

**THE TASK. BOOK 1,
WITH LIFE
AND NOTES**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649246205

The task. Book 1, with life and notes by William Cowper

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

WILLIAM COWPER

**THE TASK. BOOK 1,
WITH LIFE
AND NOTES**

THE TASK

BOOK I.

BY

WILLIAM COWPER

With Life and Notes



W. & R. CHAMBERS
LONDON AND EDINBURGH
1885

280.1.401.

LIFE OF COWPER.

WILLIAM COWPER, the son of a clergyman, was born at Great Berkhamstead in 1731. His mother, a lady of high descent, died when he was six years of age; and in *Verses on his Mother's Picture*, written about fifty years afterwards, we have one of the finest elegies in our literature. Educated at Westminster School, he was articled, at the age of eighteen, to an attorney with a view to the law as his profession. Soon after this period, his mind became a prey to fits of deep melancholy; and an event occurred in 1763, which brought his life to a sad crisis—he became insane. After a few months spent in a lunatic asylum, he recovered; but the malady returned at intervals three times before his death. In 1767, Cowper went to live with the Unwin family at Olney, where for some years he enjoyed a happy life. He amused himself with drawing, carpentering, and the rearing of a great many pet animals, among which were three tame hares. The curate of the parish was the remarkable John Newton, whom he joined in the writing of the *Olney Hymns*, and in helping with Christian work. Cowper was nearly fifty years of age, when at the suggestion of Mrs Unwin he took to writing verse, as a congenial employment for his mind. His first volume, containing *Truth, Hope, Table Talk*, and other poems of a moral or religious character, was published in 1782. This was followed by the highly humorous ballad of *John Gilpin*, the story of which a lady told him one day when his mind was gloomy; his greatest work, *The Task* (1785), a poem in six books; and a *Translation of Homer* (1791), which he meant should have greater merit than that of Pope. In 1794, he received a pension of £300 from the king, but by that time his mind was again dark, and the poor maniac could not understand the gift. His last years were most miserable, and he died in 1800.

The literary style of Cowper, clear, flowing, and natural, should be considered in contrast with the artificially refined style of Pope, which had been popular up to that time. He wrote with genuine feeling, and only about what he knew, felt, or saw for himself. In all his poetry there is more or less of a religious element, but a vein of gentle humour and a true love for nature are equally characteristic of it. The best passages are those where he describes with the most faithful portraiture the landscape of the country and the everyday scenes of his quiet home-life. The letters he wrote to his friends are among the best of their kind in our language.

THE TASK-BOOK I.

THE SOFA.

THE ARGUMENT.—Historical deduction of seats, from the stool to the sofa—A schoolboy's ramble—A walk in the country—The scene described—Rural sounds as well as sights delightful—Another walk—Mistake concerning the charms of solitude corrected—Colonnades commended—Alcove, and the view from it—The wilderness—The grove—The thresher—The necessity and benefits of exercise—The works of nature superior to, and in some instances imitable by, art—The wearisomeness of what is commonly called a life of pleasure—Change of scene sometimes expedient—A common described, and the character of Crazy Kate introduced—Gipsies—The blessings of civilised life—That state most favourable to virtue—The South Sea islanders compassionate, but chiefly Omai—His present state of mind supposed—Civilised life friendly to virtue, but not great cities—Great cities, and London in particular, allowed their due praise, but censured—Fête champêtre—The book concludes with a reflection on the effects of dissipation and effeminacy upon our public measures.

I SING the Sofa. I who lately sang
Truth, Hope, and Charity, and touched with awe
The solemn chorus, and with a trembling hand,
Escaped with pain from that adventurous flight,
Now seek repose upon an humbler theme; 5

ABBREVIATIONS.—A.S. = Anglo-Saxon; Cf. (Lat. *confer*) = compare; Fr. = French; Ger. = German; Gr. = Greek; Lat. = Latin; pa.p. = past participle. The symbol — means 'directly derived from.'

1. I sing &c. Poems were first of all written to be sung or chanted; hence the word *sing* is used of writing about a subject in verse. Cf. the beginning of Virgil's great poem, *The Æneid*: '*Arma virumque cano, Arms and the hero I sing.*'

2. Truth, Hope, and Charity are the names of three poems in Cowper's first published volume of poetry (1782).

3. Chorus . . . hand. A poetical allusion to the harp or the lyre, a stringed musical instrument which was anciently used as an accompaniment to the chanting of poetry.

4. Escaped, &c. 'I (in line 1) . . . (having) escaped . . . now seek repose,' &c. In his first poems, Cowper set himself to teach religion—an 'adventurous flight' or great effort compared with what he was now aiming at.

The theme though humble, yet august and proud
 The occasion—for the Fair commands the song.
 Time was, when clothing sumptuous or for use,
 Save their own painted skins, our sires had none.
 As yet black breeches were not; satin smooth, 10
 Or velvet soft, or plush with shaggy pile:
 The hardy chief upon the rugged rock,
 Washed by the sea, or on the gravelly bank
 Thrown up by wintry torrents roaring loud,
 Fearless of wrong, reposed his weary strength. 15
 Those barbarous ages past, succeeded next
 The birthday of Invention; weak at first,
 Dull in design, and clumsy to perform.
 Joint-stools were then created; on three legs
 Upborne they stood—three legs upholding firm 20
 A massy slab, in fashion square or round.
 On such a stool immortal Alfred sat,

6, 7. *Is* is twice understood. 'Though the theme (is) humble, yet the occasion (is) august and proud.—*August*, high, full of honour. Lat. *augustus*—*augeo*, I increase.

