

The Cowper Johnson Archive

Letters, Books, Portraits and Relics
(including two miniatures by William Blake)

Felix Pryor

A highlight of the years covered by this retrospective issue of the journal was the acquisition of the Cowper Johnson Archive. It was offered to the Trustees by Bonhams auction house in 2006, on condition that we could raise the purchase price of £220,000 within six months. If we failed to do so, the archive would be auctioned and dispersed. Since it was the most important collection of Cowper-related material ever to come onto the market, we could not allow this to happen. Unlocking the necessary support from the Lottery and other funding bodies depended, crucially, on our raising match funding, mainly from the local community. The target was £25,000. Through the efforts of many individuals and a magnificent response from Olney residents it was not only met but substantially exceeded, and well within the time limit. The Archive was saved for the Museum.

An unexpected bonus was the vendor's gift, outside the sale, of the copy of Abbott's portrait with accompanying pedigree of the Cowper family, which now hang in the hall at Orchard Side (see below: 2. Johnson on Abbott's Portrait of Cowper).

Felix Pryor, an art historian and manuscripts expert retained by Bonhams, produced the following description prior to the offer for sale. It is a meticulously researched guide to the treasures we were about to acquire, set in the context of Cowper's life and work. We are glad to have this opportunity of placing it on permanent record through the medium of the journal.

The portraits and 'relics' are in most cases on permanent display and can be viewed by anyone visiting the Museum. The books are held in the Museum Library and may be consulted on request. As a condition of the Lottery grant the letters were deposited in the County Record Office in Aylesbury (now the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies) to be preserved under approved archival conditions: interested readers should contact the archivist at archives@buckscc.gov.uk (Note by Tony Seward)

This extraordinary collection was assembled and preserved by the Revd. John Johnson (1769-1833) and the descendants of his eldest son William Cowper Johnson (1813–1893): for further details, see the notes on individual provenances below. Johnson was Cowper's first cousin once removed, his grandfather being the son of Roger Donne, Cowper's maternal uncle:

For twenty-seven years Cowper held no intercourse with his maternal relations, and knew not whether they were living or dead. Johnson, however, when a Cambridge student, introduced himself to the poet during a Christmas vacation. Cowper conceived an affection for 'the wild but bashful boy', which was amply requited. Cowper, who used to call him 'Johnny of Norfolk', was deeply indebted to his kinsman for the care taken of him during the latter

years of his life. Cowper died in Johnson's house in the market-place of East Dereham 25 April 1800.

Dictionary of National Biography

Johnson commissioned Lemuel Abbott's portrait of Cowper, and greatly assisted his cousin in his translation of Homer. After Cowper's death, he helped Hayley with his *Life*, and through Hayley came into the orbit of William Blake, who drew his portrait. Many of the objects in this collection have passed by descent through the family directly from Johnson; but others were bequeathed to later members of the family by Lady Hesketh and other intimates of the poet: it seems fair to say that the Cowper Johnson family was regarded throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as custodians of Cowper's memory and guardians of his shrine. The present collection has remained with the family to this day.

LETTERS

1. Letters by William Cowper to Joseph Hill

Series of over 170 autograph letters (including verse epistles) by William Cowper, to his close early friend and lifetime supporter Joseph Hill (a few to his wife), the series annotated by Lady Hesketh and bound for the Revd. John Johnson; title-page ('The Original Letters of Cowper to his friend Joseph Hill Esqr. including those to Mrs Hill; arranged, and prepared for binding, by the Revd. John Johnson, LL.D, the Writer's friend and Relation. A.D. 1820.') and contents list, later inscription pasted in by Sarah Hill presenting the volume to Joseph Jekyll of Wargrave Hill, 14 March 1821; the letters mounted and sometimes overlaid or strengthened, with the text in places pasted over, some headed with autograph signed receipts by Cowper for monies received from Hill (in one or two instances torn off in the course of business), a few other letters fragmentary and one or two damaged by damp, green morocco gilt, spine stamped 'Original Letters of Cowper 1755-1793/ To Joseph Hill Esq/ MDCCCXX', all edges gilt, small tear on upper cover, 4to; contained in a contemporary matching fitted case, with lock

According to King and Ryskamp (*Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, i, 1979, p.xxxii, where these are published): 'This is a collection of 176 letters from 10 October 1755 to 10 December 1793 on 472 pages. They were arranged and prepared for binding by John Johnson in 1820. These letters are owned by the Misses C. and A. Cowper Johnson.' As far as we aware, it is the longest series of original Cowper letters to one correspondent extant, covering very nearly his whole adult life, especially the early years: the next largest being those to John Newton at Princeton and those to William Unwin at the British Library. Neither of the Newton nor Unwin series has survived intact, while about 25 letters from our series to Joseph Hill are either lost (1), known only from printed texts (3) or in other collections such as the Pierpont Morgan, Massachusetts Historical Society, Princeton, New York Public Library, the Boston Public Library and the Cowper and Newton Museum, Olney (21).

According to King and Ryskamp's census, this can also lay claim to being the second largest collection of Cowper letters in any one place;

the largest being the collection of 404 letters (to various correspondents) assembled by Professor Hannay and now at Princeton. King and Ryskamp list the next largest collections, after ours, as being those to various correspondents at the British Library (118 letters), Panshanger (72 letters), the Cowper and Newton Museum, Olney (c.50 letters) and the Pierpont Morgan (50 plus letters).

The collection was magnificently bound by John Johnson for Sarah, Joseph Hill's widow. She bequeathed it to Joseph Jekyll (1754-1837), the lawyer and wit, of Wargrave Hill (where the young Gertrude Jekyll was to live). It was then left by his descendants Sir Herbert and Joseph Jekyll to Canon Cowper Johnson, and belonged at the time of King and Ryskamp's edition of the letters to Misses C. and A. Cowper Johnson.

