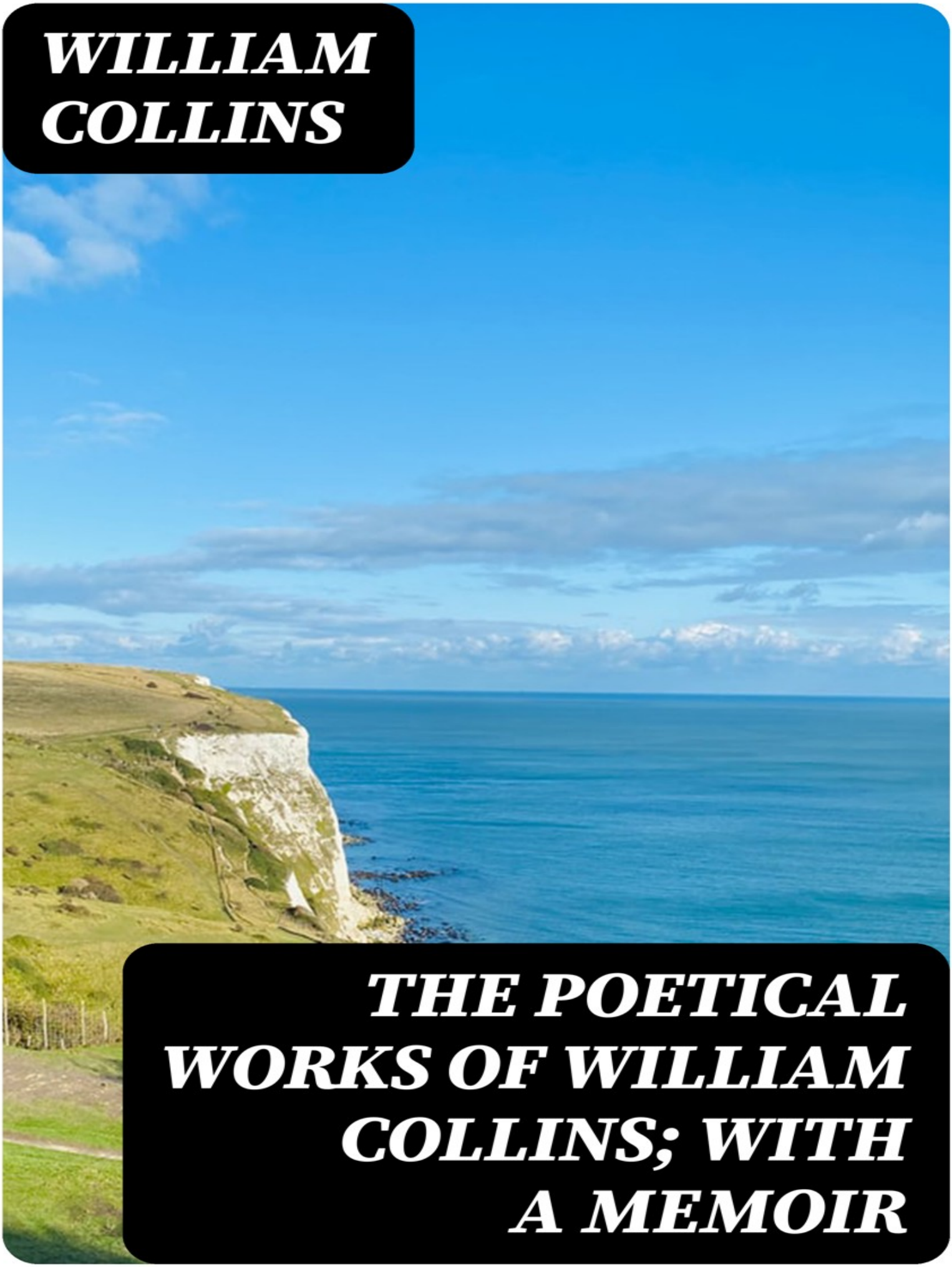
WILLIAM COLLINS



THE POETICAL WORKS OF WILLIAM COLLINS; WITH A MEMOIR

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The Poetical Works of William Collins; With a Memoir

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MEMOIR OF COLLINS.

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> “A Bard,
> Who touched the tenderest notes of Pity’s lyre.”
> HAYLEY.