7. *The Fair*, one of the fair sex, a lady. This use of the adjective as a substantive is very common in writers of the century to which Cowper belongs; but in the singular number is uncommon. Generally *the fair* is plural, and means the fair sex. Cf. 'the fair' in line 73, 'the sick' in line 80, and 'the paralytic' in line 472. The lady here referred to was Lady Austen, the same lady who had told him the story of John Gilpin (see the *Life of Cowper*). She now desired him to try blank verse, and playfully gave him the *Sofa* for a subject: hence he called the whole poem *The Task*.

8. *Sumptuous* (= costly) forms a contrast to 'for use.'

9. *Painted skins*. The ancient Britons, whom Cæsar found on this island, *tattooed* or stained their faces and limbs with the plant *woad*, which produced a blue colour; and for this reason they were more terrible to look at in battle. But they clothed

their bodies with the skins of animals.—*Sires*, through Fr. from Lat. *senior*, elder. Is it historically correct to say that the Celts or ancient Britons were the sires or ancestors of the English people?—*None* is here an adjective qualifying 'clothing.' *No*, which we always use as the adjective, leaving *none* as the noun, or to be used absolutely, is just a shortened form of *none*. Distinguish the adverb *no*, A.S. *na* = (*ne*, not, and *æ*, ever).

11. *Plush*, a kind of woollen cloth woven like velvet.—*Pile*, the nap or hairy surface on cloth; from Lat. *pilus*, hair.

15. *Strength* is put for 'strong body,' 'strong limbs,' by the figure of speech called *metonymy*. Cf. line 389.

16. *Those . . . past* is an absolute clause. Supply *bring*.

21. *Fashion*, the way in which a thing is made; through Fr. from Lat. *factio* (accusative case of *facio*)—*facio*, I make, do. *Faction* comes directly from this Latin root. Cf. *feat*, *fact*; &c.

22. *Alfred*, Alfred the Great, king of England from 872 to 901.

And swayed the sceptre of his infant realms :
 And such in ancient halls and mansions drear
 May still be seen ; but perforated sore,
 25 And drilled in holes, the solid oak is found,
 By worms voracious eating through and through.
 At length a generation more refined
 Improved the simple plan ; made three legs four,
 Gave them a twisted form vermicular,
 30 And o'er the seat, with plenteous wadding stuffed,
 Induced a splendid cover, green and blue,
 Yellow and red, of tapestry richly wrought
 And woven close, or needlework sublime.
 There might ye see the peony spread wide,
 35 The full-blown rose, the shepherd and his lass,
 Lapdog and lambkin with black staring eyes,
 And parrots with twin cherries in their beak.
 Now came the cane from India, smooth and bright
 With Nature's varnish ; severed into stripes
 40 That interlaced each other, these supplied

24. *Drear*, or *dreary*, gloomy. A.S. *dreorig*—*dreoran*, to fall, become weak.

25-27. 'But the solid oak is found sorely perforated and drilled in holes by voracious worms eating through and through.'—*Perforated*, from Lat. *per*, through, and *foratum*, bored.—*Sore* = much; from A.S. *sar*, a wound. This use of the word is like the Ger. *schr*, very, which originally means 'painfully,' being connected with the root of *sore*.

28. This poetical description of the progress of seats must be looked upon as entirely playful; otherwise, it might be objected that four-legged stools are better than three-legged ones, only when the floor is even.

29. *Vermicular*, like a worm; from Lat. *vermicular*, diminutive of *vermis*, a worm; hence also *vermin*.

32. *Induced*, spread. This is a use of the word approaching the original meaning of the Lat. *induco*, I lead or bring into or upon, place upon, and hence *spread upon*.

34. *Sublime* (= grand, lofty) is here used ironically, that is, in an opposite sense to its real meaning. See note on line 303.

35. *Peony*, a plant with beautiful crimson flowers; so called from Gr. *Paiôn*, the physician of the gods, the plant being thought to have healing virtues. *Hermetic*, *panic*, *santalise*, &c. belong by derivation to this class of words.

36. *Blown*. Distinguish the verb *blow* (A.S. *blawan*, Ger. *blähen*), to bloom or blossom, from the other verb *blow* (A.S. *blawan*, Ger. *blähen*) used of the wind.

37. *Lambkin*, a little lamb. The suffix *-kin* (= *-k* or *-ock* + *in*) is a double diminutive, as in *mannikin*, *firkin*, *pipkin*, &c.

40-42. 'These (canes), severed into stripes that interlaced each other, supplied a lattice work of firm texture.' *Sever* (through Fr.) and *separate* are doublets, from Lat. *separatum*, p.p. of *separe*—*se*, aside, and *pare*, I put, prepare.

