

* English *

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BOADICEA, BY WILLIAM COWPER.

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I. BIOGRAPHICAL.

The poetic spirit of the Elizabethan age had almost died out. Society had become a soulless thing, a nicely polished form from which, however, the spirit had fled. Cowper was one of the first in a reactionary movement, by which again the superiority of the natural to the artificial, of the thought to its expression, was asserted.

The gray November weather in which, in 1731, the child of the Rev. John Cowper opened his baby eyes upon a cheerless world, was a mournful prelude of the life that was to follow. He was of a good Whig family, and descended through his mother from Henry III. That mother died when the little, sensitive child was only six years of age. He was sent to a boarding-school, where his experience was such as he could never look back upon without shuddering. After spending two years with an oculist, on account of weak eyes, he next passed to Westminster school, where he laid the foundation of a good classical scholarship. At eighteen he left school to study law, and in course of time was called to the bar. But all hope of a successful professional career was cut off by an attack of insanity. He recovered after a few months, but, abandoning all thought of a return to his profession, he was provided with a home at Huntingdon. Here he made the acquaintance of the Rev. Wm. Irwin, his wife, and their son and daughter. The acquaintance ripened into so warm a friendship that Cowper soon left his bachelor home and became a member of the Irwin household. They were intensely religious people, for they had caught the fervor that was being felt throughout England in the form of the great revival of religion which produced the Methodists. After Mr. Irwin's death, Cowper and Mrs. Irwin removed to the dreary town of Olney, in Buckinghamshire, attracted by the presence of an enthusiastic preacher of the revival, John Newton. A life spent in uninterrupted religious exercises—for hymn-writing was scarcely an interruption—brought on another attack of insanity, which lasted for more than a year. John Newton left Olney shortly after, and now, when nearly fifty, Cowper became a poet. His youthful verses and Olney hymn-writing would scarcely have justified the title. His first poems, on themes suggested by Mrs. Irwin, such as Truth, Table-Talk, Charity, etc., were criticized as tedious and dull and too distinctly religious. A happier choice was made when another friend, Lady Austen, bade him take for subject the sofa on which she was reclining. The result was his greatest poem, "The Task," in which the poet is led in a rambling fashion from the sofa to country-walks and country-life, and into much talk on subjects philosophic, religious and political. Yet "The Task" is not so well-known and will probably not live so long as some of his short poems, such as "John Gilpin" and "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk." He also attempted translations of Greek and Latin poetry, but with indifferent success.

Cowper has been called the best of English letter-writers. His letters are written in a graceful and natural style, and are also interesting for the revelation they give of the character and life of the poet.

Cowper's last days were shadowed by steadily thickening clouds. Insanity again seized him. Mrs. Irwin, also, was stricken with paralysis, and though they moved from place to place in the hope of benefiting her, the hope proved vain, and she died in 1796. Cowper had not sufficient command of his faculties to be fully conscious of his loss, and during the remaining three years of his life the gleams of reason were faint and infrequent. His last original poem was "The Castaway," in which we have an awful picture of the gloom in which his soul was plunged. Death came at last, a welcome liberator, on the morning of April 25, 1800.

II. EXPLANATORY.

1. Historical Basis of the Poem.—Boadicea was a British queen in the time of the Emperor Nero.

She was the wife of Prasutagus, King of the Iceni, a people inhabiting the eastern coast of Britain. On his death-bed, 60 A.D., Prasutagus named the Emperor heir to his accumulated treasures, conjointly with his own daughters, in expectation of securing thereby Nero's protection for his family and people; but he was no sooner dead than the Emperor's officers seized all. Boadicea's opposition to these unjust proceedings was resented with such cruelty that orders were given that she should be publicly whipped. The Britons took up arms, with Boadicea at their head, to shake off the Roman yoke; the colony of Camalodunum, or Colchester, was taken, and the Romans massacred wherever they could be found. The whole Province of Britain would have been lost to Rome if Suetonius Paulinus (the Governor) had not hastened from Nima, and at the head of 10,000 men engaged the Britons, who are said to have amounted to 230,000. A great battle was fought, which resulted in the complete defeat of the Britons (63 A.D.) Boadicea, who had displayed extraordinary valor, soon after despatched herself by poison. ("Encyclopædia Britannica." See also "Freeman's Old English History.")

2. "Her country's gods," "Spreading oak," "Druids," etc.—"There was something grand and yet horrible in the religion of the Britons. They had priests called Druids, who had secret doctrines of their own, and who are said to have offered up men and women as sacrifices; but the people seem chiefly to have worshipped nature. They adored the geni of the streams, woods and mountains. The oak, with the mistletoe growing on it, was their emblem of Divinity; and they met for worship in caverns and in the depths of the forest." ("New High School History.")

3. "Rome shall perish."—The founding of Rome is ascribed by tradition to Romulus, in the year 753 B.C. At first she found it difficult to maintain her own independence, exposed as she was to the attacks of hostile tribes, but with a growth that was truly marvellous, she not only reduced all Italy to subjection, but became mistress of the world. But hand in hand with increase of wealth and territory went internal decay. The free constitution of the Republic became an oligarchy and soon an imperial despotism was established. The bold, military character of the early Romans was lost by the habits of voluptuousness and idleness which came with wealth, and they became a tempting prey to the wild barbarians from the North. Various Teutonic tribes pressed into the Empire, and in 410 A.D. the Goths, under their king Alaric, took Rome itself.

