

Calling William Cowper: A visit to the Cowper and Newton Museum

Your sea of troubles you have past,
And found the peaceful shore

These were the words I included in the March (Cambridgeshire) Grammar School magazine at the end of my last year there. Roman House were the champions. I was their house captain. Wonderful days! Yet it was the rest of the verse which always stuck in my mind:

I tempest-toss'd and wreck'd at last,
Come home to port no more.

(‘To the Reverend Mr. Newton on his return from Ramsgate. October 1780’)

Those words made me think more about the man himself.

William Cowper, whose father, John Cowper, was chaplain to George the Third, suffered most of his life from what we know now as manic depression. The actor, Stephen Fry, has publicly shared with the media his own battle with such an affliction. When Cowper died in May, 1800, the funeral service at St. Mary Woolnoth in Lombard Street, London, was conducted by the Rev. John Newton. He said that ‘He [Cowper] could give comfort, though he could not receive any himself.’ (*The Life of John Newton* by Richard Cecil).

John Newton, author of the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’, was the curate of the church of St Peter and St Paul in Olney from 1764 to 1779. He was Cowper’s firm friend and mentor. They collaborated to write the *Olney Hymns*.

I wanted to see for myself where Cowper lived, where he wrote his poems and letters, and what he did with his time. I wanted to know about his social life, about his friendships and his loves. He spent the best years of his life in Olney, 1768 – 1786. But what does a man do when he cannot live by himself, or with himself, whatever his age, or circumstances? What kept him going, I wondered? In his poem, ‘Table Talk’, Cowper says:

Happiness depends, as Nature shews,
Less on exterior things than most suppose.

(published in 1776 after Cowper’s latest resurgence of mental illness.) Could a visit to this museum throw some light on those *interior things* that gave him respite, however briefly, from his demons?

The weather was hot and sunny when I visited Cowper’s house, Orchard Side. I had parked my car in the centre of the town, a short walk away. The museum’s brochure states that Orchard Side was where poet and preacher met. Inside, it was like stepping back in time. There were so many artefacts to see in the kitchen, the hall and the parlour. The kitchen’s inglenook fireplace, surrounded by pots and pans, and a coal scuttle, were backed by a cast-iron fireback bearing the Coat of Arms of George the Third. I noticed an opening to the side of the fireplace where, presumably, light from the Hall could get through. A long-case clock (*circa* 1770) stood in the corner of the hall next to Newton’s ladder-backed chair. Apparently, the hall door was always kept shut, on account of Cowper’s numerous pets, and carpentry ventures.

Stepping into the parlour, one felt a more intimate atmosphere. This was where Cowper and Mary Unwin, and his cousin, Lady Hesketh, spent many happy hours in discussion. Cowper and Lady Hesketh always sat in the large, softer chairs, leaving the smaller and ‘harder than marble’ one for Mary (*Cowper* by Goldwin Smith, p. 6). Now there were relics like the Pembroke fly-leaf table, and the Charles the Second sofa, more a day bed, which Cowper wrote about in *The Task*. The idea came from an attractive, worldly widow, Lady Austen, with whom Cowper had great rapport. In that respect, she wanted more from him. Personal items abounded. They included Cowper’s snuff box from his cousin Theadora, a cribbage board, a coffee pot, and a bottle of lavender water. There was a pocket book for his money, and a gold fob when he wanted to seal his letters in red wax.

I went upstairs into the bedrooms. Cowper's room, with its oak beams, was quite large and spacious, whereas Mary Unwin's room was more regular in shape, and smaller, exactly as I expected. I felt that Mary, twelve years older than Cowper, was that steady, burning light in Cowper's eyes, always guiding him, and caring deeply for him. She was also very practical, and looked after household finance, something far beyond Cowper's expertise. They nearly got married, but his mental state was not up to such commitment. Yet Mary's influence was more that of a mother – Cowper's mother died when he was six – or of an older sister.

I wandered down the long garden, and through the gateway that led into another garden. At the bottom stood Cowper's summer house, his 'sulking room' as he called it. I opened the wooden door, but visitors were only allowed to look inside. There were two windows either side, and a larger window at the back. High-branched trees, with their summer dressing, blocked the view of the Parish Church spire.

Outside again, I walked past the Old Vicarage where Newton once lived. I carried on through a Neighbourhood Watch area to the parish church itself, standing on the banks of the Great Ouse river. I was back in 2008. Of course, the church doors were locked. As I came away, the church clock played its Westminster chimes, as it had been doing since the turn of the century. It was three o'clock in the afternoon.

So what kept William Cowper, Jane Austen's favourite writer in verse, going? People loved him, and were there for him. He had a very caring relationship with women. He certainly enjoyed their company. But marrying one of them? He had many good friends, especially the Unwins. There was real humour in their household. When her husband, a retired clergyman, died after falling from a horse, Mary Unwin devoted her life looking after Cowper. John Newton, on the other hand, was more Cowper's mentor than a personal friend. Renowned for being short on tact, and heavy on religious doctrine, the man certainly had a disturbing effect on the sensitive Cowper (*Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, Vol.11, Chapter 4 (2)). However, Cowper did say of him, 'A sincerer or more affectionate friend no man ever had.' (*William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century*, by Gilbert Thomas, p.192.). During long walks, they chatted about current events, including Cowper's great interest in the American War of Independence. He had his strong Christian faith, his summer house retreat, his love of gardening. His 'exterior' life was certainly orderly and productive. Yet there was something more. Was it the comforting thought of his church nearby, where he worshipped? Was it his keen interest in helping poorer locals who called him Squire Cowper and came to seek his advice? I believe what stirred him more than anything else was the melodious peal of the church bells reverberating across Olney. They were a constant reminder of all the things he loved and treasured the most. The echo of their harmony embraced and rejuvenated him, lifting his spirits in his hour of need. Cowper said it himself:

Tall spire, from which the sound of cheerful bells,
Just undulates upon the listening ear.

Now, centuries later, the bells are to be rehung in their new bell frame, and retuned, with two new treble bells blending into the chorus. Who knows? The ding-dong of those bells from the church of St. Peter and St. Paul could be ringing out loud and clear to herald the morning service on Christmas Day, 2008. They will be calling to the people to come and worship. The church will be packed, just as it was when John Newton was preaching there. Calling William Cowper. I just know the bells will be ringing for you again. Your darkness will turn into light.

Tony E. Warner