



The Rev William Lisle Bowles

The family from which this distinguished poet descended is one of some note. It springs from John Bowles, of Bristol, who was living in 1460; and whose great grandson Rowland Bowles, a volunteer under Sir Thomas Arundel at the siege of Bran, in Hungary, in 1595, received on that account the honour of knighthood, and the addition of the crescent to his arms.

The poet counted Sir Isaac Newton amongst his nearest relatives; his own immediate parentage were clergymen for two generations; his grandfather was vicar of Brackley in Northumberland; his father was also in orders; he was himself the eldest of seven children. One of his nephews is the present Mr Justice Erle.

William Lisle Bowles (such was the poet's name) received his education at Winchester School, where he was placed in 1776. In five years he rose to be senior boy of that seminary, and won the particular notices and favour of the then master, Dr Warton.

Bowles, while at Trinity College, Oxford, obtained the chancellor's prize for a Latin poem on the siege of Gibraltar. In 1792 he took his degree of MA; and, his father dying, he quitted Oxford and entered into holy orders, and became a curate in this county. In 1797 Mr Bowles married a daughter of Dr Wake, Prebendary of Westminster, which proved a most fortunate and happy union. Lord Somers presented him, soon after his marriage, with the living of Dumbledon in Gloucestershire.

In 1803 he was made prebendary and afterwards a canon of Salisbury Cathedral; and from Archbishop Moore he obtained the rectory of Bremhill, a beautiful and romantic spot which he subsequently rendered famous in his verse. Bremhill is near Devizes and near also to Bowood, the seat of the Marquis of Lansdowne, and to Sloperton Cottage, the residence of another, alas! now scarcely read poet, the illustrious Moore.

The life of Bowles was that of country clergymen in general, has been but more diversified by incidents. One of the only occasions which he came before the public in any other than a poetic or literary character, was as a magistrate of this county, when he did good service to the cause of humanity by energetically and effectually remonstrating against a sentence of unparalleled severity elicited by a fellow magistrate on an unfortunate man for a very trifling theft. His conduct at the time met with the approbation of Lord Lansdowne, then Home Secretary; as well as with that of every thinking and honourable mind.

Bowles's first publication was his "Sonnets", brought out, according to the fashion of the day in quarto in 1789. These were followed by "Verses on Howard's Description of Prisons". "The Grave of Howard" and "The Sorrows of Switzerland". "The Spirit of Discovery", probably his best work, came out in 1805.

His edition of Pope, which gave rise to the celebrated controversy, was published in ten volumes in 1810. Bowles in this edition advanced certain doctrines respecting the "invariable principles" of poetry, which, he admitted, tended to lessen Pope's reputation as a poet. With the truth or fallacy of

these principles the whole fame of that great poet was connected. Campbell first began the controversy on behalf of Pope; Byron also took the same view; while a host of pamphleteers on both sides of the question completely occupied the public's attention, and kept alive the literary warfare. After a long contest, the combat may be said to have ended in a drawn battle. This renowned dispute, however, did infinite credit to the talent and perseverance of Bowles, who disputed the ground inch by inch, and was not dismayed by the lofty names and widely extended fame of his antagonists.

Bowles wrote much both in verse and in prose. His poetry, always good in style and pure in sentiment, bears the stamp of a virtuous and reflective mind; its deficiency lies in the absence of passion or the stronger emotions of the heart; it has all the elegant evenness and cold correctness of the scholar, but elevation and novelty of thought are wanting. Nevertheless, the poems of Bowles will ever afford pleasure and satisfaction to the reader, whose kindlier feelings and social affections they will not fail to move and engage in their favour.

The prose contributions to literature of Mr Bowles are very valuable. His "History of Bremhill", his "History of Lacock Abbey" and last, not least, his delightful "Hermes Britannicus" are works which would establish for him lasting reputation.

In private life Mr Bowles was much beloved: he was a man thoroughly amiable and virtuous; the pleasantness of his manner, and the varied extent of his information gave a charm to his society which few could resist, and which made him a universal favourite. Bremhill, his charming residence, formed a centre of attraction to a circle which included some of the highest in rank and the greatest in talent of the age. To numbers, indeed, high and low, came with heartfelt sorrow the news, some years ago, that this gentle poet was gradually sinking, under the accumulation of years, into a state of mental and bodily imbecility. From that condition the Rev Canon never rallied; he died on the 13th instant, in the 88th year of his life. Bowles may be truly lamented as a poet of many virtues, and "to each fine feeling true". (from Illustrated London News).

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