

“Cowper’s Poems” (CR1998/SS/2)

Warwickshire Libraries are celebrating Literary Links as part of Heritage Open Days. Therefore, September’s Document of the Month is a lovely book of poems, by William Cowper. Two related poems have been selected from the book:

On My Dog Beau killing a young bird

*A Spaniel, Beau, that fares like you,
Well-fed, and at his ease,
Should wiser be than to pursue
Each trifle that he sees.*

*But you have kill’d a tiny bird
Which flew not till to day,
Against my orders, whom you heard
Forbidding you the prey.*

*Nor did you kill that you might eat
And ease a doggish pain,
For him, all feathers and no meat
You left where he was slain.*

*Nor was he of that hurtful sort,
Which blooming fruit allures,
But merely made to take his sport
Whom you have slain for yours.*

*My dog, what remedy remains,
Since teach you as I can,
I see you, after all my pains
So much resemble man?¹*

Beau’s Reply

*Sir when I flew to seize the bird
In spite of your command,
A louder voice than yours I heard,
And harder to withstand.*

*You cried – forbear - but in my breast
A mightier cried – proceed -
‘Twas Nature Sir, whose strong behest
Impell’d me to the deed.*

*Yet, much as Nature I respect,
I ventur’d once to break
(As you perhaps may recollect)
Her precept for your sake.*

*And when your linnet on a day,
Passing his prison door
Had flutter’d all his strength away,
And panting press’d the floor,*

*Well knowing him a sacred thing,
Not destin’d to my tooth,
I only kiss’d his ruffled wing
And lick’d the feathers smooth.*

*Let my obedience then excuse
My disobedience now,
Nor some reproof yourself refuse
From your aggriev’d Bow-wow;*

*If killing birds be such a crime
(Which I can hardly see)
What think you, Sir, of killing Time
With verse address’d to me?¹*

¹ Warwickshire County Record Office. Volume bound in half calf, entitled "Cowper's Poems" on spine. Document reference CR1998/SS/2.

On my Dog Beau killing a young bird.
July 15th 1793.

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Well-fed and at his ease,
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Each trifle that he sees.

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My Dog, what remedy remains,
Since teach you as I can,
I see you, after all my pains,
So much resemble Man.

Beau's Reply.

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In spite of your command,
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(which I can hardly see)
What think you, Sir, of killing Time
With verse address'd to me?

William Cowper (1731-1800)

William Cowper was born in November 1731 at the rectory, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire. He was the son of the Reverend John Cowper and Ann Donne, the grandson of Spencer Cowper - a lawyer and whig politician, and descendant of John Donne – the poet and dean of St. Paul's.²

Cowper was educated at a local boarding school and then moved to Westminster School where he studied Law, being called to the bar in 1754 and taking chambers in 1757.³

Sadly, Cowper suffered from depression and mental illness for much of his adult life and spent some time in an asylum. He would take comfort in religion during his low times and went on to write several hymns as well as his many poems.^{2,3}

The record office is fortunate to hold a collection on the Throckmorton family from Coughton Court and through his correspondence with Lady Throckmorton, we have some lovely examples of Cowper's letters and poems – they are well worth having a read through, if only to see how Cowper addresses his letters to Lady Throckmorton as "Mrs Frog"!

² Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. *Cowper, William (1731-1800)*.

<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-6513> :
accessed 15 August 2019.

³ Encyclopaedia Britannica. *William Cowper British Poet*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Cowper> :
accessed 15 August 2019.