

Is the Cowper Collection of National Importance?

[The following is the text of a talk given by Crispin Paine at the Annual Cowper and Newton Day on 26 April 2008. Crispin is a museum consultant, but also an Editor of *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*.]

Why do people who enjoy James Bond books and films want to go to the Imperial War Museum and visit an exhibition on James Bond? It's fun perhaps to see - as the museum's website is announcing - 'the "blood-splattered" shirt worn by Daniel Craig in *Casino Royale*, along with prototypes of Rosa Klebb's flick-knife shoes in *From Russia With Love* and Halle Berry's bikini from *Die Another Day*.' But why on earth would one care about the desk the Ian Fleming wrote *Casino Royale* on? Surely what matters is the book, not the desk?

And yet people do care about the objects the writers used, from their pens, beds, chairs and desks to their shaving brushes and hats. Why? If you ask people, you find that the commonest answer by far is 'they help to bring him or her to life'.

I've been asked to try to spend a few minutes this morning vainly (probably) and bravely (I think so) trying to answer the question 'why the Cowper collection is of national importance'. The first and simplest answer must surely be 'If Cowper is a nationally-important poet (which most people seem to think, and of course everyone here does by definition!), then anything that helps enhance our enjoyment of his poetry must be important'.

Yes, I realise this begs a lot of questions - I hope we may be able to tackle some of them in a few minutes.

In 1892 Olney schoolmaster and author Thomas Wright, after years of effort, established a collection of Cowper and Newton relics and promoted the idea of a permanent museum. In 1899, as the centenary of Cowper's death approached, the wealthy stationer W.H. Collingridge responded to these local moves by presenting Orchard Side 'to the Town and the Nation' and the Cowper and Newton Museum was opened there on Centenary Day, April 25th, 1900.

So from the very beginning the idea was there that the Cowper collection was for 'The Nation', and hence believed to be of national importance.

What does 'The Cowper Collection' actually consist of? We'll be looking at it in detail no doubt this afternoon, but it might be useful to think about it now. The museum holds a surprising and impressive collection of items which are reputed, at least, to have belonged to Cowper, Newton, or their circle. Many are in fact very well provenanced.

Personalia

The collection of items associated with William Cowper amounts to some dozens of objects. They are of great variety, very evocative and of much interest, ranging from his snuffbox, pocketbook, watch and razor strop, to a ball of wool wound by him. There is a shutter from Weston Lodge with an inscription by Cowper.

Only one straw-work 'trinket box' is directly associated with John Newton, but items associated with their circle include the remarkable workbox with inset portraits and a view of the Parlour, Mary Unwin's spectacles, and Lady Austen's bobbin-winder and fan. Of wider interest is the 'electric machine' used by William Hayley to cure Mary Unwin. The museum also holds items associated with other Evangelical contemporaries of Cowper.

Furniture

Virtually all the furniture in the house is associated, more or less reliably, with Cowper, Newton, or their circle. Most notable I think are the late 17th century walnut day-bed believed to be Cowper's

famous 'sofa', his remarkable letter-cabinet designed by his cousin John Johnson, the table on which he reputedly wrote *The Task*, and a walnut writing table he gave to Newton. Other associated pieces include Newton's wing-chair and ladderback chair, and Lady Austen's bidet!

Portraits & busts

The museum holds about ten contemporary portraits of Cowper, most notably perhaps the pencil sketch by Thomas Lawrence. There are also portraits of Newton, Cowper's father, his aunt, William Bull and his son, Samuel Greatheed, a set of silhouettes of Cowper, Newton and Mary Unwin's son and daughter, a small oval pastel of William Bull, and a bust of his son. A remarkable collection - the National Portrait Gallery would be overjoyed to have any one of those.

Costume and textiles

The collection of clothes and other textiles associated with the Cowper/Newton circle is also remarkable. It includes Cowper's greatcoat, waistcoat and walking stick, his counterpane and nightshirts, Newton's clerical bands, William Bull's caped travelling cloak (worn on a tour of Scotland in 1780, and exactly what you'd need for a coach journey), Hannah Bull's wedding dress of 1788, Lady Austen's 'presentation' dress, and John Johnson's satin waistcoat.

