

The Winner of Sorrow: a Novel by Brian Lynch

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Brian Lynch is an Irish poet and scriptwriter: this is his first novel. It is a richly textured, tragi-comic exploration of the life of William Cowper, a fellow-poet with whom he clearly feels a deep affinity. He insists that it is not a biography, but it would be fair to classify it as 'fictionalised biography', a genre which has become firmly established in recent times through the practice of writers such as Peter Ackroyd and Julian Barnes. Indeed, Brian Lynch has remained significantly more faithful to the known facts surrounding his subject than have some other authors in the field. There is evidence on every page of his intimate knowledge of Cowper's letters and poems, and of the work of earlier biographers such as Lord David Cecil and James King. He has closely researched the poet's milieu, and presents a convincing picture, not only of the lives of William Cowper, John and Mary Newton, Mary Unwin and the other dramatis personae of the story, but of life in Olney and the surrounding countryside.

But he does far more than this. Above all, he brings a poet's eye to the narrative and structure of the book. Naturally, for a poet writing about a poet, questions of technique arise and are discussed at appropriate points in the story. There is a beautiful chapter in which Newton and Cowper visit a lacemaking school, on the way discussing the finer points of hymn-writing. At the school, Cowper is deeply moved by the pathos of the little girls working in freezing conditions, but also inspired by the power of simple verses, the lacemakers' 'tells', to imprint themselves on the memory – which in turn feeds back into the continuing discussion of hymn writing. But the poetic method informs the book in more subtle and important ways – through imagery especially, but also through wordplay and a vivid particularity in the realisation of people and objects. For example, the poem 'The Snail', which is seen as clearly autobiographical, provides a recurring motif illuminating aspects of Cowper's character and, in particular, his sexuality. The prevalence of wordplay is such that the reader must be ever on her toes if she is not to miss some of the subtleties of what is on offer. There is a mystery at the heart of the book – the meaning of 'Sadwin' – which is partially unravelled by discussions of the names of the characters, but which demands an alertness to the nuances of language which is as bracing as a Norfolk sea breeze.

The novel deals with large themes – madness, love, loneliness, creativity, old age – as played out amongst a group of people living in a small market town at a time of major social and political change. As in Jane Austen's work, irruptions from the wider world of revolution and the French wars unsettle the apparently uneventful lives of the protagonists. Cowper and Mary Unwin, however, with the Newtons, constitute an inner circle which dangerous or interfering outsiders like Anna Austen and Harriot Hesketh attempt to penetrate in vain. Exclusion is a powerful force prompting action and forming character: exclusion of interlopers from the inner circle, Cowper's feelings of exclusion at school because 'he is not like other boys', exclusion by death from his mother's love, culminating, tragically, in the unshakeable belief in his exclusion from God's love. Morally, all the characters can be selfish and manipulative, not least the saintly Mary Unwin when her stake in Cowper is challenged, but a measure of ordinary human kindness is enough to create lasting bonds between true friends and enable them to survive ('All four of them had loved each other', p.320).

As is appropriate for a hero who lived most of his life in an intimate female circle (there is a recurring image of Cowper as Hercules 'unmanned' when he became the servant of the queen Omphale), the women are given their full due. The character of Mary Unwin is explored with great delicacy as a person with her own foibles, weaknesses and jealousies as well as a heroic capacity for devotion. It is good to see the balance thus partially restored between William, who through his letters and poems was able to fashion his own image for

posterity, and Mary, who has left scarcely any record of her real character and emotions. John and Mary Newton are painted with a broader brush and seem not quite fully realised, but the most challenging creation is Lady Austen, who imparts a heavy sexuality and vitality to the central chapters and then is cast off as brutally as was Falstaff by Prince Hal. Others have their exits and their entrances – Theadora, his first love, the Revd. Bull, who weeps at every mention of Christ’s suffering, Johnny Johnson, birdlike saviour and carer for the old couple, and the appalling Samuel Teedon, whose frowstiness is evoked with a relish worthy of Dickens.

The Winner of Sorrow is a vividly imagined exploration of the life and inner struggles of a complex personality – it gives us a Cowper for our times. It is a demanding read, but worth the effort for the fresh insights it brings to our understanding of the man and the forces which shaped his poetry.

[*The Winner of Sorrow* (paperback, 352 pages) was first published by New Island, Dublin, in 2005; copies are available on Amazon, or as a 2009 reprint by Dalkey Archive Press.]