

Lives of the Poets: Waller, Milton,  
Cowley

By

Samuel Johnson

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## Introduction

Samuel Johnson, born at Lichfield in the year 1709, on the 7th of September Old Style, 18th New Style, was sixty-eight years old when he agreed with the booksellers to write his "Lives of the English Poets." "I am engaged," he said, "to write little Lives, and little Prefaces, to a little edition of the English Poets." His conscience was also a little hurt by the fact that the bargain was made on Easter Eve. In 1777 his memorandum, set down among prayers and meditations, was "29 March, Easter Eve, I treated with booksellers on a bargain, but the time was not long."

The history of the book as told to Boswell by Edward Dilly, one of the contracting booksellers, was this. An edition of Poets printed by the Martins in Edinburgh, and sold by Bell in London, was regarded by the London publishers as an interference with the honorary copyright which booksellers then respected among themselves. They said also that it was inaccurately printed and its type was small. A few booksellers agreed, therefore, among themselves to call a meeting of proprietors of honorary or actual copyright in the various Poets. In Poets who had died before 1660 they had no trade interest at all. About forty of the most respectable booksellers in London accepted the invitation to this meeting. They determined to proceed immediately with an elegant and uniform edition of Poets in whose works they were interested, and they deputed three of their number, William Strahan, Thomas Davies, and Cadell, to wait on Johnson, asking him to write the series of prefatory Lives, and name his own terms. Johnson agreed at once, and suggested as his price two hundred guineas, when, as Malone says, the booksellers would readily have given him a thousand. He then contemplated only "little Lives." His energetic pleasure in the work expanded his Preface beyond the limits of the first design; but when it was observed to Johnson that he was underpaid by the booksellers, his reply was, "No, sir; it was not that they gave me too little, but that I gave them too much." He gave them, in fact, his masterpiece. His keen interest in Literature as the soul of life, his sympathetic insight into human nature, enabled him to put all that was best in himself into these studies of the lives of men for whom he cared, and of the books that he was glad to speak his mind about in his own shrewd independent way. Boswell was somewhat disappointed at finding that the selection of the Poets in this series would not be Johnson's, but that he was to furnish a Preface and Life to any Poet the booksellers pleased. "I asked him," writes Boswell, "if he would do this to any dunce's works, if they should ask him. JOHNSON. "Yes, sir; and SAY he was a dunce."

The meeting of booksellers, happy in the support of Johnson's intellectual power, appointed also a committee to engage the best engravers, and another committee to give directions about paper and printing. They made out at once a list of the Poets they meant to give, "many of which," said Dilly, "are within the time of the Act of Queen Anne, which Martin and Bell cannot give, as they have no property in them. The proprietors are almost all the booksellers in London, of consequence."

In 1780 the booksellers published, in separate form, four volumes of Johnson's "Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the most Eminent of the English Poets." The completion followed in 1781. "Sometime in March," Johnson writes in that year, "I finished the Lives of the Poets." The series of books to which they actually served as prefaces extended to sixty volumes. When his work was done, Johnson then being in his seventy-second year, the booksellers added 100 pounds to the price first asked. Johnson's own life was then near its close. He died on the 13th of December, 1784, aged seventy- five.

Of the Lives in this collection, Johnson himself liked best his Life of Cowley, for the thoroughness with which he had examined in it the style of what he called the metaphysical Poets. In his Life of Milton, the sense of Milton's genius is not less evident than the difference in point of view which made it difficult for Johnson to know Milton thoroughly. They know each other now. For Johnson sought as steadily as Milton to do all as "in his great Taskmaster's eye."

H. M.

## Waller

Edmund Waller was born on the third of March, 1605, at Coleshill, in Hertfordshire. His father was Robert Waller, Esquire, of Agmondesham, in Buckinghamshire, whose family was originally a branch of the Kentish Wallers; and his mother was the daughter of John Hampden, of Hampden, in the same county, and sister to Hampden, the zealot of rebellion.

His father died while he was yet an infant, but left him a yearly income of three thousand five hundred pounds; which, rating together the value of money and the customs of life, we may reckon more than equivalent to ten thousand at the present time.

