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William Cowper : The Man of God's Stamp

by George M. Ella, Publisher by Joshua Press

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In just eleven chapters Dr Ella has given us a loving portrait of William Cowper (1732–1800), the poet whose verse all Christians appreciate though holding different theological views.

Some of us will have made the pilgrimage to Olney in Buckinghamshire, to the home of Cowper. This house is now the Cowper/Newton Museum. To the staff of the Museum Dr Ella has dedicated his excellent book.

The house without the man however is a seemingly dead thing, like the house in Saltzburg, where Mozart spent his childhood. These houses supply us with information and satisfy some of our curiosity, but the spirit of the man will only be discovered in his works. Their histories, personalities, troubles and joys are discoverable only in the letters they left or in contemporary biographies and even then, many truths about them may well be obscured.

Dr Ella manages skilfully to show us obvious things as well as to reveal formerly obscure points about William Cowper. The verse of Cowper is brilliantly presented, for our delight and to support Dr Ella’s hypothesis.

William Cowper shines forth as a delightful man, not only as the musing poet but also as an active Christian, taking part in current debate and entering into controversies concerning the social injustices of his day. Most of this debate was conducted through letter writing to the appropriate persons but often Cowper took up his pen and crusaded with his poetry.

When we come to the sad record of Cowper’s illnesses, we see how that depression and mental illness, which today among Christians raises sympathy but hardly condemnation, in Cowper’s day was not handled in the kindest of ways. Apart from the genetical contribution along hereditary lines that dogged him, poor Cowper also suffered unreasonable pressures from well-meaning evangelicals, some of them ministers of the gospel, who should have known better.

It is encouraging to read in Dr Ella’s book that Cowper held strongly to the doctrines of the Reformation. Cowper was a Calvinist and the problems

with his relatives was that they seem to have been mostly Arminian in their theology. They were proud of his publishing triumphs but not of his doctrines. When it came to his own literary accomplishments, Cowper's expressed object was to propagate the gospel, so that the criticism he met with in the literary world of his day was the sort of opposition met by any minister or missionary.

His modern critics produce the typical analyses that one gets used to from unbelievers. Dr Ella exposes the dreadfully misinformed and misinforming work of modern critics eaten up as they are with that deadening, psychological interpretation of every minor point of behaviour.

Cowper’s poetry was extraordinary. It had a good classical foundation in common with the works of most of his contemporary poets. It was quotable and even singable. William Wordsworth, the greatly loved pastoral poet of the English language, said that it was the only poetry worth learning by heart! A great compliment to Cowper’s ability.

William Cowper had the sort of gift that could produce verse that soared to heaven in its sublimity and yet in other poems was homely enough to comfort and warm the heart. His love of nature and of animals in particular also found its way into his poetry, believing as he did that ‘creation itself groaneth unto the day of redemption’.

The cruel way in which his well-meaning friends and relatives dragged him from his quiet home, his beloved animals and his garden, to end his days in a bustling Norfolk town is very poignant; once again others decided what Cowper’s needs were without any regard to the poor man’s own desires.

Dying as he did in a depressive state in 1800 his nephew was amazed just after he had died. His countenance was quite radiant! William Cowper had arrived in the holy City to be forever with his Lord.

Sonia Hill

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