

Stephen Duck, Poet and Clergyman

1705-1756



The little village of Charlton St. Peter nestles under the protecting edge of Salisbury Plain just off the road from Upavon to the Wiltshire market-town of Devizes eight miles away. If you ever travel along the road which hugs the downland slopes you should look out for the old coaching inn "The Poore's Arms Inn", now better known by its modern name of "The Charlton Cat". Down below, by the Avon stream, lies Charlton with its thatched cottages, Manor house, and grey stone Church. Across the fertile Vale of Pewsey to the northward rise the bold outlines of the Marlborough Downs, stretching from Martinsell to Tan Hill with the Alton White Horse on the slopes.

Stephen Duck was born at Charlton in 1705, one of a large family belonging to a farm-labourer and his wife. The boy was allowed little time for his education, for he was taken from school at 14 and put to work in the fields to help augment the family income.

Stephen had left school able to read and write well, and with an interest in, if not much knowledge of, arithmetic. But what was important, he had the desire to learn more, and the only way was to educate himself. The first need was for a little extra money with which to buy some books. Four-and-sixpence a week as a thresher did not go far, but Stephen Duck worked many long hours after the rest had gone home - there were no trade unions to help or hinder in those days - and soon he had saved enough to buy a book on vulgar arithmetic, one on decimals, and another on land measurement. For Stephen had decided that a greater knowledge of arithmetic was a first essential and he studied hard to master it.

A friend afterwards wrote that Stephen "worked all day for his master and set to his books at night". In fact, after he had married in 1724, Stephen's wife became worried about her husband's thirst for knowledge, and she used to tell the neighbours that "Stephen is either going mad or dealing with the devil, for he talks to himself and tells his fingers".

Stephen Duck soon gained a reputation as a "scholar" amongst his workmates, and one of them who had been in service near London and had an inclination towards books, joined him in collecting a small library of books from their earnings. They spent many hours reading to each other, and helping each other through discussion and test. Their library was very small but very varied, and included, besides the Bible and the

arithmetics, Milton's Poems ("Paradise Lost" was Duck's favourite), Addison's "Defence of Christianity", Seneca's "Morals", Ovid, Bysshe's "Art of Poetry" Dryden's "Virgil", and some of Shakespeare's plays. They also bought editions of "The Spectator", which, we are told, Stephen often took to work with him and read in his midday break.

But his real ambition was to write poetry. Stephen Duck - like so many literary aspirants - tried many times and consigned many efforts to the flames of his cottage fire.

It was at the christening of his third child in 1728 that the news that he was "a bit of a poet" leaked out. One of the women at the ceremony told the officiating clergyman that "Mr. Duck was a man of great learning and had wit enough to be a parson himself, for he could make verses like mad and good ones at that". The clergyman was interested in this thresher-poet and told the Rev. Stanley, Rector of Pewsey, who invited Duck to write some verses for him. Stephen did so, and the Rector was amazed at the high standard of poetry coming from a poor farm labourer in a secluded village. He encouraged Stephen further, and meanwhile helped him with gifts of various kinds.

Stanley told a clergy man friend at Winchester, who showed some of Duck's poetry to Lady Sundon, a member of Queen Caroline's household, who in turn showed the verses to The Queen herself. The Queen was pleased and intrigued by the work of this rural genius, and soon Stephen was invited to Marlborough Castle, the home of Lady Frances, Countess of Hertford and a great patroness of the arts. There Duck probably met such famous people of the time as James Thomson who wrote "The Seasons", Elizabeth Rowe and Isaac Watts, the hymn writer.

In 1730 Stephen Duck's poems were first published, and in an instant were the talk of society circles and the Court. The Earl of Macclesfield read them to the Queen in the drawing-room at Windsor Castle on Friday 11th September 1730, and Queen Caroline was so entranced by them that she immediately ordered that Duck be given a salary of £30 a year and a house in fashionable area at Kew.

Stephen Duck was pleased and grateful, though humble, in his success, but it aroused the envy of the other poets at Court, especially Pope and his circle. Swift wrote bitterly at the time that

"The Thresher Duck could o'er the Queen prevail,
The proverb says 'no fence against the flail';
From threshing corn he turns to thresh his brains,
For which Her Majesty allows his gains.
Tho' 'tis confessed that those who ever saw
His poems think them all not worth a straw.
Thrice-happy Duck, employed in threshing stubble,
Thy toil lessened, and thy profits double".

But Stephen himself had no illusions about his poetry. He said: "I have indeed but a poor defence to make for the things I have wrote. I don't think them good, and better judges than I will doubtless think worse of them. My want of education will be only too evident from them".

He made a great friend in Dr. J. W. Spence, Professor of Poetry at Oxford, who helped and encouraged him with expert constructive criticism and advice.

Duck's poems quickly ran to ten editions. In the same year (1730), his first wife having died a little while earlier, Stephen married his housekeeper at Kew. He was made a Yeoman of the Guard in April 1733, and two years later he became the caretaker of the Queen's Library at Richmond. The same year (1735) he published another edition of his poems.

Most of Duck's poetry reflects the urbanity and spirit of the age, and much is modeled on Milton whom he greatly admired. Yet several pieces really reveal a native wit and a sensitivity essential to the countryman. He is well known for his classic piece "The Thresher's Labour" - the third poem he ever wrote - which recalls vividly the hard life (and some of the joys) of the 18th century farm labourer. Stephen Duck could laugh, too, and after reading Swift's "Tale of the Tub" he wrote:

"If words are wind as some allow
No promises can bind,

Since breaking of the strictest vow,
Is only breaking wind”.

In 1746 Duck took Holy Orders. He was a preacher at Kew Chapel in 1751, and the next year was appointed to Byfleet, where his friend Dr. Spence had been Vicar.

Yet there is tragedy in the story of this modest, grateful thresher-poet from Wiltshire, who rose from poverty to be an idol of the time. On March 21st, 1756 the Rev. Stephen Duck drowned himself in a fit of depression in “the trout stream behind the Black Lion at Reading”.

Thus passed another figure in the literary heritage of the West country. Di. Spence wrote of him:
“He seems to be exceedingly open and honest in everything he says, and ‘twould be difficult to be with him a week without going away very much his friend”.

But we may end on a happy note. For on one day each June an annual dinner for Charlton farm workers is held in memory of Stephen Duck at the “Charlton Cat”. It is called “Duck’s Feast”, and the funds come from the rent on a field in the village given by Temple, Lord Palmerston in 1729 in appreciation of the poet from Charlton. Duck himself writes of this Feast in his honour:

“All eat enough and many drink too much.
Full twenty threshers quaff around the board.
No cares, no toils, no troubles now appear,
For troubles, toils and cares are drowned in Beer...
Thus shall Tradition keep my fame alive;
The Bard may die, the Thresher still survive”.

Original Source Unknown