



## *William Lisle Bowles, Poet and Clergyman*

Memoir of the Rev W L Bowles

(From the New Monthly Magazine)

To lovers of poetry, that is, all who have the smallest share of taste or feeling, the life of a poet is always interesting. Like other lives of private men, it may produce no striking incidents, no remarkable turns or vicissitudes of fortune; yet will it exhibit the history of a fertile mind, and of a period in which the production of celebrated works will form the distinguished eras. The life of Mr Bowles, as far as poetry is not concerned, will be that of a private clergyman, attentive to the duties of his ministry, studious of the welfare of his flock, and watchful to prevent the inroads of fanaticism among them; making it at the same time his pleasure and amusement to do justice to the rural beauties of his parsonage, and to improve them by tasteful embellishments. Even this picture of tranquil usefulness and simple pleasures is not without its charms, but is not sufficiently varied to command the continued attention of the reader; it is as a poet the Mr B. demands the pen of a biographer, though finally his least conspicuous labours may prove to have been the most truly valuable.

Mr Bowles's family have been clerical for at least three generations; his father, William Thomas Bowles, being the only son of Dr Bowles, vicar of Brackley in Northamptonshire. But though moved by preferment into different situations, the family is originally of Wilts, and ancient in that county. The Rev William Thomas Bowles married Bridget, one of the three daughters of Dr Grey, author of "Memoria Rechnica" and other well known works. By her he had 7 children, of whom the eldest son was William Lisle Bowles the subject of the present memoir. (The name of Lisle was given to him in honour of that ancient family of Everley, Wilts, into which Dr Bowles, his grandfather, married; a family originally of Northumberland, but now, we believe, extinct.)

Family connection early determined that Winchester should be the place of his education; to which school he was sent in 1776. An uncle of his father's had long been a fellow of the college, contemporary with Lowth, and other distinguished men; of whose kind attention to himself, with some pleasing account of the singularities of his character, Mr B has gratefully spoken in a very late publication. Bowles was not to be overlooked, even where he had so many competitors as at Winchester, and he was soon particularly noticed by Dr Warton. By the year 1781 he had risen to be the senior boy of that illustrious seminary. In that situation he would infallible have succeeded to New

College, having been sent first on the roll to the two foundations, has it not happened that no vacancy occurred in his year, excepting what were reserved for the founder's kin.

He was entered therefore at Trinity College, Oxford, where his master's brother, the celebrated Thomas Warton, was fellow and tutor. There were auspicious beginnings for a poetical mind; and they certainly produced their due effect upon B. who, in his first year, obtained the Chancellor's prize for a Latin composition on the siege of Gibraltar, which was accordingly recited in the theatre. It is still extant in the collections of Oxford Prize Poems, published by Mr Valpy; and in the second volume of the author's poems. It is a composition of extraordinary merit and classical beauty, for so young a writer. Mr Bowles was already a scholar of Trinity, for which foundation, and well as for Winchester, like every worthy pupil of a worthy seminary, he has felt through life a constant and increasing affection; strongly expressed, with respect to the latter, in one of his most recent productions. The poetical spirit being strong within him, Mr Bowles very early appeared before the public as an author in his native language. His first publication, consisting of Seventeen Sonnets, appeared in 1789; his Verses to Howard, on his account of Lazarettos, in the same year, inscribed to his worthy master Dr Warton. In 1790 his muse wept over the tomb of Howard whose merits he had so lately celebrated. His Verses to the Philanthropic Society followed; and a Monody written at Matlock. All of which were well received by the public. The sonnets in particular were so much distinguished that they had gone through five editions before the end of 1797.

Of these Sonnets, the fame has been so widely spread, and so firmly established, that they have operated somewhat to the injury of Mr B's general character as a poet; causing him, by careless persons, to be considered merely as a writer of sonnets; whereas these poems, excellent as they are in their kind, form but a very small and comparatively inconsiderable part of Mr B's compositions; and his larger poems are, in many instances, as much distinguished, in their respective classes, as any of his sonnets. Justice has, in one case, been done to his merits, but certainly not always in the other. The sonnets, however, have had the peculiar good fortune to correct the taste and animate the exertions of another poet, who has thus gratefully acknowledged his obligations. Having said that they were first presented to him by a particular friend, he adds, "It was a double pleasure to me, and still remains a tender recollection, that I should have received, from a friend so revered, the first knowledge of a poet, by whose works, year after year, I was so enthusiastically delighted and inspired". Confessing then some mental errors into which he had been in danger of falling, he proceeds; "But from this danger I was chiefly withdrawn by the genial influence of a style of poetry, so tender and yet so manly, so natural and real, and yet so signified and harmonious, as the Sonnets etc of Mr Bowles". Such a testimony, from such a man, is truly valuable, and we have peculiar pleasure in recording it. (This was Dr Middleton, now the Reverend Bishop of Calcutta).

