

THE WEEK.

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COWPER AND BUNYAN.

A VERY pleasant addition to literature of the quiet kind is "The Town of Cowper; or, the Literary and Historical Associations of Olney and its neighbourhood,"* by Mr. Thomas Wright, who, as he dates from the Cowper School, Olney, is, we presume, the master of that institution. Olney, though Mr. Wright's local patriotism defends it against the charge of being unprosperous, is a stationary town. It has changed lace-making and straw-plaiting for some other little industry, but in its general character and features it is still the "Town of Cowper." Not only does the long, broad street, widening into a triangular market-place, remain the same in form; not only does the silent river still half encircle the little town as of yore, but Cowper's own house stands unaltered, saving that a stone architrave and frieze which were there in the poet's time have been removed. It is a double house, half of which only was occupied by Cowper. The parlour is still there; the window which was the poet's favourite seat can be identified, and the shutters remain which were closed when "peaceful evening was welcomed in." So does the bedroom, in which the cat was accidentally shut up in the drawer, and being rescued by the poet, was not only restored to life, but promoted to immortality. The summer house, too, is there, though now on a separate property. The quiet past of the little town has been overlaid by no busy present, and Mr. Wright has been able to give us all the topographical particulars, even to "the whipping distance" of pro-philanthropical times. The church has not escaped judicious restoration "under the direction of Sir Gilbert Scott;" but there it still is, with the

Tall spire, from which the sound of cheerful bells
Just undulates upon the list'ning ear.

The bridge of twenty-four arches, however, over "the wearisome but needful length" of which the postboy came twanging his horn, is gone. The Vicarage, though mellowed by time, seems to remain much as it was when it was occupied for a few months—memorable by their fruits in the poet's life and in the annals of poetry—by Lady Austen. There can be little doubt that the rupture between her and the poet, which is one of the mysteries of literary history, was produced by expectations on her part, which, the poet having on account of his dark malady resolved not to marry, could not be fulfilled; nor is there any reason for imagining that Mrs. Unwin behaved less admirably and unselfishly on this occasion than she did on all others. The neighbourhood and Cowper's favourite walks retain their character unmarred by the growth of factories; the view from Clifton Hill is as lovely as ever; and the Yardley Oak, though it has lost a few limbs in its battle with time and the elements, is not greatly altered. Kilwick Wood still rings with the huntsman's horn and the cry of the pack, as in the days when those sounds occasioned "the needless alarm." Western Mound has been pulled down by sacrilegious hands, and the wildness is now a wilderness indeed, though the wild flowers have not ceased to blow; but Grayhurst stands in its antique beauty and with all its memories

and associations, which, as it was the mansion of Sir Everard Digby, include the dark and romantic annals of the Gunpowder Plot. Mr. Wright has given us full accounts of the chief characters in the poet's circle, especially Newton and Scott. We will not debate with him the question whether the influence exercised by Newton over Cowper was good or evil. It may be that Newton was not a strong predestinarian, or in that sense responsible for the hallucination which, in itself hideous, took a sadly beautiful form in "The Castaway"; but it surely cannot be doubted that he filled a life which needed every ray of sunshine that could be shed upon it, with religious asceticism and gloom. He was himself preaching and acting, and he may thus have preserved his geniality and cheerfulness, but Cowper was simply going through a course of monotonous and depressing observances. It seems to us impossible that Newton's influence should have been otherwise than blighting to Cowper's genius, which was kindled at once into its highest activity of production by the sunny presence of Lady Austen. About Lady Austen, by the way, Mr. Wright gives us an anecdote, which he seems himself to feel that we shall find difficult of belief. She wore, so runs the story, the towering headgear of the day, and there being but one barber at Olney, and he having become religious and refusing to dress hair on the Sunday, she was obliged to have her hair dressed on the Saturday, and sit up all night. Her ladyship would hardly have paid so painful a tribute to the fashionable world of Olney. Certain it is however that head dresses in those days were towering—we have before us a caricature of a barber standing on a ladder to dress one—and that before a court ball, ladies, owing to the paucity of barbers, sometimes had to sit up all night. So nearly does the Fakirism of fashion rival the Fakirism of the Hindoo. The book, besides its biographical value, will have a special claim for those who like to escape for a moment from progress to peace, which has no securer seat than a little old country town in England.

WHAT Mr. Wright has done for Cowper has been done for Bunyan by the Rev. J. Brown, for twenty years minister of the church of which Bunyan was minister, and thus marked out for the gracious task. Mr. Brown has given us, we believe, all that is to be known about Bunyan. The all, unfortunately, is not very much. In Bunyan's day it had not become the fashion to collect materials for biography; biography itself was hardly a department of English literature. "For lives," says Bacon, "I do find it strange that these times have so little esteemed the virtues of the times, as that the writing of lives should be no more frequent." Of this the meagreness of our knowledge about Shakespeare is a melancholy proof; and a century after Bunyan nobody thought it worth while to preserve anything that could make us personally acquainted with the author of the Analogy. Every scrap of topography and history that could throw light on Bunyan's character and composition, or upon the genesis of his genius, has been fished up by Mr. Brown from the abyss of devouring time. The county gaol in which Bunyan was confined for twelve years, and in which he saw the deathless Vision, has been pulled down, though its site can be determined. But Mr. Brown has given us some new and interesting particulars about the captivity. It appears to have been comparatively mild, the prisoner having been once, in an interval between two legal terms of confinement, liberated on parole. Nor was the gaol itself one of those noisome, overcrowded and pestilential dungeons in which so many victims of the second Stuart tyranny met their doom. Bedfordshire was Puritan, and the Nonconformists there had comparatively gentle usage. Still, twelve years of prison and of separation from all that Bunyan loved were enough to make the iron enter a man's soul; and that the actual result with its fruits was so much the reverse of what ensues when the iron has entered the soul, may be fairly claimed as one of the glories of Christianity. The insinuation that the severity was warranted by Venner's insurrection is met by Mr. Brown with the fact that Bunyan had been committed to gaol before the insurrection took place; while to the argument that Bunyan might at any time have exempted himself from molestation by giving up preaching, the simple answer is that so might Christ and the Apostles. There has been a strange controversy whether it was in the Royalist or Parliamentary army that Bunyan served a brief term of soldiership. Mr. Brown seems to have proved that it was, as all probability would have led us to assume, in the army of the Parliament, and that the scene of service was the siege of Leicester, which, perhaps, suggested the Siege of Mansoul. Whatever there is of militant in the character of the great allegory, such as the fight with Apollyon, may be

*London Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1886.