chapman, a solicitor," he says; "there was I and the future Lord Chancellor" (Thurlow) "constantly employed, from morning to night, in giggling and making giggle, instead of studying the law."

It was at this period that he formed an attachment to his cousin, Theodora Cowper, the sister of Lady Hesketh, to whom so many of his letters are addressed. Though this affection was returned, obstacles, arising from her father's aversion to the marriage of parties so nearly related, and from his own limited income, prevented their union. She was never married, and lived until the year 1824.

On leaving Mr. Chapman, he took chambers in the Inner Temple, London, where he lived for twelve years. Here, instead of devoting himself to the study of the law, he yielded to the natural bent of his disposition, and amused himself with literature, and occasionally contributed verses and essays (none of which are now known) to the periodicals of the day.

Shortly after entering the Temple, the first symptoms of that malady appeared from which he was destined to suffer so dreadfully. "I was struck," he says, "with such a dejection of spirits, as none but they who have felt the same can have the least conception of. Day and night I was upon the rack, lying down in horror, and rising up in despair." This despondency lasted for nearly twelve months.

Cowper's melancholy has been attributed to his religious views; but at this time he was entirely ignorant of true religion. Men of science in modern times will not hazard the unphilosophical opinions which were once entertained on this subject; derangement is now understood to be a disease which has its principal seat in the nervous system, and in which accident determines the particular mental delusion by which the patient is oppressed.

When thirty-one years of age, he was appointed reading-clerk and clerk of the private committees of the House of Lords, a situation which he resigned for the inferior post of clerk of the journals in the same house of parliament. This appointment seemed at first to afford him considerable pleasure. "If I succeed," he writes to Lady Hesketh, "in this doubtful piece of promotion, I shall have at least this satisfaction to reflect upon, that the volumes I write will be treasured up with the utmost care for ages, and will last as long as the English constitution, a duration which ought to satisfy the vanity of any author who has a spark

of love for his country."

These prospects were destroyed by a party dispute, regarding the right of appointment, which rendered it necessary that he should appear at the bar of the House of Lords. The idea of appearing in such a situation entirely unhinged his mind, and drove him to repeated attempts to commit suicide. His friends, on learning his condition, immediately surrendered the appointment; and, as his malady still continued, put him under the care of Dr. Cotton, in St. Alban's, a physician equally fitted to minister to the mind and the body. With him he remained for two years. It is from this period he dates his conversion. His religious education had been almost entirely neglected. He had made himself acquainted with the evidences of Christianity, but was ignorant of Christianity itself. So early as his schoolboy days at Market Street, indeed, he had serious impressions on his mind, which returned very vividly at intervals while in the Temple; but until now, he was without any clear understanding of the nature of the gospel as a proclamation of mercy from God to sinners through Christ Jesus, and had no personal experience of its power to confer peace.

From St. Alban's he removed to lodgings in Huntingdon. The chief recommendation of Huntingdon was, that being within fifteen miles of Cambridge, he was enabled to meet once a week with his brother John, a young man of great excellence; but it was too dull a residence to detain him long, had Providence not thrown in his way the family of the Unwins, whose friendship proved the greatest happiness of his life. To their mutual satisfaction, he became a boarder in the family, which at this time consisted of Mr. Unwin and his wife, their son and daughter. Cowper thus describes his first impressions of them:--"The old gentleman is a man of learning and good sense, and as simple as Parson Adams. His wife has a very uncommon understanding, has read much to good purpose, and is more polite than a duchess. The son, who belongs to Cambridge, is a most amiable young man; and the daughter quite of a piece with the rest of the family." There must have been something remarkably attractive about Cowper, for, with all his shyness, he had more and better friends than almost any poet we could name. To know him was to love him, and few loved him by halves; indeed, the devotion paid to him partook more of the mingled respect and affection which is rendered to an accomplished female than what are enjoyed by his sex. With the Unwins he lived on the most cordial terms. "I am much happier," he writes to Major Cowper, "than the day is long, and sunshine and candle-light alike see me perfectly contented."

No certain information has been obtained of his means of subsistence. He inherited some money from his father; and a subscription made at this time by his friends placed him in comfortable circumstances. It is believed that Miss Theodora Cowper privately contributed fifty pounds a year. He does not seem to have obtained much for the copyright of his poems. The crown granted him £300 a year in 1794; but too late to be of much advantage.

