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LIVES OF THE ENGLISH POETS



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L I V E S
OF THE
ENGLISH POETS.

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L I V E S

OF THE

MOST EMINENT

E N G L I S H P O E T S,

WITH

CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS ON THEIR WORKS.

BY SAMUEL JOHNSON.

WITH NOTES CORRECTIVE AND EXPLANATORY,
BY PETER CUNNINGHAM, F.S.A.

IN THREE VOLUMES.—VOL. II.

LONDON:
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET.
1854.

LONDON: PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, STAMFORD STREET,
AND CHARING CROSS.

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THE
LIVES OF THE ENGLISH POETS.

JOHN POMFRET.

P O M F R E T.

1667-1703.

Born at Luton in Bedfordshire — Educated at Cambridge — Rector of Malden in Bedfordshire — Publishes 'The Choice' — Marries — Death and Character.

OF Mr. John Pomfret nothing is known but from a slight and confused account prefixed to his poems¹ by a nameless friend, who relates that he was the son of the Rev. Mr. Pomfret, vicar of Luton in Bedfordshire,² that he was bred at Cambridge,³ entered into orders, and was rector of Malden in Bedfordshire, and might have risen in the Church; but that when he applied to Dr. Compton, Bishop of London, for institution to a living of considerable value, to which he had been presented, he found a troublesome obstruction raised by a malicious interpretation of some passage in his 'Choice,' from which it was inferred that he considered happiness as more likely to be found in the company of a mistress than of a wife.⁴

This reproach was easily obliterated: for it had happened to Pomfret as to all other men who plan schemes of life, he had departed from his purpose, and was then married.

¹ Rather to his 'Remains,' published in 1724.

² Thomas Pomfret, father of the poet, was first curate and then vicar of Luton. Dr. Johnson says that John Pomfret, the poet, died in 1703, in the 36th year of his age. Thomas, son of Mr. Thomas Pomfret and Mrs. Catharine his wife, was baptized at Luton, March 12, 1667, as appears by the parish register. It is remarkable that this entry agrees with the poet's age; and that among a numerous family, all of whom were baptized at Luton, the name of John does not occur.—LYSONS: *Bedfordshire*, p. 114.

³ He was of Queen's College, Cambridge, and, by the University Register, appears to have taken his Bachelor's degree in 1684, and his Master's in 1698.

⁴ At the end of the fourth edition of 'The Choice' (1701, fol.) appears as an advertisement, 'The Virtuous Wife, a poem, in answer to The Choice that would have no Wife.' The Choice appeared as "by a person of quality."

The malice of his enemies had, however, a very fatal consequence ; the delay constrained his attendance in London, where he caught the smallpox, and died in 1703, in the thirty-sixth year of his age.

He published his poems in 1699 ; and has been always the favourite of that class of readers who, without vanity or criticism, seek only their own amusement.

His 'Choice' exhibits a system of life adapted to common notions, and equal to common expectations ; such a state as affords plenty and tranquillity, without exclusion of intellectual pleasures. Perhaps no composition in our language has been oftener perused than Pomfret's 'Choice.'

In his other poems there is an easy volubility ; the pleasure of smooth metre is afforded to the ear, and the mind is not oppressed with ponderous or entangled with intricate sentiment. He pleases many, and he who pleases many must have some species of merit.

EARL OF DORSET.

DORSET.

1637-8—1705-6.

Birth and Parentage — Educated under a Private Tutor — Represents East Grinstead in the Restoration Parliament — His Early Dissipation — His Valour and Gaiety — Writes a famous Ballad at Sea, 'To all you ladies now at land' — Created Earl of Middlesex — Succeeds his Father as Earl of Dorset — Sides with the Prince of Orange against James II. — Twice Married — His Patronage of Poets — Death at Bath, and Burial at Wythiam in Sussex.

OF the Earl of Dorset the character has been drawn so largely and so elegantly by Prior,¹ to whom he was familiarly known, that nothing can be added by a casual hand; and, as its author is so generally read, it would be useless officiousness to transcribe it.

CHARLES SACKVILLE was born January 24, 1637-8.² Having been educated under a private tutor, he travelled into Italy, and returned a little before the Restoration. He was chosen into the first parliament that was called, for East Grinstead, in Sussex, and soon became a favourite of Charles II., but undertook no public employment, being too eager of the riotous and licentious pleasures which young men of high rank who aspired to be thought wits at that time imagined themselves entitled to indulge.