A notable feature of the series is that many of the letters have been annotated by Cowper's cousin, and arguably closest friend of all, Lady Hesketh. Her comments are clearly directed to John Johnson and refer to Hayley's posthumous *Life of Cowper*. Some of her annotations are included in King and Ryskamp's edition of the letters, but most are not. Hers is a running commentary of especial interest in light of Cowper's posthumous reputation (one in which Blake was also to be involved). In the words of Verlyn Klinkenborg:

Though his cousin Lady Hesketh understood the need for an authorized biography, she intended to confine to the immediate circle of his friends any knowledge of what she considered the misfortune of his Evangelical beliefs and the undoubted tragedy of his periods of severe depression. William Hayley, the official biographer, respected her wishes, but when the first volume of his *Life and Letters of William Cowper* appeared in 1803, the reviewers abruptly brushed away the fragile web of Hayley's adulatory narrative and seized upon a previously unknown fact: Cowper was a brilliant correspondent. Within twenty years of his death, Cowper's reputation had almost completely reversed itself; his poetry had begun to fade, while he was justly hailed as one of the greatest of English letter writers. The attractions of Cowper's epistolary style – so adaptable and good-humored – ruined Lady Hesketh's plans to hide his miseries in oblivion, and today the details of his secluded life are better known than those of any other poet of his period.

British Literary Manuscripts: Series I, from 800 to 1800,
Pierpont Morgan Library/ Dover, 1981, 112.

Lady Hesketh's unpublished docketts on the letters include comments such as: 'This letter actually makes my heart bleed! – O! what must have been the sensations of such a heart as his while writing! I don't know whether I could be Cruel enough to wish Ld T to see this and some others of this parcel, but surely he could not see such letters from such a friend without a degree of Remorse that I could not wish my greatest Enemy'; 'How very beautiful' (on Cowper's meditation on death); 'a most pleasing letter of the Serious kind' (about his breakdown of 1763); 'Very clever & worthy of the Writer but perhaps better suppressed at this distance of Time' (about the American War of Independence); 'I intreat Mr Hayley may have this' (Cowper discussing publication of his *Poems* of 1782); 'Just the very thing our biographer wou'd like to publish. it shews the Authors best [?] turn'd inside out'; 'O! this must and shall see the light!' (Cowper on his domesticity); 'pray let this be published; & Just as it stands – why not, yet the Name may be omitted

if you've any real objection to being Popular' (Cowper's letter claiming that he has written nothing recently 'except a certain facetious History of John Gilpin, which Mr Unwin would send to the Public Advertiser'); 'I should greatly wish the first part of this letter might appear but on no account the article about Johnson tho I myself Subscribe to evry Tittle of it' (Cowper on Thurloe's pension to the dying Dr Johnson); etc. Four of the letters include verse, the first letter of all (10 October 1755), being the verse-epistle beginning 'If I write not to you/ As I gladly would do/ To a Man of your Mettle & Sense...'; other poems transcribed by Cowper for Hill being 'The Pine Apple & the Bee' (2 October 1779, published in 1782), 'On the Promotion of Edwd Thurlow Esqr/ To the Lord Chancellorship of England' (14 November 1779, published 1782), and 'Nose Pl[ain]tiff Eyes Def[endan]ts' (27 December 1780).

Although Hill, the successful lawyer and practical man of business, is usually seen as very different from his friend, the letters nevertheless abound with references to Cowper's verse, a subject that Hill clearly held close to his heart. They include significant references to his first publication, the Poems of 1782 ('...I hope my Bookseller has paid due attention to the order I gave him to furnish you with my book, the composition of those pieces afforded me an agreeable Amusement at Intervals for about a twelve month, and I should be glad to devote the leisure hours of another twelvemonth to the same occupation, at least if my lucubrations should meet with a favourable acceptance. But I cannot write when I would, and whether I shall find Readers is a problem not yet decided – so the Muse and I are parted for the present...'); the everpopular John Gilpin ('...You may think perhaps that having commenced Poet by profession, I am always writing verses. Not so – I have written nothing, at least finished nothing, since I published – except a certain facetious History of John Gilpin, which Mr Unwin would send to the Public Advertiser. Perhaps you might read it without suspecting the Author...my Book procured me this favor – it has procured me likewise other favors which my modesty will not permitt me to specify, except one, which modest as I am I cannot suppress, a very handsome Letter from Dr Franklin at Passy. These fruits it has brought forth, but whether it has brought forth any money I know not, having never heard from my Printer since he published...'); what is generally seen as his greatest achievement, *The Task*, both before publication ('...I am going to the Press again, and a volume of mine will greet your hands either some Time in the course of the Winter or early in the Spring. You will find it perhaps on the whole more entertaining than the form[er] as it treats a greater variety of subject[s] and those, at least the most of them, of a sublunary kind. It will consist of a Poem in Six books called the Task. To which will be added another which I finished yesterday, called I believe – *Tirocinium* – on the subject of Education...'), and after ('...I have orderd my volume to your door. My Bookseller is the most dilatory of all his fraternity, or you would have received it long since. It is more than a month since I returned to him the last proof, and consequently since the Printing was finished. I sent him the Manuscript at the beginning of last November that he might publish while the Town is fu[ll], and he will hit the exact moment when it is entirely empty...'); his translation of Milton's Latin poems ('...I have made a considerable progress in the translation

of Miltons Latin poetry. I give them, as opportunity offers, all the variety of measure that I can. Some I render in heroic rhyme, some in stanzas, some in seven, and some in eight syllable measure, and some in blank verse. They will all together I hope make an agreeable miscellany for the English reader. They are certainly good in themselves, and cannot fail to please but by the fault of their translator...'); and his magnum opus, his translation of Homer ('...I begin to find some prospect of a conclusion, of the Iliad at least, now opening upon me, having reached the 18th Book. Your Letter found me yesterday in the very fact of dispensing the whole host of Troy, by the voice only of Achilles. There is nothing extravagant in the idea, for you have witnessed a similar effect attending even such a voice as mine, at midnight, from a garret window, on the dogs of a whole parish whom I have put to flight in a moment...').

