

**THE POEMS
OF JOHN DYER**

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The poems of John Dyer by John Dyer & Edward Thomas

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JOHN DYER & EDWARD THOMAS

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OF JOHN DYER**



JOHN DYER L.L.D.



THE
POEMS OF
JOHN DYER

EDITED BY EDWARD
THOMAS, AUTHOR
OF "HORAE SOLI-
TARIAE" LONDON
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11 PATERNOSTER
BUILDINGS. MXCIII

INTRODUCTION

JOHN DYER, 1701-1757.

JOHN DYER was born at Aberglasney, a considerable house, in the parish of Llangathen, in Caermarthen-shire, in 1700 according to some, in 1701 according to others; more probably in 1701. The register which would have shown the date of his birth has been lost, and I can only learn that he was fifty-six years old when he died in 1757. He was the second son of a solicitor "of great reputation," and from father and mother had English blood. He was educated, first at a country school, then at Westminster School, under Dr Freind. Of his attainments we know nothing. It is likely that he painted and wrote verse at an early age; and he is said to have planned "Grongar Hill" when he was sixteen years old. Before he was ripe for a university, he was called from Westminster to his father's office. Having no taste for the law, he left it on his father's

death, soon afterwards. His taste for painting led him to become a pupil of Jonathan Richardson, in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Richardson's written work inspired Reynolds, but his teaching would not seem to have matured Dyer's capacity to anything beyond a skilled mediocrity. According to one of his own published letters, the youth, on leaving Richardson, became "an itinerant painter" in South Wales and the neighbouring counties of England. He must have paid visits to London about this time. Savage and Aaron Hill were among his friends. From an epistle by the former, it appears that, like his master, he painted portraits. His character, gentle, amiable, independent and unworldly, endeared him to those whom he met, if it did not attract the literary world.

Probably in 1724, he went, still as a painter, to Italy. He spent two years in Rome and Florence and other cities that were a matter of course. Like some of the next century's poets, whom he faintly but certainly foreshadowed, he was delighted by the riches of Nature, the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, and antiquity, which he saw. With a milder rapture than Shelley's, he was happy in sight of the Baths of Caracalla and the Coliseum. He is said to have been more successful with pen and ink sketches than with crayon and oils; but it may be conjectured that his work in colour and line had little but the indirect value of training his eye in a way that

afterwards served him as a poet of Nature. To "Clio"—probably the "Clio" whom he is known to have painted—he addressed some trifling "Verses from Rome"; Clio sent back a set of verses of equal merit.

1726, the year of his return to England, was a year of some literary activity for Dyer. It was the year of the publication of Thomson's "Winter." Savage's *Miscellany* of that date contained five pieces from Dyer's pen, viz.: "The Inquiry," an unimportant composition that proves his rural contentment; "To Aaron Hill," a complimentary epistle; "An Epistle to a Painter," *i.e.* to Richardson; "The Country Walk," and "Grongar Hill." As then published, "Grongar Hill" was not significant. In form "an irregular ode," divided into stanzas, it displayed some unattractive Pindarism and the antics of that day. "The Country Walk," the one wild flower of the collection, slender but unique, in manner suggested the turn which was given later to "Grongar Hill." He was again an itinerant painter.

In 1727, "Grongar Hill" appeared in its final shape. The revision had been happy, but somewhat imperfectly inspired. Thus the opening lines are negligent and vague, and "unhappy fate," etc., is indefensible. But when we consider the fitness of the metre, and the skilful presentation of a mood so uncommon in his day, breathing in the first lines,

and gracefully completed in the last, we must grant to the poem a very special claim. If we exclude consideration of the age in which it appeared, it has still a charm, if only for the small number of readers who care for all the poetry of Nature. As a product of 1727, it must be allowed that it adds to the strength of a necessary link in the chain of English literature that deals poetically with Nature. It has been praised in English and Welsh, and in the last century was paraphrased in Welsh. The manner of Dyer's work, and the combination of personal fancy with accurate observation, make him a closer relative to Wordsworth than his bulky rival Thomson, who was in many ways far more richly gifted. It is necessary to add, since it has been wrongly located, that Grongar is in Caermarthenshire, and in sight of Aberglasney.

It is obvious that Dyer must have been much out of doors. He probably knew South Wales intimately. He had a short, practical experience of agriculture, and a love of animals. At the same time he was not a hearty out-door philosopher. His health was always indifferent, and the Campagna had injured it. He seems to have had an amiable, constitutional melancholy, and must have known the angrier moods of that "sweet enemy"; for, in 1729, he is said to have written his epitaph. He called himself "old and sickly" in middle age; for many years in later