

**ABRAHAM  
COWLEY,  
A DISSERTATION**

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Abraham Cowley, a Dissertation by Emma A. Yarnall

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# ABRAHAM COWLEY

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A DISSERTATION

FOR

THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR IN PHILOSOPHY

IN

THE UNIVERSITY OF BERNE

BY

**EMMA A. YARNALL.**

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## ABRAHAM COWLEY.

### The 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

Abraham Cowley was born in the early part of a Century which was to prove the most eventful in the history of the British Isles.

A Century which was to combat the "right divine of kings to govern wrong". A Century which was to see the life of a king taken by his subjects—not because he was a wicked ruler—an old story in the history of the world—not because he was a profligate as was Louis XV.; not because he was a tyrant in the manner of his ancestor, Henry the VIII.; but because the germs of self-government were stirring to life in the Anglo-Saxon race and a new order of things was to be introduced.

Heredity was no longer to be a reason why a people should be governed by the vacillating will of a weak ruler.

A Century of two Revolutions. The second necessary to complete what the first had begun. Abraham Cowley was born in 1618. In the second decade of this Century of Revolutions. A boundary period in Politics as in Literature. The reign of the Tudors—with its glory and its despotism—was past. In the future lowered the black clouds of the "Great Re-

bellion" which was to change the old order. The great and glorious Elizabethan period was in its autumn glories and a new order of things was here also about to be ushered in. Not with the drum beat and the horrors of civil war, but a change none the less real and vital for the history of Literature in England. Shakespeare, Beaumont—Spenser were gone—"Bare Ben" was still to be seen at the "Mermaid" surrounded by his few surviving friends. Bacon was living but shorn of his glory. Milton was ten years of age. Of Cowley's most famous friends, Davenant and Denham, were only three years older than he.

Waller was 13 years older. Dryden was born 13 years later.

The war of the "Roses" in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century is oft quoted as a reason for the dearth of Literature in that Century.

With the same reasoning and with the oft repeated "inter Arma silent Musæ" should we not expect a like result from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century? We shall find, however, this period so prolific in political changes and marked by a civil war, not a barren one in literature, though not boasting of the brilliant names which graced the preceding Elizabethan age, or the following Queen Anne period.

### Sketch of the Poet's Life.

Cowley was born in London—in the centre of busy, bustling London. Not an ideal place for the birth of a poet, we should say; yet nature laughs at our reasoning and deposits one of her choice spirits in an Ayrshire hut and another in the centre of London.



Aubrey, Wood, Johnson and most of the other authorities have stated that Cowley was born "at London in Fleet Street near the end of Chancery Lane" and that his father was a grocer. It has been reserved for an American Genealogist, Colonel Chester, to show, with almost absolute certainty, that Cowley was the son of a stationer, Thomas Cowley, of the Parish of St. Michael le Querne, a church in Cheapside, which was destroyed by the "fire" and not rebuilt. The registers of this church were burnt but the will of the aforesaid Thomas Cowley has been found among the wills of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury.<sup>1)</sup>

Peter Cunningham had already, in 1854, stated the same in his edition of Dr. Johnson's "Lives of the Poets".<sup>2)</sup> Not having given his authority, no importance was attached to his statement.

Cowley's father died before his birth and his early years were guided by his mother.

As the father, according to his friend Sprat, left "sufficient estate" it is pleasant to know that our poet's early years were not oppressed by the "res angusta domi".

His days of adverse fortune come later in life. We can think of him, therefore, as a happy little boy enjoying life as only a boy can, emulating the words of Longfellow:

A boy's will is the wind's will  
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.

His mother seems to have been equal to the task of caring for the mind as well as the body of her

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<sup>1)</sup> See Grosart's Memorial Introduction to his "Complete Works of Cowley", p. 10, 1881.

<sup>2)</sup> 3 vols., 8°, 1854. — Vol. I, 3.

son. Through her efforts he was early sent to the Westminster school. She is represented as earnestly endeavoring to procure for her son the advantages of a liberal education. She lived to the age of eighty and therefore had her efforts rewarded by seeing her son a great man. Sprat represents Cowley as always a dutiful son, justly repaying her for her tender care of his childhood.

Cowley had a gentle, amiable disposition which won him many friends in Westminster school. The little of his early history which we know he has told us himself. Speaking of his love of the poets he says:<sup>1)</sup>

How this love came to be produced in me is a hard question. I believe I can tell the particular little chance that filled my head with such chimes of verse as have never since left ringing there, for I remember when I began to read and take some pleasure in it there was wont to lie in my mother's parlor (I know not by what accident, for she herself never read any book but of devotion), but there was wont to lie Spenser's Works; this I happened to fall upon and was infinitely delighted with the stories of the Knights, and Giants, and Monsters and brave houses, which I found everywhere there, (tho' my understanding had little to do with all this), and by degrees with the tinkling of the rhyme and dance of the numbers, so that I think I had read him all over before I was twelve years old.

When we recall our experience with children of ten and twelve we are fain to smile at Cowley's modest recital. These lines are often quoted as a proof that Cowley was *made* a poet by reading Spenser. Dr Johnson seems to have been of this opinion as he says in this connection that a genius is a mind of great natural power *accidentally* directed into a particular channel. The "natural power" all

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<sup>1)</sup> "Cowley's Works", Edition of 1700, p. 137.

must agree to, but at the "*accidentally*" we think most would demur.

Some one has said: "Talent does what it *can*, Genius what it *must*."

We should rather say the poet soul leaped forth to greet the "Poet's poet" as a brother, and to revel in that which the great Macaulay called "a tedious poem". Cowley, while at Westminster school, showed wonderful precocity, perhaps the most wonderful on record. Milton, as well as Pope, may be said to have "lisped in numbers", but we have nothing from the former before his fifteenth year and from the latter before his fourteenth year. Even "the marvellous boy" Chatterton, was sixteen before he attracted the attention of the world. As is usual with highly gifted youths, the school curriculum was irksome, and we find that Cowley could never be induced to learn the rules of Grammar. We have a poem from him, however, "Pyramus and Thisbe", composed in his tenth year, and another "Constantia and Philetus" at twelve, which seldom violate the rules of Murray.

An Epic was also written, as we shall see, during his College Days. At the age of fifteen his first volume appeared: "Poetical Blossoms" by A. C.

This little book of 1633 is a quarto of thirty-two leaves. It is now very rare and one of the prizes of book collectors. A few months earlier appeared Milton's first printed *English* verses—the lines on Shakespeare prefixed to the second folio edition of 1632.

At the age of 18 Cowley entered Cambridge University where he remained seven years. For some unknown reason he had failed to be elected to a scholarship on the Westminster Foundation. His