Some Unpublished Verse by Charles Tennyson Turner

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The recent republication of the poems of Charles Tennyson Turner, noted elsewhere in this issue, will be welcomed by many in the county. The landscapes of the 1830 sonnets are invariably the landscapes of his Somersby childhood - the Rectory garden and the enclosing hills - while for some of his finest sonnets published from 1864 onwards, the impulse is his own garden at Grasby, the church he so lovingly restored or the surrounding fields.

The young Charles Tennyson was ordained in 1832 and, after holding the curacy of Tealby under the uneasy patronage of his grandfather, George Tennyson, he inherited in 1835 the advowson and living of Grasby from his great-uncle, the Rev. Samuel Turner. A condition of the bequest was that Tennyson should abandon the patronymic and adopt the name of Turner. He thereupon moved into Samuel Turner’s old house in the Market Place, Caistor, some three miles from Grasby, and became, according to his brother Alfred, ‘the first man in the place, an owner of books and pictures, a water closet with a recumbent Venus in it, and a house with a stone front’.¹ The building still stands.

The family attorney, Charles Robert Haddelsey (1791-1855), had similarly benefited by Samuel Turner’s will, having inherited a house, also in Caistor Market Place, which he had hitherto held on lease. This bequest is not as surprising as it at first appears, for Haddelsey was Samuel Turner’s step-son. His father, Robert Haddelsey, landlord of the George Inn, had married the renowned beauty Barbara Bullock of Goxhill in 1790. On Robert’s death, Samuel, unable to resist her charms, married the widow and they appear to have lived happily until her death at the age of sixty-three in 1827.

By then Charles Robert Haddelsey had already married. His eldest son, George (1824-1897) was to carry on the family business and his eldest daughter, SusannahJune, born in 1822, was to become a close friend of the Somersby Tennysons. It was to Susannah (or Susan, as she was always called) that Cecilia Tennyson expressed her vexation over her brother Charles’s dilatory letter-writing:

Susanne wilt thou tell my brother, otherwise the Grasby Vicar, to Pen to me immediately and that I greatly wonder not having heard from that gentleman. Tell him to write on the instant (my hand trembles with passion) if he wishes me to remain a sister to him. Mind that thou dost tell him this, giving him at the same time a hearty shake even whilst he is most enjoying himself on the sofa - with his books - listening to sweet airs and songs. Tell him his promises mean nothing. Make him feel the cruelty of his conduct. I leave it to thee to cut him to the quick. In his house fall on him telling him at the same time that you do it not of yourself but from the orders of an ill used sister²

It was to Susan too that Charles (now Turner) addressed a charming piece of light verse, hitherto unpublished, in a letter³ typical of his whimsical nature. It is postmarked

10 February 1837. Susan, at this time in her fifteenth year, had evidently been sent to France for the improvement of her French:

When, Susan, wilt thou cross again
With homeward heart, the heaving main?
And bring sweet pleasure, gone with thee
To France, back with thee o’er the sea?
England - and that small English town
On which the chalky wolds look down
That slope unto the “Humber loud,”
Caistor, the primitive and proud,
Demands thee back and fain would swear
A good sound oath at St Omer
For keeping from its views so long
A maid in heart so true, in head so strong.
They say that when the cat’s away
(The proverb old) the mice will play.
So all the souls, at whom you laugh’d
Are safe from your satirick shaft;
Those souls, I mean, who fear’d the H
And had not wind enough to fetch
That most impracticable sigh
That stands midway 'twixt G and I.
The eternal foes of aspiration
Are keeping now their long vacation -
And hunting out, like hound or setter,
*(Fourteen hundred to one letter)
This jaded sound, without the fear
Of Susan Jane sly-smiling near.

*The population of Caistor or thereabouts. (Turner’s note).

This vignette of Caistor in the 1830s continues:

Are there at St Omer people as famous for provincial French as the Caistortites for provincial English? But I must remember that you have been so long away that perhaps Caistor seems thrice lovely to you now - perhaps all its inhabitants seem angels with silver tongues and even the yelping curs of its market place a most tuneful set: but you must recollect how you used to quiz the want of this useful letter amongst us . . . We have no carnival at Caistor, but the dear old football was kicked at my window on Shrove-Tuesday and made a great mark but did not come through or I should have kept it and refused to return it.

While far far weightier issues and more melancholy thoughts occupied him all his life, it is evident from Turner’s sonnets that this wry, child-like humour never fully left him.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 170.
3. To clarify the sense I have modernised the punctuation of the verse. This letter and the above are from the Tennyson Research Centre Collection, Central Reference Library, Lincoln, by courtesy of Lord Tennyson and Lincolnshire Library Service.

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