

**THE LIFE AND THE  
POETRY OF  
CHARLES COTTON**

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The Life and the Poetry of Charles Cotton by Charles Jacob Sembower

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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

country-gentlemanlike familiarity, as his master, Montaigne, had treated French." And again in defense of the poet, Lowell says, "If he wrote the 'Virgil Travesty,' he also wrote verses which the difficult Wordsworth could praise, and a poem of gravely noble mood addressed to Walton on his Lives, in which he shows a knowledge of what goodness is that no bad man could have acquired. Let one line of it at least shine in my page, not as a sample but for its own dear sake:—

'For in a virtuous act all good men share.' "

So much, in brief, as to the rare quality of language, mind and heart that is to be found in Cotton's serious verse. Why, if all this is so, has he been, as a poet, so long neglected?

Two or three reasons at once occur to the student of the poetry of the period. In the first place, very little of his best work was published in his lifetime. It circulated to some extent amongst his friends, who were not insensible to its high merit; but it was not printed till 1689. Then it came too late. Cotton himself, though driven to it by necessity, had helped to establish a taste for licentious verse and for burlesque. In 1689, there was little appreciation remaining for the verse of Cotton's youth and early manhood. Perhaps even if it had been published at the time of its production, it would still have been out of key with the public taste. The "sweet amenity" of his master, Isaac Walton, had met with little response as pure literature. Until well into the eighteenth century, the "Angler" was

thought of as merely a pleasant manual for the craft. "The magnanimity of the old English vein" would probably have been as easily overlooked. At all events the reputation that Cotton gained after 1660 as a translator and as a pleasant burlesquer and compiler was naturally adverse to a quick response to the work of his serious muse. This reputation as a clever man-of-letters kept fresh well into the next century, but there is little or no record that his poetry was known at all. It had to wait for its hearing until the beginning of the following century, when a genuine love of nature and of thoroughly poetical conception sought out and discovered poetry wherever it lay hid.

As a poet, however, he would naturally have suffered much from the changing attitude of his time toward poetry. Professor Schelling, in the introduction to his "Seventeenth Century Lyrics," has pointed out that "Whilst the larger number of poets between 1640 and 1670, according to temperament or circumstances, held either to the old manner, as did Milton and Marvell, or went over wholly to the new, as did Waller and Denham, a few were caught, so to speak, between the conflicting waves of the two movements, and are of unusual historical interest on this account." Of those who, without being reactionary, were loyal to the spirit that was passing, Charles Cotton was by no means the least.

The poet was descended from an ancient and honorable family. His great-grandfather was Sir Richard Cotton, Comptroller of the Household and Privy