

An Important First Edition

Tony Seward

The museum's collection has been greatly enhanced by the acquisition of a unique first edition of William Hayley's *The Life and Posthumous Writings of William Cowper*, in three volumes, quarto. This purchase was made possible by a grant of £1500 from the Friends of National Libraries, and a donation of £900 from the Friends of the Museum. The Trustees are most grateful to both organisations for their prompt and generous support.

Volumes I and II were published three years after Cowper's death, in 1803, and Volume III in 1804. The edition is fully described in *A Bibliography of William Cowper to 1837*, by Norma Russell, Oxford Bibliographical Society 1963, pp.250-3. The book is in excellent condition, in its original leather binding, with very clear, unspotted plates.

What is unique about this copy and makes it so important and appropriate for the museum is its provenance, and the inclusion in it of a set of interleaved drawings and a silhouette of Cowper by the original owner, John Higgins. It carries the bookplate of 'Charles Longuet Higgins MA, Turvey Abbey AD 1874'. Charles was the son of John, who was a friend of Cowper from 1786, after the poet had moved to Weston Underwood, a village near Olney. John inherited Turvey Abbey in 1792, and married Theresa Longuet. Charles was born in 1806.

John Higgins, as well as being an admirer of Cowper's poems, was a talented amateur artist and produced the second earliest likeness of Cowper, a silhouette based on a shadow drawing made some time before May 1791. It is likely that he made several copies of the silhouette for friends, but what appears to be his own original copy is bound into Volume I, with a manuscript note: 'Cowper, reduced from a profile shadow drawn in 1791 by J.H.' The history of this likeness is outlined in Russell, *op.cit.*, pp.285-6.

As well as the silhouette, Volume I also contains 6 original pen and ink drawings by Higgins: one of The Lodge at Weston Underwood, where Cowper lived from 1786 to 1795, and five views taken from East, West, North and South of the Old Hall at Weston, the home of Cowper's friends and patrons Sir John and Lady Throckmorton. These views are a valuable record of a now-vanished building, since the Old Hall was demolished later in the nineteenth century.