Of texture firm a lattice work, that braced
 The new machine, and it became a chair.
 But restless was the chair; the back erect
 Distressed the weary loins, that felt no ease: 45
 The slippery seat betrayed the sliding part
 That pressed it, and the feet hung dangling down,
 Anxious in vain to find the distant floor.
 These for the rich: the rest, whom fate had placed
 In modest mediocrity, content 50
 With base materials, sat on well-tanned hides,
 Obdurate and unyielding, glassy smooth,
 With here and there a tuft of crimson yarn,
 Or scarlet crewel, in the cushion fixed,
 If cushion might be called, what harder seemed 55
 Than the firm oak of which the frame was formed.
 No want of timber then was felt or feared
 In Albion's happy isle. The lumber stood
 Ponderous and fixed by its own massy weight.
 But elbows still were wanting; these, some say, 60
 An alderman of Cripplegate contrived;
 And some ascribe the invention to a priest,
 Burly and big, and studious of his ease.

42. *Texture*, the way in which a thing is woven or put together. Lat. *textura*—*texo*, I weave.—*Lattice work*, a work made by crossing *laths* or rods, and forming open squares like a network; from Fr. *latte*, a lath.—*Braaced*, made firm and tight; from Fr. *bras*, the arm, strength. Cf. line 350.

44. *Restless*, not affording rest: uncomfortable.

50. *Mediocrity*, a middling position. Lat. *mediocritas*—*medius*, middle.

52. *Obdurate*, hard. Lat. *obdurus*—*ob*, against, and *durus*, hard.

54. *Orewal*, worsted yarn slackly twisted.

55, 56. 'If what seemed harder than the firm oak of which the frame was formed might be called (a) cushion.'

57. *No want of timber*, &c. Before the universal use of coal as fuel, a great deal of timber was burned in England; and some people, when Cowper wrote,

believed that our forests would soon be exhausted.

58. *Albion*, a name first applied to Britain by the Greek writer Aristotle.—*Lumber* = the chair, which as yet was a clumsy and heavy thing. *Lumber* means anything useless or cumbersome, or things bulky and thrown aside as of no use; a *lumber-room* being originally the *Lombard-room*, or a room where the Lombards, the first bankers and pawnbrokers in England, stored their pledges.

61. *Alderman*, a city magistrate next in rank to a mayor; from A.S. *ald*, old.—*Cripplegate*, a district of London, named after one of the old city gates, which was so called on account of the *cripples* who sought charity there.

63. It is jocularly implied that the stout, fat priest was led by his love of ease to think of improving the chair by suiting arms to it. Cf. line 70.

But, rude at first, and not with easy slope,
 Receding wide, they pressed against the ribs, 65
 And bruised the side; and, elevated high,
 Taught the raised shoulders to invade the ears.
 Long time elapsed or e'er our rugged sires
 Complained, though incommoiously pent in,
 And ill at ease behind. The ladies first 70
 'Gan murmur, as became the softer sex.
 Ingenious Fancy, never better pleased
 Than when employed to accommodate the fair,
 Heard the sweet moan with pity, and devised 75
 The soft settee; one elbow at each end,
 And in the midst an elbow it received,
 United yet divided, twain at once.
 So sit two kings of Brentford on one throne;
 And so two citizens, who take the air,
 Close packed, and smiling, in a chaise and one. 80
 But relaxation of the languid frame,
 By soft recumbency of outstretched limbs,
 Was bliss reserved for happier days. So slow
 The growth of what is excellent; so hard 85
 To attain perfection in this nether world.
 Thus first Necessity invented stools,

68. Or e'er, ere ever. *Or* is an old form of *ere*, and the use of *ever* here corresponds to its use in such compounds as *whatever*, *wherever*—that is, gives a touch of universality or indefiniteness to the sense.

71. 'Gan murmur, began to murmur. In old English *gan* was used as an auxiliary like the modern *did*. A.S. *ginnan*, to begin.

72. *Fancy* is poetically spoken of as a person; an instance of the figure *Personification*. There are many other examples in the poem, as in lines 86-88.

75. *Settee*, a long seat with a back to it; from *set*.

75, 76. It received one elbow at each end, and one in the middle.

77. *Twain*, two, A.S. *twegen*; *two*, two. From the same root (*two*) are *twin*, *twine*, *twill*, *twilight*, &c.

78. *Two kings of Brentford*. The allusion is to an old play or farce called *The Rehearsal*, by the Duke of Buckingham. In act ii. scene 2, the two kings of Brentford enter 'hand in hand;' and the actors, to heighten the absurdity, generally made them 'smelling at one nosegay.' Brentford is a town of ancient date, eight miles west of London.

80. *One*, that is, drawn by one horse; so we say a *carriage and pair*.

81. *Relaxation*, a letting loose from effort; from Lat. *re*, away from, and *laxus*, loose.

82. *Recumbency*, from Lat. *re*, back, and *cumbo*, I lie down.

85. *Attain*, reach; through Fr. from Lat. *ad*, to, and *tango*, I touch.

—*Nether*, lower; a comparative now rarely used; from the root of *neath*, as in *beneath*, *underneath*.