

A Cowper 'First Edition': Sequel to an Auction at the Museum

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At the Cowper and Newton Museum sale at Olney on 24 April 2010 I purchased item 44 with a view to rebinding it. The catalogue entry for the book was as follows:

Cowper's Poems 1815 Edition 'Fake' 1st edition, with title page giving date of 1782, date of true first edition. Illustrated with engravings carrying date of 1815. Remarkable gilded and patterned fore-edge. Full leather binding, gilded tooling marked but restorable. Back cover detached but repairable. pp i-x of Memoir at back missing.

On detailed examination it was evident that the book had to be re-backed and the boards re-attached but the text block with its gilded and decorated edges was sound apart from some foxing.

None of this, however, explained the wrong date on the title page, why some of the preliminary pages were missing, or why pp xi-xxvi had been bound in at the back whereas pp xxvii-xxxii (those containing Newton's preface) had been placed at the front. Looking carefully at the title page, one could see that the paper on which it was printed was different from that of the main text, which led to the conclusion that the original title page had been lost along with the first pages of the memoir, and a simple new title page with the phoney date and without the publisher's name had been bound in. This was further reinforced by the fact that Newton's preface (p xxvii) starts on signature 'E' whereas the prelims signatures 'C' and 'D'; are now at the back, and signatures 'A' and 'B' are missing.

The pages had been heavily, and somewhat unevenly, cropped but the publishers' name still appears on some of the plates with dates of 1814 and 1815, the publishers being Nuttall, Fisher & Co., Liverpool. All this suggests it is the edition mentioned by Norma Russell as item 114 in her bibliography of Cowper's works, but that this copy had been bound later in the nineteenth Century; by that time the first two sections had been lost and the binder attempted to conceal the fact by binding what was left of the memoir by the Rev. David M'Nicoll at the back where the loss might pass unnoticed by someone interested only in the poems.

When all is said and done, however, I now have a good reading copy that is nice to hold, opens well and is set in a typeface that is easy to read.