Other pictures

In addition to contemporary portraits and paintings, there are a number of later 'genre' pieces, including later 19th and 20th century paintings of Cowper and of scenes from his works. Among these are a collection of oils and watercolours of local scenes and scenes from the life of Cowper by museum founder Thomas Wright's father William Samuel Wright; more recent acquisitions are four very fine small watercolours, by Richard Westall, of scenes from *The Task*. I would certainly count these with the 'Cowper Collection': they speak of Cowper's reputation, indeed one might almost say his cult.

Souvenirs

'Souvenirs' associated with Cowper, Newton and their circle comprise both contemporary items, like feathers from the 'Goldfinch starved to death in his cage' and souvenirs of the *Royal George*, and later items such as the Staffordshire figures of John Gilpin. In addition, there are even later items, such as medals struck to celebrate Cowper's centenary.

Books

The museum holds an important collection of books by, about, or relating to Cowper and Newton. Books were collected from the beginning, and Thomas Wright's own collection is the core. A very important element is the collection given by the bibliophile and Cowper enthusiast John Sparrow, Warden of All Souls College, Oxford. It's easy to forget just what a significant collection this is. The museum library contains:

- three whole bays of books by or about Cowper,
- one bay of books by or about Newton,
- one shelf of *The Monthly Review*, with Cowper's bookplate,
- one shelf of Bibles etc,

Archives

Let's not forget, too, the large and important collection of papers, letters and so on deposited by the museum Trustees in the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies. The National Record Office would be honoured to hold those.

We honour the memory of Wright, Collingridge and many others over five or so generations in creating this wonderful collection. But let's also honour the present Trustees (and many people here) for the astonishing achievement of the museum in acquiring a couple of years ago the Cowper Johnson Collection. Among the treasures it includes are a portrait miniature of Cowper by Blake after Romney, a portrait miniature by Blake of John Johnson, as well as such charming things as Cowper's linen cap, pocket watch and shaving mirror. The Heritage Lottery Fund recognized the national importance of this collection - and recognized that Olney is the right and proper place for it to live.

Designation

How do you determine whether a collection is of 'National importance'? Who decides, and on what grounds?

One answer you sometimes hear - if only by implication - is that if something is in a National Museum, it must be of national importance.

It's easy to see the absurdity of this. But, too, it was tackled head on some years ago, when the co-called Designation Scheme tried to identify collections in provincial museums that were the equals of those to be found in the 'Nationals'. It was a brave stab at identifying collections in the provinces that were quite as important as those in the National Museums that attracted all the attention and the money. The 'Designation' scheme set out to identify collections outside the big National Museums that were of national importance. I was partly involved in devising the scheme so I'm prejudiced, but I think it was sensible in admitting from the start that complete objectivity is impossible, and a panel of 'experts' was set up who judged applications against four basic criteria.

The trouble with the Designation Scheme has always been that the government put an arbitrary limit on the number of collections it would accept – because of course the carrot is access to extra grants, and these are – as always – very limited.

But, in principle at least, would the Cowper collection count as 'nationally important' on these grounds? Let's see.

1. 'That the collection is of outstanding significance for contemporary national life, culture or history, or of outstanding significance for the study of humanities, science, technology or medicine.
2. 'That the collection would have to be consulted in order to tell the story or advance knowledge and understanding of the subject, geographic area, community or themes it represents.
3. 'That the collection is central to advancing public understanding and scholarly knowledge of the subject area, region or community that it represents with wider global relevance on the artistic/scientific/historic/cultural/economic stage.
4. 'That the collection can be regarded as of more than regional significance.'

Surely we have to say yes on all those counts. Cowper's importance as a poet and a precursor of the Romantics is one major reason. Another is his and Newton's role in the Evangelical movement, which laid the foundations of so many of the assumptions and attitudes of Victorian England. You could scarcely study the fount of Cowper's thought, of his muse, without visiting his home, reading his letters, understanding how and when his verses were published, considering the way of life that's evinced by his possessions, looking at his portraits or trying to understand how he felt about his things.