The series also includes valuable references to Cowper's reading habits ('...My Reading is pretty much circumscribed both by want of Books, and the influence of particular reasons... Poetry, English Poetry I never touch, being pretty much addicted to the writing of it, and knowing that much intercourse with those gentlemen, betrays us unavoidably into a habit of imitation, which I hate and despise most cordially...'), and contemporary writers, including Johnson, to whom Cowper's erstwhile fellow-clerk Chancellor Thurlow had offered a pension, and Gray ('...I have been reading Greys Works, and think him the only Poet since Shakespear entitled to the Character of Sublime. Perhaps you will remember that I once had a different Opinion of him: I was prejudiced; he did not belong to our Thursday Society & was an Eaton Man, which lowered him prodigiously in our Esteem. I once thought Swifts Letters the best that could be written, but I like Greys better; his Humour or his Wit, or whatever it is to be called is never illnatur'd or offensive, & yet I think equally poignant with the Deans...').

By way of bonus, Cowper also transcribes the full text of Benjamin Franklin's famous letter to John Thornton in praise of his poetry, in which Franklin tells Thornton: 'The relish for reading of Poetry had long since left me, but there is something so new in the manner, so easy and yet so correct in the language, so clear in the expression yet concise, and so just in the sentiments that I have read the whole with great pleasure, and some of the pieces more than once – I beg you to accept my thankfull acknowledgments, and to present my respects to the Author...' While Cowper's attitude to Franklin's cause is the subject of a long mockdialogue with Hill written late in 1781 ('...Well Cowper – what do you think of this American War?/ I – To say the truth I am not very fond of thinking about it; when I do, I think of it unpleasantly enough. I think it bids fair to be the ruin of this Country./ You – That's very unpleasant indeed – if that should be the consequence, it will be the fault of those who might put a stop to it if they would./ I – . But do you really think it practicable?/ You. – Why not?...').

In addition, this series touches on some of the great, often formative, events in Cowper's life, such as his mother's early death ('...To condole with you on the death of a Mother aged 87 would be absurd... Your lot and mine in this respect have been very different, as indeed in almost every other. Your Mother lived to see you rise, at least to see you comfortably established in the world. Mine dying when I was six years old, did not

live to see me sink in it. You may remember with pleasure while you live, a blessing vouchsafed to you so long, and I while I live I must regret a comfort of which I was deprived so early. I can truly say that not a week passes, (perhaps I might say with equal veracity say a day) in which I do not think of her...'); his religious calling (one letter marked by Lady Hesketh 'This is a charming letter full of good Sense Piety & Truth, without any of the methodistical Cant wch I dislike extremely' in which he declares that 'It was not without many [d]readfull Afflictions and a deep Sense of the Wrath of God [ag]ainst Sin, that I was brought to a serious Hearing of the Word of God. Depend upon it, it is well worth your while to e[n]quire into these things...'); his breakdown of 1763 and the death of his brother ('...I have not done conversing with terrestrial Objects, though I should be happy were I able to hold more continual Converse with a Friend above the Skies. He has my Heart – but he allows a Corner in it for all who shew me Kindness, and therefore one for You. The Storm of 63 made a Wreck of all the Friendships I had contracted in the Course of many Years, Yours excepted, which has survived the Tempest...'); and the death of others close to him ('...Mr Unwin is dead... at nine o'clock on Sunday morning he was in perfect Health and as likely to live 20 years as either of us, and before 10 was stretched speechless and senseless upon a Flock Bed in a poor Cottage, where, (it being impossible to remove him) he died on Thursday evening. I heard his dying Groans, the Effect of great Agony, for he was a strong Man, and much convulsed in his last Moments...').

Nor – like The Task – does this series shun those everyday preoccupations that have made Cowper's letters so highly prized from Hayley's day to this, a quality which he himself acknowledges ('...Dear Sephus,/ Uncertain whether or no this will ever reach your Hands, I shall lay an Embargo upon all that Wit & Humour which generally pours itself into my Epistles, and only write the needfull...'), the subject of gardening being especially popular ('...Having commenced Gardiner, I study the Arts of pruning, sowing, and Planting, and enterprize every thing in that way from Melons down to Cabbages. I have a large Garden to display my Abilities in, and were I 20 Miles nearer London, might turn Higglers, and serve your Honour with Cauliflowers and Brocoli at the best hand...').

2. Johnson on Abbott's Portrait of Cowper

Autograph letter signed ('JJ') by the Revd. John Johnson, to his sister Kate at East Dereham, written when staying with Cowper at Weston Underwood and during a sitting by Cowper to Lemuel Abbott for the portrait which Johnson had commissioned:

I was not up till Mr Abbott and my Cousin were set down to Breakfast – Mr Abbott, say you, and who is Mr Abbott? Oh my love, I can no longer keep the secret – Mr Abbott is perhaps the first Portrait Painter in the Kingdom with respect to a likeness – he has actually painted a most enchanting likeness of our great Poet – nothing can be more like – and this is the reason of my going up to London when I did – I engaged Mr Abbott to come down on the 12th of this month, that is to say, on this day sennight – he accordingly came down – and has finished his face – such a likeness, well, my love – this Portrait is mine at present, but my intention has always been to present it to our Aunt and Uncle Bodham... Our dear Cousin is painted in the attitude of

Study – with his Homer lying on his favourite desk, before him... All this Country already knows that I went up to Town for the purpose of engaging a Painter without saying any thing to my Cousin – and Every Body seems delighted with the idea – for my own part I never dreamt of any thing except securing my point – for I knew that if I hinted it to our Cousin before I went he would not have let me go, being so unambitious of appearing on canvas – however he now delights in the business and enters into the subject with great pleasure – He has been the best Sitter Mr Abbott ever had in his life – I am now relieving him by sitting for the lights and shades of the leg, and am therefore cross-legged and sitting at his desk – but he will resume his seat again for the finishing part.

(4 pages, 4to, integral address, seal and postmark, Weston Underwood, 19 July 1792)

[The original of this portrait was sold to the National Portrait Gallery; the copy now in the museum was commissioned by the family as a replacement.]

