

The Weather House

Tony Seward

This delightful engraving was something of a mystery to me until recently, when I stumbled upon its original source. I was familiar with elements of it, especially the three hares, which appear on a snuffbox in the museum, and the whole design, or parts of it, has been used from time to time to illustrate Cowper's life and work.

It appears as an Appendix at the end of Volume II of William Hayley's three-volume Life of Cowper. The first two volumes of this, the first biography of the poet, were published in 1803, three years after his death, to be followed by the third volume in 1804. The first few lines of the Appendix consist of Cowper's 'Motto on a Clock' in Latin, followed by Hayley's translation. It has nothing to do with the subject of the engraving, which follows immediately after it, without a break. This has led at least one subsequent writer to assume that there is somehow a connection, and to reproduce the motto next to the design as if the engraving illustrated it. However, this seems unlikely and what is far more probable is that Hayley was simply assembling odds and ends as appendices concluding his second volume.

The top section of the picture is a highly imaginative rendering of a weather-house, that device, once common but now seldom seen, where fine weather is forecast by a woman coming out of the house, and rain by the man. It is activated by a modified hygrometer concealed in the mechanism. Cowper's lines reflecting on it are hand-engraved on a kind of plinth below the house:

Peace to the artist, whose ingenious thought
Devised the weather-house, that useful toy!
Fearless of humid air and gathering rains,
Forth steps the man - an emblem of myself!
More delicate, his tim'rous mate retires.

(The Task I, ll.210-14)

As an aside, it is pleasant to think of Cowper and Mrs Unwin in these roles, William striding out manfully through the rain and wind, while

MOTTO on a CLOCK,

With a Translation by the Editor.

QUÆ lenta accedit, quam velox præterit hora!
 Ut capias, paucis esto; sed esto vigil!

Slow comes the hour: its passing speed how great!
 Waiting to seize it—vigilantly wait!



Mary stays indoors. But of course there are wider resonances: the man recalls Adam, first Man and lord of creation, and the woman his frail helpmeet Eve – the Miltonic echoes are unmistakable.

Below the weather-house, and linked to it by a garland, is a roundel, also illustrating *The Task* but without directly quoting the relevant lines. It shows, above, a cottage on a hill, labelled 'THE PEASANT'S NEST', and below, the three hares. The latter are labelled 'PUSS, TINEY & BESS Cowper's tame Hare's [sic]'.

The Peasant's Nest is a famous landmark for Cowperians, a cottage between Olney and Weston Underwood described in *The Task*, in lines directly following those about the weather-house:

When Winter soaks the fields, and female feet
Too weak to struggle with tenacious clay,
Or ford the rivulets, are best at home,
The task of new discov'ries falls on me.
At such a season, and with such a charge,
Once went I forth, and found, till then unknown,
A cottage, whither oft we since repair:
'Tis perch'd upon the green hilltop, but close
Environ'd with a ring of branching elms
That overhang the thatch, itself unseen
Peeps at the vale below; so thick beset
With foliage of such dark redundant growth,
I called the low-roof'd lodge the peasant's nest.

(*The Task*, I, ll.215-27)

The thatch on the weather-house in the engraving, as well as on the cottage, recalls these words and helps to draw the design together.

So much for the relation of the drawing to the poetry. However, when you look more closely at it, there is something odd about its treatment of the subject. This is no 'toy' but a scene as on a stage showing real people in action. The man is a dramatic figure, muffled up to the ears against a stormy sky, and the girl, or woman, is a radiant shepherdess, with flowers in her lap, her sheep behind her, and a rising sun illuminating the scene. There is a visionary quality to the design, no mere literal rendering of Cowper's lines.

What is behind this strange, rather compelling image, and why was it produced? It was not, as far as we know, commissioned to illustrate the text of any contemporary edition of the poems. It appears to be a genuine *jeu d'esprit* by the artist, made partly out of admiration for Cowper, partly to express his own vision. The clue to the mystery is contained in microscopic lettering just below the weather-house plinth, to the right of the ribbon undulating from the left-hand garland: 'Blake d & sc' – an abbreviation of an abbreviation, 'del & sculp' being conventional Latin indications on plates meaning 'drawn and engraved'. Here, uniquely in the illustrations he made for Cowper's biography and poetry, we have an original design by the great William Blake: for once it is not a copy after other men's work, engraved by him as yet another example of the hackwork by which he was forced to earn a living. Once we know this, the weather-house design may well remind Blake enthusiasts of the illustrations to *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, or the pastoral woodcuts Blake made for Thornton's *Virgil*, which were so admired and imitated by Samuel Palmer.

We may confidently claim the weather-house section of the engraving as original, but there remains a problem with the roundel below. Virtually the same design on the snuffbox in the museum is attributed to Romney, suggesting, if correct, that Blake was here no more than

the copyist. This appears to be reflected in the quality of the drawing - it is flatter, the hares are charming but uninspired, and the whole is rather stiff, as well as not possessing any noticeably Blakean characteristics.

The final question remains: why did Blake go to the trouble of drawing and engraving this picture? It is the only image in the three volumes of Hayley's biography illustrating Cowper's poetry, the others being plates after other artists - of Cowper, his mother, his monument in East Dereham church, and so on. If it had been initiated by Hayley, he would surely not have included it as an afterthought at the end of the volume, not even giving it a page to itself. Another sign of the small importance assigned to it is that it was printed on the same thin paper as the text, not the much thicker paper reserved for the other plates. In the original printing, the paper has not taken the image well and is so thin that there is considerable show-through of the printing on the verso of the page. We have removed this from the reproduction here, but any reader who would like to examine the original in detail is welcome to email me for an electronic copy on: t.seward396@btinternet.com.

The most likely explanation could be that the subject of the weatherhouse simply appealed to Blake, and it does reflect his dualistic view of the world - good and evil, darkness and light. His *Songs of Innocence and Experience* was published in 1794, and the Weatherhouse drawing could almost serve as an illustration of their subtitle: 'Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul'. So he drew it as one of the six designs commissioned for the biography, perhaps adding the roundel of the hares as an afterthought, and then engraved it, adding the line 'Publish'd Novr 5 1802 by J Johnson St Pauls Church Yard'. Since there was no logical position for the engraving in the main text of the biography, Hayley must have decided to drop it in as an appendix. In the absence of other evidence, this may have been the sequence of events.

The plates having been drawn and engraved, the next step was to print them. Giving a fascinating insight into his working methods and the key part played by Mrs Blake, Blake writes to his brother at this time,

My Wife has undertaken to Print the whole number of the Plates for Cowper's work, which she does to admiration, & being under my own eye the prints are as fine as the French prints and please everyone.

The loose sheets of the plates would then have been delivered to the printer in Chichester, Joseph Seagrave, for binding up with the text, and the whole published in London a few weeks later under the imprint of Joseph Johnson.