The sudden death of Mr. Unwin, by a fall from his horse, caused the removal of the Unwins from Huntingdon; and Cowper removed with them. The Rev. John Newton, whose acquaintance they had recently made, engaged for them a house in Olney, to which they removed in October 1767. The warmest friendship grew out of this connexion; there was a private passage between the vicarage and the house in which they lived, and seven hours, we are told, rarely passed without the two families being together. Here Cowper spent two or three years in great comfort. His employments were various,--he learned to draw, he cultivated flowers, and he handled the tools of the carpenter with considerable address. "There is not a squire in all the country," he writes, "who can boast of having made better squirrel-houses, hutches for rabbits, or bird-cages, than myself. I had even the hardiness to take in hand the pencil. Many figures were the fruit of my labours, which had at least the merit of being unparalleled by any production of art or nature." And he talks of sending "tables, such as they were, and joint-stools, such as never were." Three

hares which he tamed afforded him much amusement. His account of them, which was inserted in the Gentleman's Magazine, has often been reprinted. He also visited the houses of the villagers, administering spiritual counsel and relieving the wants of the poor, which he was the better enabled to do from a fund placed at his disposal by the benevolent Thornton, so celebrated for his philanthropy. At the suggestion of Newton, he began his contributions to that collection so well known as the "Olney Hymns." These were commenced in the year 1771, but, owing to a return of the melancholy disease under which he laboured, not completed till 1779.

The death of his brother, to whom he was warmly attached, and which took place in 1770, has been supposed to furnish the cause of the new attack of his malady; but he never was entirely free from it,--his mind was like the coast of Holland, which requires the embankments to be constantly renewed to exclude the encroachments of the tide; and it is scarcely worth while, when so many causes were in operation, to ask which was the greatest. The attack lasted for four years, during which he was watched by Mrs. Unwin with a self-devotion and tenderness which happily found its reward in seeing him restored to the full measure of his former powers, though it left him with weakened nerves and a constant tendency to relapse into moodiness. Thus, after Newton had left Olney for London, he writes--"It is no attachment to the place that binds me here, but an unfitness for every other. I lived in it once, but now I am buried in it, and have no business with the world on the outside of my sepulchre."

Cowper had now reached the age of fifty, and was as yet unknown to the world. "A few light and agreeable poems, two hymns written at Huntingdon, with about sixty others composed at Olney, are almost the only known poetical productions of his pen between the years 1749 and 1780." The long pent-up stream of his genius was now to break out. At the suggestion of Mrs. Unwin, he wrote "Table Talk," the first poem in the present collection of his works, to which were afterwards added, "The Progress of Error," "Truth," "Expostulation," "Hope," "Charity," "Conversation," and "Retirement." These were all written in little more than a year, and were published in one volume in 1781. It met with a favourable reception from the critics of the day, and slowly found its way into the esteem of the public. The vein thus opened was not allowed to remain unwrought. "Dejection of spirits," he informs Lady Hesketh, "which may have prevented many a man from becoming an author, made me one. I find constant employment necessary, and therefore take care to be constantly employed." "When I can find no other occupation, I think; and when I think, I am very apt to do it in rhyme. Hence it comes to pass, that the season of the year which generally pinches off the flowers of poetry unfolds mine, such as they are, and crowns me with a wintry garland."

About this time he formed an acquaintance with a highly-accomplished woman, Lady Austen; she was wealthy, had seen much of the world, and possessed a liveliness of manner which charmed away his melancholy. After three years' intimacy, this friendship was unfortunately broken up by the not unnatural jealousy of Mrs. Unwin, who was afraid it might end in a nearer connexion. To Lady Austen we owe the amusing ballad of "John Gilpin," and his great poem the "Task." A merry tale which she told to amuse the poet was the groundwork of the first; it soon became a universal favourite, though few suspected the melancholy Cowper to be the author. Surprise has been expressed that it should have been written while suffering from despondency; but it is the very nature of this disease to admit of violent alternations from the liveliest gaiety to the deepest gloom.

The "Task" was begun in the summer of 1783, and completed before the close of 1784. Lady Austen, who, as an admirer of Milton, was partial to blank verse, had often solicited Cowper to try his power in that species of composition. To his objection that he knew of no suitable subject, she replied, "Oh, you can never be in want of a subject--you can write upon any; write upon this sofa." The idea struck him, he took

up the pen and began,--

"I sing the Sofa, I who lately sung

Faith, Hope, and Charity."