4. "Tramples on a thousand states."—The imperial system of Rome was very despotic. Little liberty, little self-government was permitted to the conquered peoples. In Britain, for instance, during the three centuries of Roman rule, though commerce, agriculture, etc., flourished, yet "wealth and population alike declined under a crushing system of taxation, under restrictions which fettered industry, under a despotism which crushed out all local independence."

5. "Hark! the Gaul is at her gates!"—In the early days of Rome, when she was still struggling for bare existence, the Gauls (who dwelt in the northern part of what is now Italy, in the basin of the river Po), several times threatened her with ruin. In B.C. 390, on the banks of the river Allia, they almost annihilated the Roman army, and Rome itself was taken—all but the capitol, which was saved by Camillus. This first capture of Rome by an army of barbarians foreshadowed the greater calamity of 410, when Alaric took the city.

6. "Sounds, not arms."—Referring to the decay of the Roman military spirit.

7. "A wider world."—The world of the Romans comprised little except the basin of the Mediterranean. The Romans nowhere penetrated very far inland. Africa, except for a narrow strip along the north coast, was a region of unknown horrors; Asia, with the exception of Asia Minor, was not much better known; and Europe itself, with the exception of its three southern peninsulas, with France, part of Britain, and a small part of Germany, was unconquered. Compare the extent of the British Empire.

8. "Caesar."—"Caius Julius Caesar" is perhaps the greatest name in history. He lived in the latter days of the Republic, was a great military

leader, as well as author, orator and statesman. He conquered Gaul, invaded Britain, defeated the party of his rival Pompeius in a great civil war, and was successful in all his military undertakings. He gained almost despotic power at Rome, but was assassinated by the Republican party. Soon after his death, his adopted son, Julius Cæsar Octavianus, became the first Emperor of Rome. All the succeeding emperors also took the title of Cæsar. Notice how the same word appears in the modern "Kaiser" and "Czar."

9. "Where his eagles never flew."—The eagle was called by the ancients the "bird of Jove." It was borne on the Roman standards. Many modern nations, as France under the Bonapartes, Russia, Prussia, Austria, the United States, etc., have adopted it as their national emblem.

10. "Empire is on us bestowed."—It was not the race of Boadicea, however, i.e., the British and Celtic race, that was destined to reach glories. On the contrary, the British were overcome by the English (Angles and Saxons) and it is their descendants who have built up the present mighty British Empire. Are you disposed to criticize the poet's representation of the matter?

III. SUGGESTIVE.

What are the chief emotions pictured by the poem? What human feelings are most commonly and with most effect portrayed in poetry and fiction? Are those here portrayed among the most interesting? How is the reader made to feel a personal interest in the two characters? Describe the character of the bard and that of Boadicea from the poem. Is there anything unnatural, untrue or displeasing in the characters? Compare the effect produced by such a poem as this with the effect produced by a painting—the bard bending over his "awful lyre," Boadicea in warlike attitude, etc. Do you notice any peculiar words or constructions in the poem? What is meant by "her pride shall kiss the ground"? Quote any similar figure. What is meant by "thunder" and "wings" in verse 7? Compare in meaning the word "bard" with the words "poet" and "soothsayer." Was the bard something more than each or both? Why "celestial" fire? Does Boadicea misunderstand the bard's prophecy when she goes to battle? What effect is produced by having two or more words in a verse begin with the same letter—as, "pitiless as proud"? What is this called? Notice other instances of it in the poem. But space, time, and some slight regard for the teacher's individuality permit no more.

NEW BOOKS IN ENGLISH.

SHAKESPEARE'S *Coriolanus*. Edited, with Introduction and Notes, by K. Deighton. Introduction, pp. xvii.-xxiv; text, 1-116; notes, 117-250. Price 2s. 6d. Messrs. Macmillan & Co.

A volume of the same series as the preceding, annotated with scholarly accuracy and appreciation of the difficulties of the young student of literature.

TENNYSON'S *The Coming of Arthur* and *The Passing of Arthur*. Edited, with Introduction and Notes, by F. J. Rowe, M.A., of Presidency College, Calcutta. Introduction, pp. xliii; text, 1-31; notes, 33-78.

In the General Introduction the editor first treats of the Laureate as a man; sketches in outline the life of the Laureate; shows how his sense of law pervades his references to nature, freedom, love; notes his nobility of thought and simplicity of emotion; then, treating of him as a poet, he pictures him as the representative of his age, and, as an artist, keen and accurate in observation, profound in his scholarship, happy in expression, lofty and melodious in diction. The Introduction to the *Idylls* contains an account of the growth and character of the King Arthur myths, the relation of Tennyson's work to that of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Walter Mass, Sir Thomas Malory, Spencer, Dryden, Scott, Blackmore, Lytton and others who have recast the Arthurian legends, closing with an account of the spiritual significance of the *Idylls of the King*. The Notes contain, in addition to ample explanations of historical or etymological difficulties, illustrative quotations from general