No one can have reflected on the history of genius without being impressed with a melancholy feeling at the obscurity in which the lives of the poets of our country are, with few exceptions, involved. That they lived, and wrote, and died, comprises nearly all that is known of many, and, of others, the few facts which are preserved are often records of privations, or sufferings, or errors. The cause of the lamentable deficiency of materials for literary biography may, without difficulty, be explained. The lives of authors are seldom marked by events of an unusual character; and they rarely leave behind them the most interesting work a writer could compose, and which would embrace nearly all the important facts in his career, a “History of his Books,” containing vi the motives which produced them, the various incidents respecting their progress, and a faithful account of the bitter disappointment, whether the object was fame or profit, or both, which, in most instances, is the result of his labours. Various motives deter men from writing such a volume; for, though quacks and charlatans readily become auto-biographers, and fill their prefaces with their personal concerns, real merit shrinks from such disgusting egotism, and, flying to the opposite extreme, leaves no authentic

notice of their struggles, its hopes, or its disappointments. Nor is the history of writers to be expected from their contemporaries; because few will venture to anticipate the judgment of posterity, and mankind are usually so isolated in self, and so jealous of others, that neither time nor inclination admits of their becoming the Boswells of all those whose productions excite admiration.

If these remarks be true, surprise cannot be felt, though there is abundance of cause for regret, that little is known of a poet whose merits were not appreciated until after his decease: whose powers were destroyed by a distressing malady at a period of life when literary exertions begin to be rewarded and stimulated by popular applause.

For the facts contained in the following Memoir of Collins, the author is indebted to the researches of others, as his own, which were vii very extensive, were rewarded by trifling discoveries. Dr. Johnson’s Life is well known; but the praise of collecting every particular which industry and zeal could glean belongs to the Rev. Alexander Dyce, the result of whose inquiries may be found in his notes to Johnson’s Memoir, prefixed to an edition of Collins’s works which he lately edited. Those notices are now, for the first time, wove into a Memoir of Collins; and in leaving it to another to erect a fabric out of the materials which he has collected instead of being himself the architect, Mr. Dyce has evinced a degree of modesty which those who know him must greatly lament.

William Collins was born at Chichester, on the 25th of December, 1721, and was baptized in the parish church of

St. Peter the Great, alias Subdeanery in that city, on the first of the following January. He was the son of William Collins, who was then the Mayor of Chichester, where he exercised the trade of a hatter, and lived in a respectable manner. His mother was Elizabeth, the sister of a Colonel Martyn, to whose bounty the poet was deeply indebted.

Being destined for the church, young Collins was admitted a scholar of Winchester College on the 19th of January, 1733, where he was educated by Dr. Burton; and in 1740 he stood first on the list of scholars who were to be received at viii New College. No vacancy, however, occurred, and the circumstance is said by Johnson to have been the original misfortune of his life. He became a commoner of Queen's,[1] whence, on the 29th of July, 1741, he was elected a demy of Magdalen College. During his stay at Queen's he was distinguished for genius and indolence, and the few exercises which he could be induced to write bear evident marks of both qualities. He continued at Oxford until he took his bachelor's degree, and then suddenly left the University, his motive, as he alleged, being that he missed a fellowship, for which he offered himself; but it has been assigned to his disgust at the dulness of a college life, and to his being involved in debt.

On arriving in London, which was either in 1743 or 1744, he became, says Johnson, "a literary adventurer, with many projects in his head and very little money in his pocket." Collins was not without some reputation as an author when he proposed to adopt the most uncertain and deplorable of all professions, that of literature, for a subsistence. Whilst at Winchester school he wrote his Eclogues, and had appeared

before the public in some verses addressed to a lady weeping at her sister's marriage, which were printed in the Gentleman's Magazine, Oct. 1739, when Collins was in his eighteenth year. In January, 1742, he published his Eclogues, under the title of ix "Persian Eclogues;"[2] and, in December, 1743, his "Verses to Sir Thomas Hanmer on his Edition of Shakespeare," appeared. To neither did he affix his name, but the latter was said to be by "a Gentleman of Oxford."

From the time he settled in London, his mind was more occupied with literary projects than with steady application; nor had poesy, for which Nature peculiarly designed him, sufficient attractions to chain his wavering disposition. It is not certain whether his irresolution arose from the annoyance of importunate debtors, or from an original infirmity of mind, or from these causes united. A popular writer[3] has defended Collins from the charge of irresolution, on the ground that it was but "the vacillations of a mind broken and confounded;" and he urges, that "he had exercised too constantly the highest faculties of fiction, and precipitated himself into the dreariness of real life." But this explanation does not account for the want of steadiness which prevented Collins from accomplishing the objects he meditated. His mind was neither "broken nor confounded," nor had he experienced the bitter pangs of neglect, when with the buoyancy of hope, and a full confidence in his extraordinary powers, he threw himself on the town, at the age of twenty-three, x intending to live by the exercise of his talents; but his indecision was then as apparent as at

any subsequent period, so that, in truth, the effect preceded the cause to which it has been assigned.