One of these frolics has, by the industry of Wood,³ come down to posterity. Sackville, who was then Lord Buckhurst, with Sir Charles Sedley and Sir Thomas Ogle, got drunk at the Cock, in Bow-street by Covent-garden, and, going into the balcony, exposed themselves to the populace in very indecent

¹ In the Dedication of his Poems to the Earl's son.

² His mother was Frances Cranfield, daughter of Lionel Cranfield, Earl of Middlesex, by his second wife. The mother of Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham, was Elizabeth Cranfield, daughter of the same nobleman by his first wife.

³ Wood's account of his own Life (ed. Bliss, 1848), p. 137.

postures. At last, as they grew warmer, Sedley stood forth naked and harangued the populace in such profane language that the public indignation was awakened; the crowd attempted to force the door, and, being repulsed, drove in the performers with stones, and broke the windows of the house.

For this misdemeanor they were indicted, and Sedley was fined five hundred pounds: what was the sentence of the others is not known. Sedley employed Killigrew⁴ and another to procure a remission from the King; but (mark the friendship of the dissolute!) they begged the fine for themselves, and exacted it to the last groat.

In 1665 Lord Buckhurst attended the Duke of York as a volunteer in the Dutch war, and was in the battle of June 3rd, when eighteen great Dutch ships were taken, fourteen others were destroyed, and Opdam the admiral, who engaged the Duke, was blown up beside him, with all his crew.

On the day before the battle he is said⁵ to have composed the celebrated song, 'To all you ladies now at land,' with equal tranquillity of mind and promptitude of wit. Seldom any splendid story is wholly true.⁶ I have heard from the late Earl of Orrery,⁷ who was likely to have good hereditary intelligence, that Lord Buckhurst had been a week employed upon it, and only retouched or finished it on the memorable evening. But even this, whatever it may subtract from his facility, leaves him his courage.

He was soon after made a gentleman of the bedchamber, and sent on short embassies to France.⁸

⁴ Henry Killigrew, son of the celebrated Thomas.

⁵ By Prior.

⁶ Pepys is thought to refer to it at a still earlier period:—"2nd January, 1664-5. To my Lord Brouncker's, by appointment, in the Piazza in Covent Garden, where I occasioned much mirth with a ballet I brought with me, made from the seamen at sea to their ladies in town, saying Sir W. Pen, Sir G. Ascue, and Sir J. Lawson made them."

The song is printed (I believe for the first time in any collection of poems) in Lintot's *Miscellany Poems*, 8vo., 1712, and is there called 'A Song, written at sea by the late Earl of Dorset, in the first Dutch War.'

⁷ John, fifth Earl of Orrery (born 1707, died 1762), author of a well-known volume of *Letters on Swift*. Fenton, the poet, had been his tutor.

⁸ One embassy was, as Dryden is said to have called it, "a sleeveless

In 1674 the estate of his uncle, James Cranfield, Earl of Middlesex, came to him by its owner's death, and the title was conferred on him the year after. In 1677 he became, by the death of his father, Earl of Dorset, and inherited the estate of his family.

In 1684, having buried his first wife, of the family of Bagot, who left him no child,⁹ he married a daughter of the Earl of Northampton, celebrated both for beauty and understanding.

He received some favourable notice from King James; but soon found it necessary to oppose the violence of his innovations, and with some other Lords appeared in Westminster Hall to countenance the Bishops at their trial.

As enormities grew every day less supportable, he found it necessary to concur in the Revolution. He was one of those Lords who sat every day in council to preserve the public peace after the King's departure; and, what is not the most illustrious action of his life, was employed to conduct the Princess Anne to Nottingham, with a guard, such as might alarm the populace as they passed with false apprehensions of her danger. Whatever end may be designed, there is always something despicable in a trick.

He became, as may be easily supposed, a favourite of King William, who, the day after his accession, made him lord-chamberlain of the household, and gave him afterwards the Garter. He happened to be among those that were tossed, with the King, in an open boat sixteen hours, in very rough and cold weather, on the coast of Holland. His health afterwards declined; and, on January 29, 1705-6, he died at Bath.¹⁰

errand." Charles II. had become enamoured of Nell Gwyn, with whom Lord Buckhurst was then living, and a short embassy was invented by the King to get rid of his rival.

⁹ She was the widow of the Earl of Falmouth, and is attacked by Lord Mulgrave, in his Essay on Satire, as

A teeming widow, but a barren wife.

There is a fine portrait of her at Althorp. His second wife is among the Kneller beauties at Hampton Court.

¹⁰ He was buried in the Sackville vault, in the church of Wythiam, in