

CARTOGENIC COWPER

Among the several types of collectable ephemera, cigarette cards are one of the most fascinating. Issued in their millions from the 1880s through to the outbreak of the Second World War (and later in occasional series and with cigar brands), they comprise a rich reflection of historical events and circumstance, were long a core source of knowledge and information for a mass readership, and had a potent and diverse influence on cultural attitudes. Alongside the sportsmen, film stars, politicians, architectural gems and natural wonders, development of the British Empire, household hints, air-raid precautions, and the myriad other subjects, cards of a literary cast were always in strong evidence. Shakespeare is prominent (as in the famous ‘Shakespearean Series’ of 1917 from Players), though, indicating widespread popular appeal, it is Dickens that seemingly looms largest, notably in sets depicting characters from the novels (one of them again a well-known Players series, ‘Characters from Dickens’, published in 1912 and reissued in 1923) but also in other formats such as the excellent ‘Historic Places from Dickens’ Classics’, brought out by the firm of R. & J. Hill in 1926, where the pictures and texts remain valuable even for serious students of Dickens’s life and works. Burns is there, not least in an attractive biographical and illustrations-to-the-poems series of 1924 from the Scottish Co-op; Byron regularly graces assemblies of Great Britons, or on one occasion the Players gallery of ‘Dandies’ (where Dickens also features); and there is even a set of fifty cards illustrating ‘Milton’s “Paradise Lost”’, issued in Malta (by the company of Pizzuto in 1910), and no doubt intended for very erudite smokers! Of Cowper I have found three manifestations, each different in kind and of distinctive interest. I shall take these in reverse chronological order.

In 1932 W.A. & A.C. Churchman (since 1901 part of the Imperial Tobacco Company) issued a Second Series of twenty-five cards entitled ‘Eastern Proverbs’, each of which takes a proverb from the East, provides a colourful and finely-drawn cartoon-like artist’s impression of it on the front, and on the back discusses it with the help of relevant maxims in English and other languages and quotations from authors. Card No. 24 focuses on the Persian saying, ‘One is never a friend by force’, and selects as the main analogue a stanza from Cowper’s ‘Friendship’, quoted in full, although the precise source in Cowper is not given:

The man that hails you Tom or Jack,
And proves by thumps upon your back
How he esteems your merit,
Is such a friend, that one had need
Be very much his friend indeed
To pardon or to bear it.

The texts for these cards have been expertly researched, and probably owe much to the use of a good dictionary of quotations; but the choice of and simple reference to ‘the poet Cowper’ bears witness to his standing as a recognized and authoritative voice. He is in good company. Two of the three adjacent cards quote from Cicero and Lord Byron respectively.

‘Figures of Fiction’, another set of twenty-five cards, came out in 1924 from the old-established firm of Carreras, which started trading in 1788, just three years after Cowper published *The Task*. There is a popular flavour to it, with bright single-figure representations of Cinderella, The Mad Hatter, Jim Hawkins, David Copperfield, Hamlet, Sinbad, and a similar variety of other legendary characters. No. 22 is a portly but robust John Gilpin, portrayed arms akimbo in dazzling red coat, yellow waistcoat, white breeches, tricorne hat, boots with spurs, riding crop in hand. The simple plot- and character-descriptions on the backs reinforce the status of this series as the plain person’s counterpart to such subtler and more ambitious projects as the Dickens ‘Historic Places’ offering mentioned above or the twenty-five large-size ‘Characters from Fiction’ cards that appeared from Players in 1933—perhaps in deliberate rivalry to ‘Figures of Fiction’—each of which includes both a pointed résumé and a substantial and well-chosen quotation from the novel in question (the first is George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, the last George Du Maurier’s *Trilby*) on the reverse of very fine illustrations prepared from originals by M. Brock. ‘Figures of Fiction’ is often referred to in discussions of errors, for in some printings Uncle Tom, of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, is depicted with white feet. John Gilpin cuts an unquestionably convincing figure!

In the beginning smoking was of course a male preserve, and early cigarette cards were overwhelmingly of Beauties (no names) and Actresses (names), military and other public celebrities, and places of interest. One of the more sophisticated exceptions is the Players 'Famous Authors and Poets' series of 1900, conspicuously well-produced for its time, with tasteful multi-coloured fronts and framed backs in delicate green. The most interesting of the Cowper items resides here, for No. 7 out of 20 is Cowper himself in the celebrated George Romney version, nightcap, winsome eyes, and all. One might expect the back to bear a brief account of the poet, but it tenders instead, as do all the other nineteen, a quotation in praise of tobacco:

The pungent, nose-refreshing weed; ...
Does thought more quicken and refine
Than all the breath of all the 'Nine'.