The Evangelical movement is deeply unfashionable today, I'm afraid. Perhaps you'll disagree, but I suspect there are few of us who proudly claim to stand in that particular church tradition – fewer still who actively engage with the personalities and writings of those times. But though what *inspired* the Evangelicals of the generation that grew to maturity at the end of the 18th century is little understood by today's public, the *effects* of their beliefs are well appreciated. The celebrations last year of the abolition of slavery reminded us all of just how key in world history the dedication and commitment of the Evangelicals was. And to understand them, an intimate knowledge of Cowper as well as of Newton, I suggest, is crucial.

And you get that by engaging with the Cowper Collection at the Cowper and Newton Museum.

Once upon a time museum curators used to collect things, put them in a logical order in showcases in order to tell some sort of story, reinforce that story with labels and guidebooks of various kinds, and invite the public in to look and learn. Those days are long gone. That approach is sometimes rudely called the 'hypodermic syringe' - curators injecting visitors with doses of knowledge.

We've learned a lot in recent years from the world of education - and picked up quite a lot of jargon,

too. When we visit a museum we bring with us a huge personal baggage of understanding, preferences, experiences and moods. So it's not only our enjoyment that we bring in large part with us - it's our understanding, too. We aren't getting given something by the museum; we are joining in with the museum in creating a whole new meaning (enjoyment, understanding, boredom, whatever), and just for us - each visitor creates their own individual experience.

The implication is that curators no longer have power, no longer control museum knowledge, but have at best to share understanding with their visitors. (At least that's what the museum studies courses say - in fact I'm not really sure you can see much difference in approach between a museum today and one twenty years ago.) Be that as it may, this approach does make us think more about what objects mean to individual museum visitors. Another thing that people working in museums have been trying better to understand is *significance*.

Assessing 'significance'

Over the past few years there's been a great deal of thought and interest given in the museum world to 'significance'. This too has been an effort to answer questions like: 'Is this object of National importance? Is this collection of local importance? Are these things of regional importance? Why? What makes them important? Who says so anyway? Who are they significant to?'

It gets more and more complicated of course, and I confess that at its worst it's a false veil of objectivity thrown over an entirely subjective and pretty spurious exercise.

But the fact is we do need to have some way of judging the value of objects we are collecting and caring for. Moreover, *things* - as we've been suggesting - take on meaning only in relation to people - when they can take on a very powerful meaning indeed. That's why, of course, anthropologists, material culture studies people and others have been taking a very active academic interest in this approach.

It's the Australians who seem to have been making the running. The Australian Heritage Council produced, a year or two back, a guide to assessing significance. I'm sure it was because museum people in Australia have to deal with material that comes from wildly different cultural backgrounds, and is imbued with utterly different meanings by its source communities. In that situation, you have to try that much harder to assess things. Be that as it may, it's been hugely influential in the UK.

My own interest in all this is in how and whether 'significance', as we use it in this sense about objects, has anything to do with 'sacred'. Is a 'sacred' object an object that has significance in the religious sphere? Is 'significant' the secular equivalent to 'sacred', and do both mean just 'special to someone'? All of this would have been anathema to Cowper, I'm afraid. He followed the tradition that goes back way beyond Protestantism, that denies the possibility of holiness to any *thing* or any *place*. Cowper wrote (my italics):

Jesus, where'er thy people meet,
There they behold thy mercy-seat;
Where'er they seek thee thou art found,
And *every* place is hallowed ground.
For thou, within no walls confined
Inhabitest the humble mind...

Conservation Management Plan

The year before last, I was involved with my colleague John Rhodes in preparing a Conservation Management Plan for the museum. This was a requirement of the Heritage Lottery Fund - and they had of course been reading their Australians. What was the *significance* of the building? Of the various parts of the collections? We tackled it by marking each part of the collection out of 3 for its

- Ability to demonstrate
- Historical associations
- Formal/aesthetic value

- Contemporary communal values
- Overall heritage value

It won't surprise you to hear that we scored virtually everything full marks! For example, we said of 'Ability to demonstrate' that

The Cowper and Newton collection at Olney is significant because it helps to demonstrate both late 18th century poetry and the religious movement that led to the abolition of slavery and did much to lay the foundations of the reforms of early Victorian England. It helps people to appreciate the poetry of William Cowper, by helping them to understand his life. For most people today, the Evangelical Movement is remote and incomprehensible. This collection of everyday personal possessions of leading Evangelicals helps to make them seem human and perhaps thus more easily understood, and hence helps people to understand the Evangelical Movement and its impact on society.