BOOKS FROM COWPER'S LIBRARY

For a history of this library and its dispersal, see Geoffrey Keynes, 'The Library of William Cowper' in Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society, vol.iii, I, 1960, p.47ff.

Cowper spent the last five years of his life being cared for by his first cousin John Johnson, Rector of Yaxham with Welborne, Norfolk. In all 177 titles were listed as being in Cowper's possession at his death by William Barker, a local bookseller. The rest of his library having perished by fire, as he tells Hill (in the present collection) in the spring of 1788:

I am likely to be furnishd soon with shelves which my Cousin of Norfolk Street is about to send me, but furniture for those shelves I shall not presently procure unless by recov'ring my stray Authors. I am not young enough to think of making a new collection, and shall probably possess myself of few Books hereafter but such as I m[a]y put forth myself... Alas! My Library – I must now give it up for a lost thing for ever. The only consolation belonging to the circumstance is or seems to be, that no such loss did ever befall any other man, or can ever befall me again... Those Books which had been my fathers, had, most of them, his arms on the inside Cover, but the rest, no mark, neither his name or mine. I could mourn for them like Sancho for his Dapple, but it would avail me nothing.

Cowper's surviving library passed, on his death, to Johnson, who gave a few volumes away to members of the family. On Johnson's death in 1833 library and relics were divided among his three sons, William Cowper Johnson, John Barham Johnson and Henry Vaughan Johnson. This division was indicated by their pencilled initials on the inside covers, ours belonging to the eldest son, 'WCJ'. Although the present collection clearly does not represent all the books WCJ inherited, it does contain what are by any account some of the most outstanding, such as Cowper's copies of Milton and Homer. While this section has remained with the family, those belonging to John were sold at Sotheby's in 1943 and those to Henry were bought by Keynes in 1928 and partly dispersed by him at Sotheby's.

A notable feature of all these books is that each was signed by Cowper on the top left-hand corner of the title page and dated 1797, in what Keynes describes as ‘a spidery and uncertain hand’. This was done in an attempt to help Cowper, suffering as he was during these last years from debilitating depression. Johnson has left an account of the process:

Today we entered upon an experiment from which I had great hopes, and which in some sort answered the purpose. I should have observed that the Homer had been laid aside a long time, without my being able to persuade him to resume it. The scheme, therefore, which I now formed to draw him out of himself, was this. He had about four hundred Volumes which followed us from Weston. It struck me, therefore, that by coaxing him to write his name in every one of these Volumes, I should perhaps have the happiness to find that he would be tempted to look into them. So I proposed to him that he should write his name in ten Volumes every day, so long as they lasted. To this he readily agreed – though from an odd reason, dear Soul – viz. because he thought that he must live till they were all finished at that same rate. – So he began to work, and to my great joy was tempted, as I had hoped, to peep into almost every Volume as he went along.

(Journal for 16 August 1797, quoted by Keynes)

On 26 September Johnson added: ‘Finished the books this day’. Rarely can a set of ownership inscriptions have had greater poignancy.

In addition to the 1797 signature, many of the present volumes have (as described by Keynes) ‘Cowper’s crest stamped in gold on a [black] leather label fixed to the spines and his bookplate... pasted inside the front cover’.

3. Bible – Greek New Testament

Novum Testamentum Graeci, 2 vols (1763), both title-pages signed ‘Wm Cowper 1797’, vol.i. with Cowper’s armorial bookplate and that of his father, vol.ii with his father’s only, Cowper crest on spine (one from remaining impress only), vol.i initialled ‘WCJ’ and inscribed at the end ‘Rev Dr Johnson’, calf, joints weak, spine chipped, 8vo.

In his letter to Joseph Hill (see above) about the loss of his early library, Cowper especially regretted that of his father’s books: ‘Those Books which had been my fathers, had, most of them, his arms on the inside Cover, but the rest, no mark, neither his name or mine. I could mourn for them like Sancho for his Dapple, but it would avail me nothing’ (8 May 1788). See also his father’s copy of Pasore’s Lexicon, below.

4. Brown (John)

A Dictionary of the Holy Bible, third edition, in two volumes (1789), both title-pages signed ‘Wm Cowper 1797’, no bookplate, Cowper crest on spine on vol.ii (with impress where formerly on vol.i), vol.i initialled ‘WCJ’, half-calf marbled boards, joints weak, spines chipped, 8vo.

5. Cervantes Saavedra (Miguel de)

The History and Adventures of the Renowned Don Quixote, translated by Smollett, fifth edition, in 4 volumes, all title-pages signed ‘Wm Cowper 1797’, Cowper’s armorial bookplate in each volume, Cowper crest on spines (one crest label lacking), first volume initialled ‘WCJ’, calf, spines cracked, joints weak and covers coming loose, spine chipped, 8vo

Writing to Joseph Hill about the loss of his early library, Cowper invokes Cervantes: 'I could mourn for them like Sancho for his Dapple, but it would avail me nothing' (8 May 1788, from the letter in the present collection).

6. Gillies (John)

Memoirs of the Life of the Reverend George Whitefield (1772), signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', upper right inscribed 'Maria Johnson/ from My dear Johnnie', no bookplate, Cowper crest on spine, calf, joints weak, spine chipped, 8vo.

7. Green (William)

A New translation of the Psalms (1762), Cowper's signature cut away from the title-page, Cowper's armorial bookplate, calf, Cowper crest on spine, 8vo.

8. Griffith (Richard)

A Series of Genuine Letters between Henry and Frances, third edition, vols i and ii bound in one (1767), title-page signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', no bookplate, Cowper crest on spine, joints weak, calf, spine chipped, 8vo.

9. Hervey (James)

Meditations and Contemplations, 22nd edition (1776), title-page signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', Cowper's armorial bookplate, Cowper crest on spine, inside cover initialled 'WSC', fly-leaf inscribed 'To my dear Maria/ April 1820', price calculations at end, calf, joints weak, spine chipped, 8vo.