He was educated, by the care of his mother, at Eton; and removed afterwards to King's College, in Cambridge. He was sent to Parliament in his eighteenth, if not in his sixteenth year, and frequented the court of James the First, where he heard a very remarkable conversation, which the writer of the Life prefixed to his Works, who seems to have been well informed of facts, though he may sometimes err in chronology, has delivered as indubitably certain:

"He found Dr. Andrews, Bishop of Winchester, and Dr. Neale, Bishop of Durham, standing behind his Majesty's chair; and there happened something extraordinary," continues this writer, "in the conversation those prelates had with the king, on which Mr. Waller did often reflect. His Majesty asked the bishops, 'My Lords, cannot I take my subject's money, when I want it, without all this formality of Parliament?' The Bishop of Durham readily answered, 'God forbid, Sir, but you should: you are the breath of our nostrils.' Whereupon the king turned and said to the Bishop of Winchester, 'Well, my Lord, what say you?' 'Sir,' replied the bishop, 'I have no skill to judge of Parliamentary cases. The king answered, 'No put-offs, my Lord; answer me presently.' 'Then, Sir,' said he, 'I think it is lawful for you to take my brother Neale's money; for he offers it.' Mr. Waller said the company was pleased with this answer, and the wit of it seemed to affect the king; for a certain lord coming in soon after, his Majesty cried out, 'Oh, my lord, they say you lig with my Lady.' 'No, Sir,' says his lordship in confusion; 'but I like her company, because she has so much wit.' 'Why, then,' says the king, 'do you not lig with my Lord of Winchester there?'"

Waller's political and poetical life began nearly together. In his eighteenth year he wrote the poem that appears first in his works, on "The Prince's Escape at St. Andero:" a piece which justifies the observation made by one of his editors, that he attained, by a felicity like instinct, a style which perhaps will never be obsolete; and that "were we to judge only by the wording, we could not know what was wrote at twenty, and what at fourscore." His versification was, in his first essay, such as it appears in his last performance. By the perusal of Fairfax's translation of Tasso, to which, as Dryden relates, he confessed himself indebted for the smoothness of his numbers, and by his own nicety of observation, he had already formed such a system of metrical harmony as he never afterwards much needed, or much endeavoured, to improve. Denham corrected his

numbers by experience, and gained ground gradually upon the ruggedness of his age; but what was acquired by Denham was inherited by Waller.

The next poem, of which the subject seems to fix the time, is supposed by Mr. Fenton to be the "Address to the Queen," which he considers as congratulating her arrival, in Waller's twentieth year. He is apparently mistaken; for the mention of the nation's obligations to her frequent pregnancy proves that it was written when she had brought many children. We have therefore no date of any other poetical production before that which the murder of the Duke of Buckingham occasioned; the steadiness with which the king received the news in the chapel deserved indeed to be rescued from oblivion.

Neither of these pieces that seem to carry their own dates could have been the sudden effusion of fancy. In the verses on the prince's escape, the prediction of his marriage with the Princess of France must have been written after the event; in the other, the promises of the king's kindness to the descendants of Buckingham, which could not be properly praised till it had appeared by its effects, show that time was taken for revision and improvement. It is not known that they were published till they appeared long afterwards with other poems.

Waller was not one of those idolaters of praise who cultivate their minds at the expense of their fortunes. Rich as he was by inheritance, he took care early to grow richer, by marrying Mrs. Banks, a great heiress in the city, whom the interest of the court was employed to obtain for Mr. Crofts. Having brought him a son, who died young, and a daughter, who was afterwards married to Mr. Dormer, of Oxfordshire, she died in childbed, and left him a widower of about five-and-twenty, gay and wealthy, to please himself with another marriage.

Being too young to resist beauty, and probably too vain to think himself resistible, he fixed his heart, perhaps half-fondly and half-ambitiously, upon the Lady Dorothea Sidney, eldest daughter of the Earl of Leicester, whom he courted by all the poetry in which Sacharissa is celebrated; the name is derived from the Latin appellation of "sugar," and implies, if it means anything, a spiritless mildness, and dull good-nature, such as excites rather tenderness and esteem, and such as, though always treated with kindness, is never honoured or admired.

Yet he describes Sacharissa as a sublime predominating beauty, of lofty charms, and imperious influence, on whom he looks with amazement rather than fondness, whose chains he wishes, though in vain, to break, and whose presence is "wine" that "inflames to madness."

His acquaintance with this high-born dame gave wit no opportunity of boasting its influence; she was not to be subdued by the powers of verse, but rejected his addresses, it is said, with disdain, and drove him away to solace his disappointment with Amoret or Phillis. She married in 1639 the Earl of Sunderland, who died at Newbury in the king's cause; and, in her old age, meeting somewhere with Waller, asked him, when he would

again write such verses upon her; "When you are as young, Madam," said he, "and as handsome as you were then."

In this part of his life it was that he was known to Clarendon, among the rest of the men who were eminent in that age for genius and literature; but known so little to his advantage, that they who read his character will not much condemn Sacharissa, that she did not descend from her rank to his embraces, nor think every excellence comprised in wit.