Of 'Historical associations' we said

The Cowper and Newton collection is significant because it is associated with the circle including one of England's greatest poets, and one of the most remarkable figures in the Evangelical Movement and the anti-slavery movement.

Of 'Formal and aesthetic' values, we claimed

The Cowper and Newton collection includes a considerable number of objects of the highest aesthetic and formal qualities. Examples include particularly some of the items of costume and some of the pictures.

Cowper's view of his things

Now what about Cowper himself? What did he think about his collection? Of course, he happily never had to undertake a significance audit, but Cowper is one of the few major English poets who wrote about things he owned and loved. The famous lines in *The Winter Evening* ('Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast...') or much of his writing about his garden, shows just how much he loved his things, how important his quite humble possessions were to him.

Above all it's in *The Task* that he shows his relationship with objects.

I sing the Sofa. I, who lately sang
 Truth, Hope and Charity, and touched with awe
 The solemn chords, and with a trembling hand,
 Escaped with pain from that advent'rous flight,
 Now seek repose upon an humbler theme;
 The theme though humble, yet august and proud
 Th'occasion – for the Fair commands the song.

What matters is the relationship of the poet and 'The Fair' (Lady Austen), the people involved, with the object.

But Cowper looks too at how the object illuminates the history of art and design:

Time was, when cloathing sumptuous or for use,
 Save their own painted skins, our sires had none.
 As yet black breeches were not...
 Those barb'rous ages past, succeeded next
 The birth-day of invention...

Three-legged stools were invented, but they were 'dull in design, and clumsy to perform', and happily

At length a generation more refined
 Improved the simple plan, made three legs four,
 Gave them a twisted form vermicular,
 And o'er the seat with plenteous wadding stuffed...

And so on. Thus were chairs invented, but they were just a stage in the evolution of the *sofa*.

It wasn't just as a decorative arts historian that Cowper approached the artefact. He was as aware as any modern-day curator of conservation issues, too, and in particular of the collections-care implications of insect attack, so that he readily recognized pieces of furniture that

...in ancient halls and mansions drear
May still be seen, but perforated sore
And drilled in holes the solid oak is found,
By worms voracious eating through and through.

Cowper was as aware as any modern museum curator of the opportunities for reaching out to new audiences by basing interpretation on the origins of materials. Does he anywhere mention mahogany, which has become such a curator's cliché? He specifically talks about bamboo:

...the cane from India, smooth and bright
With Nature's varnish; severed into stripes
That interlaced each other.

He's genuinely aware of class issues, and hints at sophisticated inventory analysis to understand 'the rest, whom fate had placed in modest mediocrity', with their crude leather chairseats and hard cushions, let alone the impoverished inhabitant of the 'peasant's nest'.

Where penury is felt the thought is chained,
And sweet colloquial pleasures are but few.
With all this thrift they thrive not. All the care
Ingenious parsimony takes but just
Saves the small inventory, bed and stool,
Skillet and old carved chest from public sale.

The whole poem of course – I'm talking particularly about *The Sofa* – is based on an awareness of gender issues related to objects and collections, the product of a commission from The Fair. More than that, Cowper specifically flags up the role of gender in the development of the Sofa:

...The Ladies first
'Gan murmur, as became the softer sex.
Ingenious fancy, never better pleased
Than when employed t'accommodate the fair,
Heard the sweet moan with pity, and devised
The soft settee;

Conclusion

I hope I've successfully shown that if Cowper was a precursor of the Romantics, he was also a precursor of 21st century material culture studies.

Is his collection of national importance? Well, one only needs a certain modicum of flippancy to suggest that it must be, since it is the research collection of an early and important practitioner of a highly fashionable research approach.

But we shouldn't end on a flippant note. I tried for ages to find an apposite quote from Cowper to end this talk - a few words that would sum up his attitude to his possessions. I failed. Lots of lovely remarks about gardens of course, and lots of subtle evidence of his love of his home and his homely things. But all I can do is ask you, this erudite audience, to suggest a quotation worthy to be nailed over the museum door, and which in Cowper's own words says 'This collection IS of national importance'.

Crispin Paine