

**THE LIFE AND
POETRY OF
CHARLES COTTON**

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The Life and Poetry of Charles Cotton by Charles Jacob Sembower

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CHARLES JACOB SEMBOWER

**THE LIFE AND
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CHARLES COTTON**

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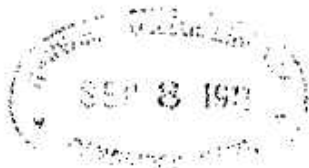
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LIFE AND THE POETRY OF
CHARLES COTTON

BY
CHARLES JACOB SEMBOWER
PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, INDIANA UNIVERSITY



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THE LIFE AND THE POETRY OF CHARLES COTTON

INTRODUCTION

To the general reader, the name of Charles Cotton means hardly anything at all; and indeed to scholars, who are not specialists within the period in which his life fell, it is little more than a name. Now and then, to be sure, it is remembered as the name of Walton's associate "Angler," perhaps also as that of the translator of Montaigne, or, much less favorably, as that of the author of a burlesque poem called the "Virgil Travesty."

Nevertheless, Cotton has not been without appreciators who rank him as one of the most delightful minor poets of the seventeenth century. Wordsworth knew him well, and in "A Letter to a friend of Robert Burns," pays a tribute to him as a "highly-gifted man" who not only in certain unfortunate circumstances of his life, but in "versatility of genius" bore "no unobvious resemblance to the Scottish bard." Coleridge found in the volume of "Poems on Several Occasions" (1689) by Cotton, "not a few poems replete with every excellence of thought,

image and passion which we expect or desire in the poetry of the milder Muse." Charles Lamb quotes and praises the poet more than once,—in this case, as so often elsewhere, hitting upon the distinctive quality in his man. "How say you, reader"—he exclaims after quoting Cotton's "New Year,"—"do not these verses smack of the rough magnanimity of the old English vein? Do they not fortify like a cordial; enlarging the heart, and productive of sweet blood and generous spirits in the concoction? Where be those puling fears of death just now expressed or affected? Passed like a cloud—absorbed in the purging sunlight of clear poetry—clean washed away by a wave of genuine Helicon—." Archbishop Trench, more careful perhaps to guard against the charge of over-praise, found in Cotton's poems "a merit which," he says, "certainly strikes me more than any singular wealth of fancy which I can find in them; and which to Wordsworth also must have constituted their chief attraction; namely, the admirable English in which they are written. They are sometimes prosaic, sometimes blemished by more serious moral faults; but for homely vigor and purity of language, for the total absence of any attempt to conceal the deficiency of strong and high imagination by a false poetic diction—purple rags torn from other men's garments and sewn upon his own—he may take his place among the foremost masters of the tongue." In America it was Lowell who found Cotton to be "an excellent poet, and a thorough master of succulently idiomatic English, which he treated with a