The lady was, indeed, inexorable; but his uncommon comprised in wit, qualifications, though they had no power upon her, recommended him to the scholars and statesmen; and undoubtedly many beauties of that time, however they might receive his love, were proud of his praises. Who they were, whom he dignifies with poetical names, cannot now be known. Amoret, according to Mr. Fenton, was the Lady Sophia Murray. Perhaps by traditions preserved in families more may be discovered.

From the verses written at Penshurst, it has been collected that he diverted his disappointment by a voyage; and his biographers, from his poem on the Whales, think it not improbable that he visited the Bermudas; but it seems much more likely that he should amuse himself with forming an imaginary scene, than that so important an incident, as a visit to America, should have been left floating in conjectural probability.

From his twenty-eighth to his thirty-fifth year, he wrote his pieces on the Reduction of Sallee; on the Reparation of St. Paul's; to the King on his Navy; the Panegyric on the Queen Mother; the two poems to the Earl of Northumberland; and perhaps others, of which the time cannot be discovered.

When he had lost all hopes of Sacharissa, he looked round him for an easier conquest, and gained a lady of the family of Bresse, or Breaux. The time of his marriage is not exactly known. It has not been discovered that his wife was won by his poetry; nor is anything told of her, but that she brought him many children. He doubtless praised some whom he would have been afraid to marry, and perhaps married one whom he would have been ashamed to praise. Many qualities contribute to domestic happiness, upon which poetry has no colours to bestow; and many airs and sallies may delight imagination, which he who flatters them never can approve. There are charms made only for distant admiration. No spectacle is nobler than a blaze.

Of this wife, his biographers have recorded that she gave him five sons and eight daughters.

During the long interval of Parliament, he is represented as living among those with whom it was most honourable to converse, and enjoying an exuberant fortune with that independence and liberty of speech and conduct which wealth ought always to produce. He was, however, considered as the kinsman of Hampden, and was therefore supposed by the courtiers not to favour them.

When the Parliament was called in 1640, it appeared that Waller's political character had not been mistaken. The king's demand of a supply produced one of those noisy speeches which disaffection and discontent regularly dictate; a speech filled with hyperbolic complaints of imaginary grievances: "They," says he, "who think themselves already undone, can never apprehend themselves in danger; and they who have nothing left can never give freely." Political truth is equally in danger from the praises of courtiers, and the exclamations of patriots.

He then proceeds to rail at the clergy, being sure at that time of a favourable audience. His topic is such as will always serve its purpose; an accusation of acting and preaching only for preferment: and he exhorts the Commons "carefully" to "provide" for their "protection against Pulpit Law."

It always gratifies curiosity to trace a sentiment. Waller has in his speech quoted Hooker in one passage; and in another has copied him, without quoting. "Religion," says Waller, "ought to be the first thing in our purpose and desires; but that which is first in dignity is not always to precede in order of time; for well-being supposes a being; and the first impediment which men naturally endeavour to remove, is the want of those things without which they cannot subsist. God first assigned unto Adam maintenance of life, and gave him a title to the rest of the creatures before he appointed a law to observe."

"God first assigned Adam," says Hooker, "maintenance of life, and then appointed him a law to observe. True it is, that the kingdom of God must be the first thing in our purpose and desires; but inasmuch as a righteous life presupposeth life, inasmuch as to live virtuously it is impossible, except we live; therefore the first impediment which naturally we endeavour to remove is penury, and want of things without which we cannot live."

The speech is vehement; but the great position, that grievances ought to be redressed before supplies are granted, is agreeable enough to law and reason: nor was Waller, if his biographer may be credited, such an enemy to the king, as not to wish his distresses lightened; for he relates, "that the king sent particularly to Waller, to second his demand of some subsidies to pay off the army, and Sir Henry Vane objecting against first voting a supply, because the king would not accept unless it came up to his proportion, Mr. Waller spoke earnestly to Sir Thomas Jermyn, comptroller of the household, to save his master from the effects of so bold a falsity; 'for,' he said, 'I am but a country gentleman, and cannot pretend to know the king's mind;' but Sir Thomas durst not contradict the secretary; and his son, the Earl of St. Albans, afterwards told Mr. Waller, that his father's cowardice ruined the king."

In the Long Parliament, which, unhappily for the nation, met Nov. 3, 1640, Waller represented Agmondesham the third time; and was considered by the discontented party as a man sufficiently trusty and acrimonious to be employed in managing the prosecution of Judge Crawley, for his opinion in favour of ship-money; and his speech shows that he did not disappoint their expectations. He was probably the more ardent, as his uncle Hampden had been particularly engaged in the dispute, and, by a sentence which seems generally to be thought unconstitutional, particularly injured.



