

Cowper's Woodman Illustrated

Vincent Newey and Tony Seward

An important sidelight on Cowper is the range and quality of the illustrations of his poems and environment in editions and other books, by artists including Richard Westall, Henry Fuseli, John Flaxman, and J. and H.S. Storer, the latter, father and son, being responsible (with John Greig) for the celebrated *Cowper Illustrated* (1803) and, an expanded version of this, *The Rural Walks of Cowper* (1822), which even today are ideal guides to the countryside round Olney and Cowper's favourite haunts. It is perhaps less widely recognized that representations of scenes and figures from the poetry were separately published. John Gilpin proved a popular choice, with nine different prints issued between 1784 and 1833, the year in which an etching by 'Phiz' (Hablot K. Browne), illustrator of Dickens, appeared. Three prints, 'two of Crazy Kate, and one of the Lacemaker in "Truth"', are mentioned by Cowper as 'lately published' in a letter to Lady Hesketh on 3 November 1787. The most interesting of such items, however, relate to the description of the woodman and his dog near the beginning of Book V of *The Task*, 'The Winter Morning Walk'. It is these I wish to make note of, together with a modest but attractive recent discovery.

'The Woodman and his Dog, from Cowper's *Task*' was among the famous paintings of Thomas Barker (1769-1847), known as 'Barker of Bath', and is listed as 'No. XVIII' in *The Gallery of Poets ... Catalogue of the Fourth Exhibition of Pictures, painted for T. Macklin, by the Artists of Britain; illustrative of the British Poets and the Bible, 1791*, and in the *Catalogue of the Fifth Exhibition, 1792*. Barker's work was ubiquitously copied onto other materials, among them pottery, cotton, and linens. The engraver Francesco Bartolozzi produced a print of 'The Woodman'; but, more unusually, the *Dictionary of National Biography* and Norma Russell's *Bibliography of William Cowper* (Oxford, 1963) record that a needlework version was embroidered by Mary Linwood (1755-1845), a renowned worker in that medium, who in 1798 established an exhibition



The Woodcutter, drawing by G. A. Radcliffe, 1835

that was still open in London in 1841, containing one hundred copies of pictures by old and modern masters.

I have lately seen for sale a fine—and costly—needlework of Barker's painting and an unsigned copy in watercolour. Could the former be Mary Linwood's? Though so far unattributed, it should hang in a museum! I have myself had the good fortune to acquire another, entirely first-hand, rendering of Cowper's passage. This is a drawing in black pencil and red crayon ('sanguine'), 13 x 16 inches, and evidently by a talented amateur. It is signed 'G.A. Radcliffe' and dated '1835'; on the reverse is the title, 'The Woodcutter', and an inscription, 'H[?]. Radcliffe Given by her Niece August 1836'.

The original sprang to mind as soon as I saw the piece: the woodman with 'axe' and 'wedge', the 'fragrant tube / That fumes beneath his nose', the snow and 'forest drear', the short-tailed dog that is 'half lurcher and half cur', and other relevant detail. The whole drawing seemed to capture the intimate and understated mock-heroic humour of Cowper's lines. It was a nice surprise, nonetheless, to get certain confirmation of the relationship when, some weeks later, I spotted in minute pencil marks within a gnarled root at the fore of the picture—the phrase 'vid. Cowper'!

Thomas Barker of Bath was a popular and respected artist specialising in landscapes and picturesque rural characters. His series of 'Impressions of Rustic Figures after Nature' (1813) has the distinction of being the first one-man collection of lithographs printed in England. He is one of the last artists to work in an eighteenth-century tradition of picturesque landscapes and characters originally inspired by European artists such as Salvator Rosa, and the Dutch masters. He has been compared to George Morland and was strongly influenced by Thomas Gainsborough, especially in his renderings of the 'Woodman' motif. Gainsborough's 'Woodman' was widely known through prints based on it, and portrays the subject with pathos, as a poor man in rags at the mercy of the elements.

Barker clearly adapted the subject to accord with Cowper's description, producing several versions of the woodman walking with his dog through a snowy landscape, usually smoking a pipe. He used George



The Woodman Returning, oil painting by Thomas Barker
(© image courtesy of Raby Estates)



The Woodman, print by Francesco Bartolozzi after Thomas Barker
(© image courtesy of Raby Estates)

Kelman, a Bath woodman, as his model. He must have become aware of the popularity of the character following publication of *The Task* in 1785 (the woodman and his dog were even used as the model for a brass doorstop). For example, his 1789 'The Woodman Returning', now at Raby Castle, Co. Durham, incorporates these attributes but without the bounding energy and independence of Cowper's character: he bears a large load of firewood, facing the viewer with patient, smiling affability. The later print by Bartolozzi based on Barker's image has more of the spirit of Cowper's original 'leaving unconcerned the cheerful haunts of man', 'the sturdy churl' who 'moves right towards his mark...nor stops for aught'.

There is a remarkable lithograph (in the collection of the Holburne Museum at Bath) of Barker in old age, made by his son John Joseph in 1848, the year following his father's death. Looking like one of his own picturesque rustic characters, but holding paintbrushes and a palette, he lifts with one forefinger the corner of a drawing: it is of the woodman and his dog, perhaps a preparatory sketch. The print is captioned 'Thomas Barker Esqr, Painter of the Woodman'.