Perhaps I am partial to Hervey for the sake of his other Writings (you know I hated him once) but I cannot give Pearshall the Preference to him now, for I think him one of the most Spiritual & truly Scriptural Writers in the World

(Cowper to his cousin Mrs Cowper, 17 April 1766)

10. Hervey (James)

Theron and Aspasio, fourth edition, 3 volumes (1761), all title-pages signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', no bookplate, part Cowper crest remaining on one spine, vol i signed 'WCJ', calf, joints weak, spines chipped, 8vo.

While Cowper greatly admired Hervey's Meditations, he did allow himself to poke some fun at Hervey's other famous work, telling Joseph Hill that Teedon, the Olney schoolmaster, 'has formed his stile (he told me himself) by the pattern that Mr Hervey has furnish'd him with in his Theron and Aspasio; accordingly he never says that my garden is gay, but that the flowery tribe are finely variegated and extremely fragrant. The weather with him is never fine, but genial, never cold and uncomfortable, but rigorous and frowning.' (See original letter, 29 June 1785.)

11. Homer

The Iliad, in Greek with facing Latin translation (1728), title-page signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', Cowper's armorial bookplate, small fragment of Cowper crest on spine, outer part of front fly-leaf remaining (detached) inscribed by Cowper ('[...] Translation of the Iliad on/ [...] Novemb.r 1784./ [...] Jan.r 13. 1786') and bearing the ownership inscriptions of John Thornton (1729), H.W. Green (1774), T. Jones (1777) [Thomas Jones, Lady Austen's brother-in-law, from whom Cowper acquired the volume (see note below)] and W.C. Johnson (1830), calf, lacking one cover, spine worn, 8vo.

A key book from Cowper's library, being – as his autograph inscription makes clear – the volume from which he translated the Iliad. Cowper's translation of Homer was an undertaking that James King, his modern biographer, places at the centre of his literary career:

I have devoted a great deal of attention to the translation of Homer, which Cowper felt was his great literary achievement and enduring monument. In his letters, Cowper left a detailed record of his progress on Homer, which he came to see as his vindication as a professional writer. Although our critical response is now rightly focused on the letters and original verse compositions, I have attempted to demonstrate how crucial the Homer project was for him. Cowper was a man who became aware of ambition comparatively late in life, and in his dedication to Homer – and to his own claim to immortality – Cowper's passivity gave way to earnest, determined activity...the translation of the Iliad and Odyssey was to become the culmination of Cowper's poetical career, and, in the process, a major aim of his parallel 'career' as a letter writer was attained as never before.

William Cowper: a Biography, 1986, pp.x-xi

In his copy of the Odyssey, Cowper wrote: 'My Translation of the Iliad I began on the twenty first day of November in the year 1784.' (King, p.195). This is matched by what remains of the inscription in the present volume: '[...] Translation of the Iliad on [...] Novemb.r 1784./ [...] Jan.r 13. 1786'. As this volume records, the first draft of his translation of the Iliad was finished on 13 January 1786. After further revisions the completed work was published on 1 July 1791 (for John Johnson's copy, see below).

James King identifies this copy of the Iliad as having belonged to Thomas Jones, Lady Austen's brother-in-law (p.190).

12. Janeway (James)

Invisibles, Realities Demonstrated in the Holy Life and Triumphant Death of Mr John Janeway (1745), fly leaf signed and dated 'Wm Cowper/ April 14./ 1769', title-page signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', Cowper's armorial bookplate, initialled 'WCJ' and signed 'Maria Johnson', Cowper crest on spine, calf, joints weak, spine chipped, 8vo.

A book with, for Cowper, a poignant association. He refers to it in *Adelphi*, his account of his own conversion and of his brother John's death: 'About this time, I reminded him of the account of Janeway's death which he once read at my desire. He said, "[I] laughed at it in [my] own mind and accounted it mere madness and folly. Yet base as I am," (said he), "I have no doubt now but God has accepted me also and forgiven me all my sins."' (Letters and Prose Writings, i, p.58). This copy of Janeway was acquired by Cowper on 14 April 1769, a little less

than a year before his brother's death, on 20 March 1770.

13. Johnson (Samuel)

The Rambler, ninth edition, in four volumes (1779), all title-pages signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', each with Cowper's armorial bookplate, traces of Cowper's crest on spine (one intact), calf, joints weak, spine chipped, 8vo.

14. Juvenal (Decimus Junius)

The Satires of Juvenal Translated (1739), title-page signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', Cowper's armorial bookplate, trace of Cowper crest on spine, inner cover initialled 'WCJ', inscribed with purchase price, calf, upper cover detached, spine chipped, 8vo.

This has been annotated throughout in Latin: the hand is not Cowper's.

15. Labutte (Rene)

A French Grammar (1784), title-page signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', Cowper's armorial bookplate, impress from Cowper crest on spine, purchase inscription in pencil ('March 27. 1797/ Binding – 1/8'), initialled 'WCJ', half-calf marbled boards, joints weak, spine rubbed, 8vo.

16. Lawrence (John)

The Clergy-Man's Recreation: Shewing the Pleasure and Profit of the Art of Gardening, second edition (1714), title-page signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', Cowper's armorial bookplate, Cowper crest on spine, name of an earlier owner above the date 1715 cut away (?for the autograph) on flyleaf, calf, spine and endpapers restored, 8vo.

Gardening featured large in Cowper's life, partly as a refuge from depression: 'all of Cowper's observations on gardening have the unmistakable air of authenticity, but a garden for him was also a symbolical representation of man's ability to care, protect, and foster... he was able in The Task to describe the countryside and its life – his extended garden – in all its complexity as "blest seclusion from a jarring world".' (James King, William Cowper: a Biography, 1986, p.93). It forms a recurrent theme in his letters to Joseph Hill in the present collection. This volume has been extensively annotated by the original owner with lively comments ('...come be quiet, you'll have Mr Bradley upon your back if you havnt a Care, how can you speak so disrespectfully of Philosophy...').

17. Lexicon – Hederich (Benjamin)

Graecum Lexicon Manuale (1766), title-page signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', no bookplate, small patch indicating original presence of Cowper crest on spine, inscribed in pencil 'WC Johnson/ from his father/ ...July 11. 1831', calf, joints weak, 4to.