This (though the card does not inform us of it) is from the 'Epistle to the Rev. William Bull', which Cowper wrote in 1782 but did not publish in his lifetime. This is one of those verse letters—a genre Cowper excelled in—where manner can be more important than content, and which function to cement and nourish friendship and professional or social relations. In developing his recent acquaintance with the Dissenting minister of Newport Pagnell Cowper adopts the humorous approach, weaving a mock-heroic *jeu d'esprit* on the theme of inspiration and the virtues of tobacco out of the fact that on a visit to Olney Bull had left behind his box full of best Oronoco leaf. He turns at one point to beg the guardian Nymph of the blessed substance to pardon his past errors of condemnation, for which he now atones:

Forgive the Bard, if Bard he be,
Who once too wantonly made free,
To touch with a satiric wipe
That symbol of thy power, the pipe;
So may no blight infect thy plains,
And no unseasonable rains, ...
So may thy votaries increase,
And fumigation never cease.
May Newton with renew'd delights
Perform thy odorif'rous rites,
While clouds of incense half divine
Involve thy disappearing shrine;
And so may smoke-inhaling Bull
Be always filling, never full.

(54-59, 66-73)

In this Cowper must be referring back to his attack in 'Conversation' on the 'Pernicious weed! Whose scent the fair annoys' (251). He thus appears to swing between polarities in his view of tobacco and the habits it breeds. The truth is, however, that in neither stance, against or for, is he deeply serious. If in the former passage he is playfully critical, and proceeds to announce that the worst effect of smoking is 'banishing for hours / The sex whose presence civilizes ours' (53-54), in the latter, the lines to Bull, he is playfully laudatory. (When in 'Table Talk' he shies at 'the lascivious pipe' [462] he may well, contrary to James King's automatic assumption in his biography of Cowper [p. 91], have in mind not the smoker's requisite at all but a musical instrument accompanying 'wanton song[s]', and in any case undoubtedly has in his sights the libertines that use the implement, whatever it be, rather than the thing itself.) Cowper surely would have objected to his verse being hijacked by the tobacco industry for publicity purposes, but his feelings about this are likely to have been less strong, less indignant, than we might nowadays imagine. Religious and moral principles, let alone health considerations, were not in his time, nor in that of Players 'Famous Authors and Poets', necessarily a bar to enjoying tobacco, or, as in his case, having a mixed outlook. John Newton, we learn from the concluding lines of the 'Epistle' quoted above, had given up smoking, not unsurprisingly for an ex-slave-trader who had renounced all the vices. The equally reverend Bull, on the other hand, was a devoted exponent of the art. Cowper seems on one occasion actually to be grateful for this, although, since he is writing from his greenhouse, it is unclear whether he is thinking of a pleasant aroma or the

effects of fumigation: 'My Greenhouse ... wants only the fumes of your pipe to make it perfectly delightfull. Tobacco was not known in the Golden age. So much the worse for the Golden age. This age of Iron and Lead would be insupportable without it' (3 June 1783). Bull's close successor in the era of cigarette cards is the renowned Baptist preacher C.H. Spurgeon (1834-92), who is No. 20 of the 'Famous Authors and Poets', last in a distinguished line of apparent enthusiasts also including Sir Isaac Newton and the biologist T.H. Huxley as well as more obvious candidates like Ben Jonson and Charles Lamb. Spurgeon's endorsement is devout indeed: 'When I have found intense pain relieved, a weary brain soothed, and calm refreshing sleep obtained by a Cigar, I have felt grateful to God and have blessed His name.'

Whatever his opinion of tobacco, it is nevertheless an irony that Cowper, who in general deplored the modern advance of luxury and aggressive commercialism, should have come to be appropriated for a consumerist advertising campaign. The paradox is further compounded by the fact that his picture and his lines have in course of time become implicated in another current of commercial repercussions. The trade catalogue value of each single card in the 'Famous Authors and Poets' series now stands at £26.50, with a premium of 100% for ones in mint condition.

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