The poem thus casually suggested grew into six books, and is deservedly the most popular of his larger poems. Many passages in his first volume are not inferior to the best pieces of the "Task;" but in the "task" he takes a wider range, and flies with freer and bolder wing.

This work brought him into immediate notice, and drew attention to his former publications. His attached cousin, Lady Hesketh, who had been abroad, hastened to renew her correspondence. His letters to her are the most finished and delightful specimens of epistolary writing in the language. The strong aversion which John Foster expressed to composition was unknown to Cowper. He wrote from choice, and was quite capable of extracting amusement from the most trivial incidents of daily life; so that, though he was almost a recluse in his habits, and his letters sometimes embraced no other subjects than the death of a viper, or the loss of one of his hares, or the overturning of a market-woman's cart, they are full of wit and sensibility. Lady Hesketh proved a most valuable friend. Finding his residence at Olney neither commodious nor cheerful, she rented and furnished for him a house bordering on a handsome park at the neighbouring village of Western Underwood, and throughout his life her purse and her services were always at his disposal. He says touchingly, on leaving Olney--"I found that I not only had a tenderness for that ruinous abode, because it had once known me happy in the presence of God, but that even the distress I had suffered for so long time on account of His absence, had endeared it to me as much."

In 1785 he began a translation of Homer's Poems, and worked with great assiduity and pleasure at the task. It was finished in 1790, and published in two quarto volumes in 1791. He next undertook to edit an edition of Milton's Poetical Works, and with this view translated his Latin Poems; but the work was never completed. A poem, entitled "The Seven Ages," was begun, but only a few lines were written. His beautiful lines to Mrs. Unwin, beginning--

"The twentieth year is well nigh past

Since first our sky was overcast;

Ah, that this might be the last,

My Mary"--

and his lines "On Receipt of his Mother's Picture," were written at this period, and exhibit the unabated force of his mind and imagination.

Of the remainder of his life we have little to record. Mrs. Unwin fell into an infirm state of health, and his own mind became extremely depressed. Lady Hesketh flew to his help, and he rallied so far as to be able to visit his biographer, Hayley; but soon he relapsed. His relation, Dr. Johnson, removed him from Weston to North Tudderham in Norfolk, and from thence to various places, for change of air and scene, but without perceptible advantage to his health. In 1796, Mrs. Unwin died. "In the dusk of the evening of her death, he attended Dr. Johnson to survey the corpse, and after looking a very few moments, he started suddenly away, with a vehement but unfinished sentence of passionate sorrow. He spoke of her no more." Dr. Johnson's attentions to him were never surpassed in delicacy and self-denial. Any other man would have

shrunk from undertaking the charge of an infirm hypochondriac, who rarely spoke, and seemed to derive no pleasure from either the world or religion.

The cloud which had now settled over his intellect was never removed. He had long lived under the delusion, that the mercy of God, which is free to all the world besides, was denied to him. There were momentary intervals in which a ray of hope gleamed upon his mind, but they were transitory; and it is melancholy to record, that that hope of which he had sung so sweetly to others was denied to himself in his last hours. But though the nature of his disease had banished hope from his mind, his life and writings prove that he had long rested his faith on Christ Jesus as his Saviour, and warrant the assurance that death translated him to eternal glory. His death took place on the 25th April 1800. He was buried in St. Edmund's Chapel, in the Church of East Dereham. Lady Hesketh erected a marble tablet to his memory.

"Cowper," says Hayley, "was of a middle stature, rather strong than delicate in the form of his limbs; the colour of his hair was a light brown, that of his eyes a bluish-gray, and his complexion ruddy." In manner he was reserved, but to females he was extremely engaging. His character was a singular compound of strength and delicacy. Manly in his thoughts and writings, he was almost a woman in the readiness with which he surrendered himself to the direction of others in matters of business. With a keen sense of the ludicrous and a sharp pen, he never willingly wounded a single human being; and, rigid himself in his attention to virtue and piety, he judged the actions of other men in a spirit of the most liberal charity.

Cowper's Poems need no panegyric of ours; they have taken a permanent place among the literary treasures of the English language. They were the genuine utterance of his own heart; and their manly thought, vigour, and simplicity, their mingled humour and pathos, the variety and the felicity of their descriptions of men and things, and the elevated strain of Christian sentiment by which they are pervaded, have secured their popularity while our language endures.

Edinburgh, June 1, 1853.

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