This is clearly the Greek lexicon acquired by Cowper in order to undertake his translation of Homer. In the autumn of 1780 he wrote to William Unwin: 'If you could meet with a Second Hand Virgil, Ditto Homer, both Iliad & Odyssey, together with a Clavis, for I have no Lexicon, & all tolerably cheap, I should be obliged if you will make the purchase.' (3 September 1780).

18. Lexicon – Pasore (Giorgio)

Lexicon Graeco-Latinum in novum domini nostrum Jesu Christi Testamentum (1650) bound with Etyma nominum propriorum (1650), initial title-page signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', armorial bookplates of Cowper and his father John, Cowper crest on spine, calf, joints weak, spine chipped, 8vo.

Another of the few surviving books from the library of Cowper's father, which he mourned in his letter to Joseph Hill: see his Greek New Testament, above.

19. Milton (John)

Paradise Lost: A Poem in Twelve Books, edited by Thomas Newton, seventh edition, in two volumes (1770), both title-pages signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', Cowper's armorial bookplate in both volumes, vol.i signed 'WCJ', calf, upper cover of vol.i. detached, joints weak, spines chipped, 8vo.

Milton and Paradise Lost were, of course, enormously influential on Cowper from his Westminster days onwards, and he felt a strong sense of self-identification with the poet who, disabled by blindness, transformed that handicap into a strength: 'He assumed his great task would be to write a poem about a corrupt individual – himself – who wanders back into the garden and finds salvation. Such thoughts preoccupied him, and he saw The Task as a continuation of Paradise Lost... Cowper now envisioned his career as a poet to be a dedication to the poet-priest calling of Milton.' (James King, William Cowper: a Biography, 1986, p.145).

The printer Joseph Johnson issued a prospectus for a magnificent edition of Milton on 1 September 1791, with Cowper as editor and Fuseli as illustrator. King remarks that, although 'it was appropriate that he should decide to edit the verse of the English poet whose literary successor he had become', when he agreed to the proposal 'the only edition of Milton Cowper possessed was the seventh edition (1770) in two volumes of Thomas Newton's edition of Paradise Lost.' (pp.232 and 234). The project was eventually to be abandoned.

At the back of the first volume is pencilled a variation of Milton's description of Satan (Newton, i, p.268): 'Satan like a Cormorant/ Sits on the tree of life/ In prospect not for use', with a further passage marked in the second.

20. Milton (John)

Paradise Regained...Samson Agonistes and Poems upon Several Occasions, in two volumes, edited by Thomas Newton (1770), both title-pages signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', Cowper's armorial bookplate in both volumes, ink proof-correction at ii, p.307, calf, cover of becoming detached, joints weak, spines chipped, 8vo.

As part of the aborted Milton edition, Cowper translated Milton's Latin and Italian poems in the autumn of 1791. It was for him 'the only attractive element of this project' (John D. Baird in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography). At the end of vol.ii (containing the Latin and Italian poems) are some pencil calculations which might relate to the project. On 14 November 1791 Cowper wrote to Joseph Hill, 'I have made a considerable progress in the translation of Miltons Latin

poetry. I give them, as opportunity offers, all the variety of measure that I can. Some I render in heroic rhyme, some in stanzas some in seven, and some in eight syllable measure, and some in blank verse. They will all together I hope make an agreeable miscellany for the English reader. They are certainly good in themselves, and cannot fail to please but by the fault of their translator.' (See the letter in the present collection.)

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21. Newton (John)

Collection of works in one volume, comprising Six Discourses as intended for the pulpit (1760), A Sermon Preached...on...the day appointed for a General Fast (1781), A Sermon Preached...on the...Death of Richard Conyers [1786], The Best Wisdom: A Sermon Preached...on... the day of the annual meeting of the Society for Promoting Religious Knowledge (1788), Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade (1788), A Sermon...on...the day of general thanksgiving for the King's happy recovery (1789), initial title-page signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', Cowper's armorial bookplate, impress from Cowper's crest label on spine, calf, joints weak, spine chipped, 8vo.

A representative volume (including the important 'Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade') by the man who, of course, exercised enormous influence over Cowper and was his collaborator on the Olney Hymns.

22. Newton (Thomas)

Dissertations on the Prophecies, second edition, in three volumes (1759), each title-page signed 'Wm Cowper 1797' (see note), Cowper's armorial bookplate in each, Cowper crest on spines, vol.i inscribed 'To/ Maria Dorothy Johnson/ from J.J./ June 8.1820.', initialled 'WCJ', calf, joints weak, spine chipped, 8vo.

Each title-page bears Cowper's earlier ownership signature, to which he has subsequently added the date 1797. The Dissertations by Thomas Newton, editor of Milton (see above) were especially influential: 'Its popularity both reflected and contributed to the persistence of the prophetic mode (and with it anti-papalism) as a key element in eighteenth-century Anglican apologetics' and 'helped his contemporaries to make sense of their world and strengthened the national sense of protestant identity in his lifetime and down to the revolutionary wars of the 1790s.' (ODNB). Cowper refers to the Dissertations in two letters to Lady Hesketh, of 5 and 12 July 1765, by which date he had presumably acquired the present volumes.

23. Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro)

Opera, edited by Charles de la Rue SJ (1687), title-page signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', Cowper's armorial bookplate, Cowper crest on spine, 133 initialled 'WCJ', further childish annotations, calf, joints weak (front fly-leaf detached), spine chipped, last few pages of index lacking at end, 8vo.

This is one of the volumes acquired by Cowper at the same time as his Iliad and Greek lexicon (see his letter to William Unwin of 3 September 1781, quoted above in our note on Hederich's Greek lexicon).

24. Voltaire (Francois Marie Arouet de)

Memoirs of the Life of Voltaire written by himself, third edition (1785), title-page signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', Cowper's armorial bookplate, Cowper crest on spine, initialled 'WCJ', calf, joints weak, spine chipped, 8vo.