He was not, however, a bigot to his party, nor adopted all their opinions. When the great question, whether Episcopacy ought to be abolished, was debated, he spoke against the innovation so coolly, so reasonably, and so firmly, that it is not without great injury to his name that his speech, which was as follows, has been hitherto omitted in his works:

"There is no doubt but the sense of what this nation had suffered from the present bishops hath produced these complaints; and the apprehensions men have of suffering the like, in time to come, make so many desire the taking away of Episcopacy: but I conceive it is possible that we may not, now, take a right measure of the minds of the people by their petitions; for, when they subscribed them, the bishops were armed with a dangerous commission of making new canons, imposing new oaths, and the like; but now we have disarmed them of that power. These petitioners lately did look upon Episcopacy as a beast armed with horns and claws; but now that we have cut and pared them (and may, if we see cause, yet reduce it into narrower bounds), it may, perhaps, be more agreeable. Howsoever, if they be still in passion, it becomes us soberly to consider the right use and antiquity thereof; and not to comply further with a general desire, than may stand with a general good.

"We have already showed that Episcopacy and the evils thereof are mingled like water and oil; we have also, in part, severed them; but I believe you will find, that our laws and the present government of the Church are mingled like wine and water; so inseparable, that the abrogation of, at least, a hundred of our laws is desired in these petitions. I have often heard a noble answer of the Lords, commended in this House, to a proposition of like nature, but of less consequence; they gave no other reason of their refusal but this, 'Nolumus mutare Leges Angliae:' it was the bishops who so answered them; and it would become the dignity and wisdom of this House to answer the people, now, with a 'Nolumus mutare.'

"I see some are moved with a number of hands against the bishops; which, I confess, rather inclines me to their defence; for I look upon Episcopacy as a counterscarp, or outwork; which, if it be taken by this assault of the people, and, withal, this mystery once revealed, 'that we must deny them nothing when they ask it thus in troops,' we may, in the next place, have as hard a task to defend our property, as we have lately had to recover it from the Prerogative. If, by multiplying hands and petitions, they prevail for an equality in things ecclesiastical, the next demand perhaps may be *Lex Agraria*, the like equality in things temporal.

"The Roman story tells us, that when the people began to flock about the Senate, and were more curious to direct and know what was done, than to obey, that Commonwealth soon came to ruin; their *Legem regere* grew quickly to be a *Legem ferre*: and after, when their legions had found that they could make a Dictator, they never suffered the Senate to have a voice any more in such election.

"If these great innovations proceed, I shall expect a flat and level in learning too, as well as in Church preferments: *Hones alit Artes*. And though it be true, that grave and pious men do study for learning-sake, and embrace virtue for itself; yet it is true, that youth,

which is the season when learning is gotten, is not without ambition; nor will ever take pains to excel in anything, when there is not some hope of excelling others in reward and dignity.

"There are two reasons chiefly alleged against our Church government.

"First, Scripture, which, as some men think, points out another form.

"Second, the abuses of the present superiors.

"For Scripture, I will not dispute it in this place; but I am confident that, whenever an equal division of lands and goods shall be desired, there will be as many places in Scripture found out, which seem to favour that, as there are now alleged against the prelacy or preferment of the Church. And, as for abuses, when you are now in the remonstrance told what this and that poor man hath suffered by the bishops, you may be presented with a thousand instances of poor men that have received hard measure from their landlords; and of worldly goods abused, to the injury of others, and disadvantage of the owners.

"And therefore, Mr. Speaker, my humble motion is that we may settle men's minds herein; and by a question, declare our resolution, 'to reform,' that is, 'not to abolish, Episcopacy.'"

It cannot but be wished that he, who could speak in this manner, had been able to act with spirit and uniformity.

When the Commons begun to set the royal authority at open defiance, Waller is said to have withdrawn from the House, and to have returned with the king's permission; and, when the king set up his standard, he sent him a thousand broad-pieces. He continued, however, to sit in the rebellious conventicle; but "spoke," says Clarendon, "with great sharpness and freedom, which, now there was no danger of being out-voted, was not restrained; and therefore used as an argument against those who were gone upon pretence that they were not suffered to deliver their opinion freely in the House, which could not be believed, when all men knew what liberty Mr. Waller took, and spoke every day with impunity against the sense and proceedings of the House."

Waller, as he continued to sit, was one of the commissioners nominated by the Parliament to treat with the king at Oxford; and when they were presented, the king said to him, "Though you are the last, you are not the lowest nor the least in my favour." Whitelock, who, being another of the commissioners, was witness of this kindness, imputes it to the king's knowledge of the plot, in which Waller appeared afterwards to have been engaged against the Parliament. Fenton, with equal probability, believes that his attempt to promote the royal cause arose from his sensibility of the king's tenderness. Whitelock says nothing of his behaviour at Oxford: he was sent with several others to add pomp to the commission, but was not one of those to whom the trust of treating was imparted.

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