Mr Bowles took his degree of master of arts in 1792; and on the death of his father, who was rector of Uphill and Bream in Somersetshire, he quitted Oxford, entered into orders, and soon after went to serve a curacy in Wiltshire. In the second part of his sonnets, there are traces of disappointed hope, from the death of a beloved female, most eloquently and pathetically lamented. Time, however, appears to have produced its natural effects; and in 1797 he formed a union, most fortunate in its influence upon his happiness, with a sister of the former object of his affection, a daughter of Dr Wake, then prebendary of Westminster, and a lineal descendant of the archbishop of that name. In the same year, by favour of the late Lord Somers, he was presented to the living of Dumbleton in Gloucestershire. In 1803 he was installed a prebendary in the church of Salisbury; and soon after received from Archbishop Moore the valuable rectory of Bremhill. Wilts, his present, and from that time his constant, residence. A debt of gratitude to Dr Grey, the maternal grandfather of Mr B was thus repaid by the Archbishop; and the gift has proved auspicious, both to the object of it and to the place.

It is not necessary in such a sketch as the present to follow up the exact series of the author's productions in regular order. Suffice it to say, that they have gradually increased to five volumes of poetry, of which the last consists entirely of *The Missionary*, a poem in heroic couplets, comprised in eight books or cantos. The subject of this is the successful resistance of the natives of Chili to the Spanish General Valdiva; and it is treated with a spirit and felicity which place it very high among poems of that class. The sonnets occupy less than half of the first volume, the rest are chiefly poems of moderate extent, and in various styles; but in general upon well chosen subjects, treated with the skill and feelings of a genuine poet.

Dr Warton, whose kindness encouraged his early disposition to poetry, was gratefully celebrated by Mr B in "Monody", which at once does honour to the master and the poet. This appears in the second volume; but is preceded by what we consider as the most beautiful descriptive poem in the language entitled "St Michael's Mount". The truth and precision of the description, the brilliant clearness with which it is presented to the mind of the reader, the natural beauty of the sentiments, together with the harmony and classic purity of the language, place it, in our opinion, beyond all chance of competition. We might expatiate also, with great justice, on his smaller, as well as his larger poem, on "The spirit of Discovery by Sea"; but as the object of this slight account is rather to relate facts than to record opinions, we forbear; having said thus much, chiefly to confirm our former assertion, that the general fame of this author had rather been obstructed than assisted, by the prevalent celebrity of his juvenile productions, the Sonnets.

Mr Bowles, with the genuine relish of a poet for rural scenes, has made it, as already hinted, his amusement, in the retirement of his parish, to embellish the garden and other grounds belonging to the rectory. Its situation, on the southern slope of a gentle hill, commanding a prospect eminently diversified and beautiful, highly favoured and encouraged this blameless gratification. Like Shenstone, he has scattered his verses in his paths, and the shades of Bremhill will long testify that they were once the retreat and solace of a poet.

But poetry has by no means monopolized the attention of Mr Bowles. Finding the religious steadiness of his parish endangered, by the unceasing efforts of dissenting preachers and teachers, he has deeply studied the genuine tenets of our church, and particularly in their purest source, the Scriptures; with a penetrating and original view, he has also plunged into many forgotten volumes of controversial divinity, and traced to their origin some of the prevailing modern errors of enthusiasm. These enquiries have let him to publish sermons, and other works, of plain but sound divinity; and have enabled him to teach with unusual success by oral instruction.

He has entered also into other controversies, and has most happily defended Public Schools, in a reply to the buffoonery and calumnies of the Edinburgh Review. He has also defended his own alma mater, Winchester, against the attacks of Mr Brougham, as we have already had occasion to mention. An edition of Pope's works, published in 1806, which he was induced to superintend, had involved him in some controversies, in which he has shewn, at least, that he is well able to defend his opinions; and had supported them by reason which are not likely to be refuted.

With all his studious occupations, Mr B has never shrunk from active duties. Of late years, he has borne his part in the magistracy of the county of Wilts; and his retirement, though rural, is far from being secluded. Much literary and elegant society, at the house of distinguished nobleman (Marquis of Lansdown) in his neighbourhood, and occasionally at his own, together with an annual visit to the metropolis, enables him to keep pace with the world, in all that is worth observing of its proceedings or its manners.

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