Inscribed by Johnson in pencil: 'read to Mr C – 12 July 1797' and below 'March 27 '97' with a note of price paid for the book and the binding. In his earlier days Cowper had, with his brother John, made a translation of the *Henriade*.

25. Williams (Edward)

Poems, Lyric and Pastoral (1794), title-page signed 'Wm Cowper 1797', Cowper's armorial bookplate, remains of Cowper crest on spine, inscribed by Johnson 'March 27 '97/ Bg – 1/9', initialled 'WCJ', calf, joints weak, spine chipped, 8vo.

'William Cowper, Esq./ Inner Temple' is listed among the subscribers. Cowper had encountered Williams – the poet, forger and Welsh propagandist, otherwise known as Iolo Morganwg – in 1792, but (according to Williams's own account) was too 'nervously sensitive' to introduce himself. (James King, *William Cowper: A Biography*, 1986, p.248).

26. Homer – Cowper (William)

John Johnson's copy of *The Iliad and Odyssey of Homer*, translated into English Blank Verse by W. Cowper, first edition, in two volumes (1791), both title-pages inscribed by Johnson in ink 'E. Lib. Joannis Johnson./ Cai: Coll: Cantab:/ 1791', first fly-leaf inscribed with the price of 5 guineas, pencilled initials 'WCJ', contemporary red straight-grained morocco gilt, all edges gilt, spines faded, 4to.

Among the list of subscribers is 'Mr. John Johnson, Caius' Coll. Camb. f.' ('f' denoting a copy on fine paper). For Cowper's copy of the *Iliad*, see above. Johnson helped Cowper with the translation and with its publication by his namesake, Joseph Johnson, acting as Cowper's amanuensis and drumming up subscriptions. He also inherited from Cowper the manuscripts and proofs (Rothschild Collection, 684-693). Out of 317 subscription copies ordered, 106 were on fine paper.

PORTRAITS BY WILLIAM BLAKE

27. Portrait miniature by Blake of Cowper after Romney

Showing Cowper head-and-shoulders, turning to his right, wearing the linen cap given him by Lady Hesketh (for the original, see below), oval 73 x 62 mm., in the original red morocco satin-lined case fitted with two bronze clasps, (the 'elegant Case' as described by Lady Hesketh, see below), blue-green velvet surround, glazed, oval 87 x 72 mm.

Blake drew this miniature after Romney's celebrated portrait, which Hayley owned, for his engraving of Cowper, used as a frontispiece to volume one of *Hayley's Life and Posthumous Writings of William Cowper* (1803). It was executed before February 1801.

Many references to it are to be found in the correspondence of Hayley

and his circle, cited by G.E. Bentley, *Blake Records*, 1969. Hayley wrote to Romney himself on 3 February 1801: 'It may interest you perhaps to hear that I am very busy at present in writing a Life of our beloved Cowper, & the good Enthusiastic Blake...is also at work on the same subject, I have taught him he says to paint in Miniature, & in Truth he has made a very creditable copy from your admirable Portrait of the dear departed Bard, from which he will also make an engraving' (p.78). On 25 February 1801 he wrote to Lady Hesketh, 'I intend that this very amiable Man shall execute, under my own Inspection, all the plates for the Work; & I am persuaded He will produce a Head of Cowper, that will surprise & delight you; & assuredly it will be executed con amore, as he idolizes the Poet, & will have as fine a portrait to work from, as ever pencil produced. –' (pp.78-9). He then sent her the miniature. Famously, she was horrified at what she saw, writing to Hayley on 19 March:

[On] one subject I am determin'd – absolutely determin'd! – I mean the subject of the picture, which I have this moment receiv'd and for which I do indeed thank you: tho.' the Sight of it has in real truth inspired me with a degree of horror, which I shall not recover from in haste! ...I cannot restrain my Pen from declaring that I think it dreadful! Shocking! and that I intreat you on my Knees not to suffer so horrible a representation of our angelic friend to be presented to the publick and to disgrace and disfigure a work I long so much to see[.] I give you my word that I open'd the elegant Case you sent me without ye smallest spark of prejudice... I cannot bear to have it in my possession nor wou'd I for worlds, shew it to any one... I must observe that I have no doubt that the Original from which this fatal Miniature is taken is a very fine Picture, considered as a Picture, & I even believe the miniature is very well executed... [but I must intreat] that you will not be so cruel as to multiply this fatal resemblance, by having the picture engrav'd[!] (p.79).

In Bentley's opinion 'Lady Hesketh's objection to Blake's miniature was clearly based upon the faint hint in Romney's portrait of the sitter's madness' (p.80). Blake himself wrote at this time, 'Miniature is become a Goddess in my Eyes & my Friends in Sussex say that I excell in the pursuit. I have a great many orders & they Multiply.' (10 May, p.80). On 15 September Hayley's old friend John Carr wrote to him, 'I beg also to be remembered to Mr Blake... I shall long to see his Head of Cowper.' (p.82). At some time between 10 September and 20 November Hayley wrote a poem to his dead son Tom, asking him to give spiritual advice to Blake:

Now to the feeling Blake attend[,]
His Copies of dear Cowper view
And make his Portraits of our Friend
Perfect in Truth as Thou art true. (p.83)

Although Lady Hesketh became reconciled to the Romney, she never overcame her dislike of Blake's miniature, telling Hayley that the eyes 'starting from his head, like some unhappy man escaping from his keepers' and 'the bottle-nose' and 'the strange drawing up between the nose and the mouth' were quite unlike Cowper. (Quoted by Norma Russell, *A Bibliography of William Cowper*, 1963, pp.301-2). The provenance is as follows: it was given by Hayley, by whom it was commissioned, to the mother of his second wife, Mary Welford, on

their first introduction in 1809. Mary's sister Harriet then gave it to John Johnson by whom it was left to his eldest son William Cowper Johnson (see Russell, also a note of provenance supplied by Mary Johnson in 1986, who states that it was left directly to WCJ).

28. Portrait miniature by Blake of John Johnson

Oval, slightly faded and slight soiling, later lacquered frame, 92 x 76 mm.

