

William Blackstone, born July 10th, 1723, was the posthumous son of a London tradesman. "If Blackstone's father—the silk mercer of Cheapside—had not died before his son entered the world," says an English writer, "the author of the Commentaries on the Laws of England might have lived and died a prosperous tradesman—a citizen of 'credit and renown' like worthy John Gilpin, and nothing more. But Fate ordered otherwise. The silk mercer died, and young William Blackstone fell to the care of his maternal uncle, Mr. Thomas Bigg, an eminent surgeon of London, by whom at the age of seven, he was put to school at what his biographer calls 'an excellent seminary,'—to wit, the Charterhouse, the school of Addison and Steele, of Thackeray and Leech."

"So assiduous was he in his studies that at fifteen he had got to the top of the school and was fit for Oxford, whither he went shortly afterwards as an exhibitor of Pembroke College—the same college where, a few years before, Samuel Johnson, a poor scholar, with characteristic independence of spirit, had flung away the new shoes which someone in pity of his shabbiness had put at his door. Here at Oxford Blackstone assimilated much Latin and Greek, logic and mathematics, and achieved a fellowship at All Souls. He even composed a treatise on architecture, but the 'mistress of his willing soul' was poetry.

"It was a poetical age; the stars of Swift and Pope were setting, but the stars of Thomson and Akenside, of Shenstone and Gray, were rising, and Blackstone had undeniably a very pretty gift that way. Already at school he had won a gold medal for a poem on Milton, and the fugitive pieces which he afterwards collected shew that he might have won an honourable place among the poets of the Augustan age of England. The motto he prefixed to these effusions was the line from Horace: '*Nec lusisse pudet, sed non incidere ludum,*' which may be roughly rendered: 'I shame not to have had my fling; shame's his who cannot stop.' Conscious that poetry was not his life work; conscious, probably, of his own limitations in the art,—he bade farewell to his muse in some excellent lines, and girded himself up for his severer studies.