Mankind are becoming too much accustomed to witness splendid talents and great firmness of mind united in the same person to partake the mistaken sympathy which so many writers evince for the follies or vices of genius; nor will it much longer tolerate the opinion, that the possession of the finest imagination, or the highest poetic capacity, must necessarily be accompanied by eccentricity. It may, indeed, be difficult to convert a poetical temperament into a merchant, or to make the man who is destined to delight or astonish mankind by his conceptions, sit quietly over a ledger; but the transition from poetry to the composition of such works as Collins planned is by no means unnatural, and the abandonment of his views respecting them must, in justice to his memory, be attributed to a different cause.

The most probable reason is, that these works were mere speculations to raise money, and that the idea was not encouraged by the booksellers; but if, as Johnson, who knew Collins well, asserts, his character wanted decision and perseverance, these defects may have been constitutional, and were, perhaps, the germs of the disease which too soon ripened into the most frightful of human xi calamities. Endued with a morbid sensibility, which was as ill calculated to court popularity as to bear neglect; and wanting that stoical indifference to the opinions of the many, which ought to render those who are conscious of the value of their productions satisfied with the approbation of the few; Collins was too impatient of applause, and too anxious to attain perfection, to be a voluminous writer. To plan much rather

than to execute any thing; to commence to-day an ode, to-morrow a tragedy, and to turn on the following morning to a different subject, was the chief occupation of his life for several years, during which time he destroyed the principal part of the little that he wrote. To a man nearly pennyless, such a life must be attended by privations and danger; and he was in the hands of bailiffs, possibly not for the first time, very shortly before he became independent by the death of his maternal uncle, Colonel Martyn. The result proved that his want of firmness and perseverance was natural, and did not arise from the uncertainty or narrowness of his fortune; for being rescued from imprisonment, on the credit of a translation of Aristotle’s Poetics, which he engaged to furnish a publisher, a work, it may be presumed, peculiarly suited to his genius, he no sooner found himself in the possession of money by the death of his relative, than he repaid the bookseller, and abandoned the translation for ever.

From the commencement of his career, Collins was, however, an object for sympathy instead of censure; and though few refuse their compassion to the confirmed lunatic, it is rare that the dreadful state of irresolution and misery, which sometimes exist for years before the fatal catastrophe, receives either pity or indulgence.

In 1747, Collins published his Odes, to the unrivaled splendour of a few of which he is alone indebted for his fame; but neither fame nor profit was the immediate result; and the author of the Ode on the Passions had little reason to expect, from its reception by the public, that it was

destined to live as long as the passions themselves animate or distract the world.

It is uncertain at what time he undertook to publish a volume of Odes in conjunction with Joseph Warton, but the intention is placed beyond dispute by the following letter from Warton to his brother. It is without a date, but it must have been written before the publication of Collins's Odes in 1747, and before the appearance of Dodsley's Museum,[4] as it is evident the Ode to a Lady on the Death of Colonel Ross, which was inserted in that work, was not then in print.

"Dear Tom,

"You will wonder to see my name in an advertisement next week, so I thought I would apprise you of it. The case was this. Collins met me in Surrey, at Guildford races, when I wrote out for him my odes, and he likewise communicated some of his to me; and being both in very high spirits, we took courage, resolved to join our forces, and to publish them immediately. I flatter myself that I shall lose no honor by this publication, because I believe these odes, as they now stand, are infinitely the best things I ever wrote. You will see a very pretty one of Collins's, on the Death of Colonel Ross before Tournay. It is addressed to a lady who was Ross's intimate acquaintance, and who, by the way, is Miss Bett Goddard. Collins is not to publish the odes unless he gets ten guineas for them. I returned from Milford last night, where I left Collins with my mother and sister, and he sets out to-day for London. I must now tell you, that I have sent him your imitation of

Horace’s Blandusian Fountain, to be printed amongst ours, and which you shall own or not, as you think proper. I would not have done this without your consent, but because I think it very poetically and correctly done, and will get you honour. You will let me know what the Oxford critics say. Adieu, dear Tom,

“I am your most affectionate brother,

“J. Warton.”

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Like so many of Collins’s projects this was not executed; but the reason of its failure is unknown.