Executed by Blake in January 1802, Hayley recalling in his autobiography (edited by Johnson): 'He [Blake] had wonderful Talents for original design – & at Hayleys suggestion, He executed some portraits in miniature very happily, particularly a portrait of Cowpers beloved Relation, the Revd Dr Johnson, who arrived at Felpham on a kind visit to the Biographer in January 1802.' (Bentley, p.88, where it is reproduced).

RELICS AND OTHER MATERIAL

29. Cowper's linen cap, as drawn by Romney, and celebrated by Cowper in verse

White linen topped with blue silk ribbon and cotton tie, c.340 mm. high.

This is the distinctive East India-style headpiece worn by Cowper in the pastel by Romney, 'one of the masterpieces of pastel drawing in British art' (ODNB), and in turn depicted by William Blake in his copy of Romney's drawing (see above). It gains further distinction in that it was given to Cowper by Lady Hesketh, and is the first gift he thanks her for in 'Gratitude; addressed to Lady Hesketh':

This cap, that so stately appears,
 With ribbon-bound tassel on high,
Which seems by the crest that it rears
 Ambitious of brushing the sky:
This cap to my cousin I owe,
 She gave it, and gave me beside,
Wreath'd into an elegant bow,
 The ribbon with which it is tied.

30. Cowper's writing slope, as painted by Abbott

George III fiddle mahogany writing box of rectangular form banded in fruitwood and edged in boxwood, the lid with an oval patera, one side fitted with a drawer, the fitted interior with glass sander, and folding support for the lid to be fitted as a book support; with brass swan-neck carrying handles, 150 mm. high, 455 x 245 mm.

This writing box features in Abbott's portrait of Cowper, with, upon it, his translation of Homer (see John Johnson's letter above). It was given to him by Lady Hesketh, whom he thanked on 8 December 1785: 'Oh that this letter had wings, that it might fly to tell you that my desk, the most elegant, the compactest, the most commodious desk in the world, and of all the desks that ever were, or ever shall be, the desk I love the most, is safe arrived – how pleasant it is to write upon such a green bank!' On 24 December 1785 he wrote to William Unwin: 'Let me sing

the Praises of the Desk which my dear Cousin has sent me. In General, it is as elegant as possible. In particular it is of Cedar, beautifully lacquer'd – When put together it assumes the form of a handsome small chest, contains all sorts of accommodations, is furnish'd with cut-glass for ink and sand, and is hinged, handled. and mounted with silver. It is inlaid with Ivory, and also serves the purpose of a Reading desk. It came stored with Stationery-ware of all sorts, and this splendid sheet is a part of it.'

31. Cowper's occasional table, as painted by Abbott

Circular top mahogany occasional table with circular centre column supporting three scroll-shaped legs, 700 mm. high, top 450 mm. This, with the desk, features in Abbott's portrait of Cowper.

32. Cowper's washstand and shaving mirror, celebrated in verse

Georgian mahogany and tulipwood banded chamber cabinet, the divided hinged top revealing a rise-and-fall mirror and circular apertures, over a drawer on block legs divided by an arched frieze to the front, 880 mm. high, 450 x 440 mm.

Given to Cowper by Lady Hesketh and celebrated in 'Gratitude'

This table, and mirror within,
Secure from collision and dust,
At which I oft shave cheek and chin
And periwig nicely adjust [...]

33. Cowper's moveable bookshelves, celebrated in verse

Pair of late Georgian grained pine 'waterfall' bookcases, each of three open shelves over a drawer on square-tapering legs, each 1190 mm. high, 460 x 265 mm.

Given to Cowper by Lady Hesketh and celebrated in 'Gratitude':

This moveable structure of shelves,
For its beauty admired and its use,
And charged with octavos and twelves,
The gayest I had to produce;
Where, flaming in scarlet and gold,
My poems enchanted I view,
And hope in due time, to behold
My Iliad and Odyssey too:

They were left by Lady Hesketh to John Johnson; see the late 19th-century 'Extract from Lady Hesketh's Will': 'I give to the Revd Dr Johnson a pair of mahogany Book Cases with two drawers under them'.

34. Cowper's pocket watch

Gold repeating pocket watch, the verge escapement repeating a bell on depression of the bow, in a pierced inner case and shagreen outer case and associated outer, by Thomas Martin, second half of the eighteenth century.

This belonged to Theadora Cowper's father (Cowper's uncle Ashley), referred to in Cowper's letter to Lady Hesketh of 5 July 1788. It appears to have been recently on display at the Cowper and Newton Museum, Olney.

35. Mourning ring for Lady Hesketh

Enamel and diamond memorial ring, set with an urn, in later case, engraved in memory of the Dowager Lady Hesketh, born July 1733, died 15 January 1807.

Cowper's publisher, Joseph Hill, wrote to John Johnson on 18 March 1807: 'I hope you will do me the Favour to accept of a Mourning Ring with Lady Hesketh's initials, H.H./ I think you will be willing to wear it sometimes in memory of an excellent woman, who was very sensible of your merit.'

36. Mourning brooch for William Cowper

Set with a lock of his hair, reverse ring engraved 'Willm Cowper ob.t 1800 Act 69', upper ring enamelled 'Cara Chioma Di Testa Impareggiabile'.

37. Lock of Cowper's hair

Set in a round brooch, with remains of green silk ribbon (in envelope identified in ballpoint), with a dodecahedron brooch containing a slightly darker lock of hair).

38. Cowper's Omphale seal ring

Set with an intaglio head of Omphale, chipped.

Cowper was given this by his cousin Theadora Cowper. It was lent to the Hanover Exhibition of 1890.

39. Ring commemorating Cowper's three pet hares

Rotating three-seal ring, each engraved with one of Cowper's three pet hares, left in her will by Lady Hesketh to John Johnson: 'Also I give to the said Dr Johnson, the tried and affectionate friend of my late dear Cousin, the Seal given to me by the Princess Elizabeth representing Mr Cowper's three favourite Hares, & which I know will be highly acceptable to him.'