

## Literary Genes

Mr Wilfred Ashton, of Saffron Walden, Essex, writes to draw the attention of our readers to the blood relationship between William Cowper and the Dorset writer John Cowper Powys (1872-1963). Powys was a prolific author of poetry and essays but is best known for his vast, brooding novels, including *Wolf Solent*, *Maiden Castle* and *A Glastonbury Romance*. His brothers Llewellyn and Theodore were also major writers, the latter remembered for his allegorical *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, in which God comes down to earth in the genial person of Mr Weston.

Research by George Davies on Cowper's family tree reveals that J.C.P. was a first cousin of the poet, four times removed. The line traces back to Cowper's mother, Anne Donne (1703-1737) whose grand-nephew Rev. John Johnson (1769-1833) was J.C.P.'s great-grandfather. Johnson was of course Cowper's beloved nephew 'Johnny of Norfolk' who was such a source of cheer, comfort and solace to William and Mrs Unwin, especially in their frail old age: in 1795, he moved them into his own house at East Dereham, the better to be able to care for them. It is interesting to note that both his eldest son and his grandson (vicar of Montacute, Somerset, and brother of J.C.P.'s mother, Mary Cowper Johnson) were given 'William Cowper' as their first names.

Cowper's mother claimed to be descended from John Donne (1572-1631), leading 'Metaphysical' poet and Dean of St Paul's (although, it has to be said, there is scant genealogical evidence for this). John Donne, William Cowper, John Cowper Powys—any search for a common thread linking these three writers remotely related by blood and widely separated by time can be prompted by no more than wishful thinking. Nevertheless, all three did manifest a strong religious sense and a powerful impulse towards self-questioning and soul-searching—even if in J.C.P.'s case as much influenced by pagan as by Christian beliefs. All in the genes?

*Tony Seward*