On the death of Thomson, in August, 1748, Collins wrote an ode to his memory, which is no less remarkable for its beauty as a composition, than for its pathetic tenderness as a memorial of a friend.

The Poet’s pecuniary difficulties were removed in 1749, by the death of his maternal uncle, Lieutenant-Colonel Edmund Martyn, who, after bequeathing legacies to some other relations, ordered the residue of his real and personal estate to be divided between his nephew William Collins, and his nieces Elizabeth and Anne Collins, and appointed the said Elizabeth his executrix, who proved her uncle’s will on the 30th of May, 1749. Collins’s share was, it is said, about two thousand pounds; and, as has been already observed, the money came most opportunely: a greater calamity even than poverty, however, shortly afterwards counterbalanced his good fortune; but the assertion of the writer in the Gentleman’s Magazine, that his mental aberration arose from his having squandered this legacy, appears to be unfounded.

One, and but one, letter of Collins’s has ever been printed; nor has a careful inquiry after others been successful. It is of peculiar interest, as it proves that he wrote an Ode on the Music of the Grecian Theatre, but which is unfortunately xv lost. The honour to which he alludes was the setting his Ode on the Passions to music.

“TO DR. WILLIAM HAYES, PROFESSOR OF MUSIC, OXFORD.

“SIR,

“MR. BLACKSTONE of Winchester some time since informed me of the honour you had done me at Oxford last summer; for which I return you my sincere thanks. I have another more perfect copy of the ode; which, had I known your obliging design, I would have communicated to you. Inform me by a line, if you should think one of my better judgment acceptable. In such case I could send you one written on a nobler subject; and which, though I have been persuaded to bring it forth in London, I think more calculated for an audience in the university. The subject is the Music of the Grecian Theatre; in which I have, I hope naturally, introduced the various characters with which the chorus was concerned, as Œdipus, Medea, Electra, Orestes, etc. etc. The composition too is probably more correct, as I have chosen the ancient tragedies for my models, and only copied the most affecting passages in them.

“In the mean time, you would greatly oblige me by sending the score of the last. If you can get it written, I will readily answer the expense. xvi If you send it with a

copy or two of the ode (as printed at Oxford) to Mr. Clarke, at Winchester, he will forward it to me here. I am, Sir,

"With great respect,

"Your obliged humble servant,

"WILLIAM COLLINS.

"Chichester, Sussex, November 8, 1750."

"P. S. Mr. Clarke past some days here while Mr. Worgan was with me; from whose friendship, I hope, he will receive some advantage."

Soon after this period, the disease which had long threatened to destroy Collins's intellects assumed a more decided character; but for some time the unhappy poet was the only person who was sensible of the approaching calamity. A visit to France was tried in vain; and when Johnson called upon him, on his return, an incident occurred which proves that Collins wisely sought for consolation against the coming wreck of his faculties, from a higher and more certain source than mere human aid. Johnson says, "he paid him a visit at Islington, where he was then waiting for his sister, whom he had directed to meet him: there was then nothing of disorder discernible in his mind by any but himself; but he had withdrawn from study, and travelled with no other book than an English Testament, such xvii as children carry to the school: when his friend took it into his hand, out of curiosity to see what companion a man of letters had chosen, 'I have but one book,' said Collins, 'but that is the best.'"

To this circumstance Hayley beautifully alludes in his epitaph on him:

He, “in reviving reason’s lucid hours,
Sought on *one* book his troubled mind to rest,
And rightly deem’d the Book of God the best.”

A journey to Bath proved as useless as the one to France; and in 1754, he went to Oxford for change of air and amusement, where he stayed a month. It was on this occasion that a friend, whose account of him will be given at length, saw him in a distressing state of restraint under the walls of Merton College. From the paucity of information respecting Collins, the following letters are extremely valuable; and though the statements are those of his friends, they may be received without suspicion of partiality, because they are free from the high colouring by which friendship sometimes perverts truth.

The first of the letters in question was printed in the Gentleman’s Magazine:

“Jan. 20, 1781.

“Mr. Urban,

“William Collins, the poet, I was intimately acquainted with, from the time that he came to reside at Oxford. He was the son of a tradesman xviii in the city of Chichester, I think a hatter; and being sent very young to Winchester school, was soon distinguished for his early proficiency, and his turn for elegant composition. About the year 1740, he came off from that seminary first upon roll,[5] and was entered a commoner of Queen’s college. There, no vacancy offering for New College, he remained a year or two, and then was