

THOMAS CHATTERTON

Selected Poems

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY GREVEL LINDOP

LB



ROUTLEDGE



SELECTED POEMS

THOMAS CHATTERTON was born in Bristol in 1752. His father, a schoolmaster, died shortly after his birth and his mother lived by running a school and taking in sewing. An unhappy, withdrawn child who had been expelled from school, Chatterton taught himself to write and draw from old manuscripts that he had found his mother tearing up as waste paper. In 1760 he was sent to a Bristol charity school intended to prepare poor children for employment or apprenticeship. At this time he first began to write 'medieval' poetry. In 1767 Chatterton was apprenticed to John Lambert, a Bristol attorney, and began to widen his circle of readers, forging medieval manuscripts to sell to local patrons. Encouraged by his success, he forced Lambert to release him from his apprenticeship on 14 April 1770, and left Bristol for London a few weeks later. He managed to write and publish his work for the first few months, but payments were too small and irregular for him to live on. He moved to cheaper lodgings, and too proud to admit failure and accept help from relatives, killed himself on 24 August 1770 by drinking arsenic.

GREVEL LINDOP was born in Liverpool (UK) in 1948 and educated at Oxford. He lives in Manchester, where he was Professor of Romantic Studies and British Academy Research Reader at Manchester University. His *Selected Poems* were published in 2000. Grevel Lindop's prose publications include *The Opium-Eater: A Life of Thomas De Quincey* (1981), *A Literary Guide to the Lake District* (1993), and *The Path and the Palace: Reflections on the Nature of Poetry* (1997). His editorial work includes the Robert Graves centenary edition of *The White Goddess*, and *The Works of Thomas De Quincey* (21 volumes, in progress).

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FyfieldBooks take their name from the Fyfield elm in Matthew Arnold's 'Scholar Gypsy' and 'Thyrsis'. The tree stood not far from the village where the series was originally devised in 1971.

*Roam on! The light we sought is shining still.
Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill,
Our Scholar travels yet the loved hill-side*

from 'Thyrsis'

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CONTENTS

	<i>page</i>
PREFACE	6
INTRODUCTION	
I <i>The Poet</i>	7
II <i>The Poetry</i>	14
III <i>The Technicalities of Rowley</i>	18
IV <i>Chatterton's Reputation</i>	21
V <i>The Text and Editorial Matter</i>	23
ACKNOWLEDGED POEMS	
<i>Apostate Will</i>	25
<i>To Horace Walpole</i>	26
from <i>Journal 6th</i>	27
from <i>Elegy to the Memory of Mr. Thomas Phillips</i>	30
<i>The Defence</i>	33
<i>A Bacchanalian</i>	35
<i>To Miss Hoyland</i>	36
from <i>February: An Elegy</i>	37
<i>The Art of Puffing</i>	39
<i>On the Immortality of the Soul</i>	40
ROWLEY POEMS	
from <i>Ælla</i>	42
<i>An Excelente Balade of Charitie</i>	73
from <i>The Parlyamente of Sprytes</i>	76
<i>Eclogue the Third</i>	78
<i>The Worlde</i>	82
‘ <i>There was a Broder of Orderys Blacke</i> ’	85
‘ <i>There was a Broder of Orderys White</i> ’	85
<i>The Gouler's Requiem</i>	86
<i>Onn Johne a Dalbenie</i>	87

NOTES	88
APPENDIX A : ‘ <i>Chatterton’s Last Verses</i> ’	94
APPENDIX B : Chatterton’s Will	94

PREFACE

My debts to the chief Chatterton scholars will be obvious to the reader. My introduction and notes rest heavily upon Skeat’s edition of Chatterton’s *Poetical Works* (London, 1875), which I have also used as the basis for the text of the acknowledged poems. E. H. W. Meyerstein’s *Life of Thomas Chatterton* (London, 1930) was, of course, invaluable. Donald S. Taylor’s edition of Chatterton’s *Complete Works* (Oxford, 1971), which appeared whilst I was at work on this selection, provided much-needed factual information and a text for the Rowley poems against which I was able to check my own inadequate text. Taylor’s splendid volumes provide a fitting monument for Chatterton, and it is good to be able unreservedly to recommend them to readers who wish to know more of Chatterton’s work.

I am grateful to the staff of the English Faculty Library, Oxford, for their help in checking some elusive facts; to Rachel Laird for constant encouragement, and advice on the organisation of the book; and to Michael Schmidt for confirming my belief that the job was worth doing.

The selection is dedicated, as I think it could only be, to the memory of Thomas Chatterton.

Manchester October 21, 1971

GREVEL LINDOP

INTRODUCTION

I THE POET

Thomas Chatterton was born in Bristol on November 20, 1752. His father, who died shortly before the poet's birth, had been a schoolmaster and sub-chanter at the Church of St. Mary Redcliff; his mother, who was then twenty-one years old, lived by keeping a 'dame-school' and taking in sewing.

These were not auspicious beginnings; and indeed, throughout his early childhood Chatterton showed no signs of talent. He was regarded as little better than an idiot until he was about six and a half years old, because he would learn nothing, refused to play with other children, and spent most of his time brooding in silence. He was expelled from his first school as a dullard.

When all allowance has been made for partiality on the part of those who knew Chatterton and supplied anecdotes to the biographers in the years after his death, it still appears that he underwent a considerable transformation in his seventh year. The story goes that one day he found his mother tearing up for waste paper some old music folios which had been brought home from the church some years previously by his father for use as sewing-patterns, bookbindings and the like. According to his mother, Thomas 'fell in love' with the illuminated capitals and, his interest once aroused, his mother soon taught him to read with the aid of the manuscript. If the story can be trusted, it illustrates vividly both Chatterton's instinctive delight in medieval art and the philistinism of his surroundings.

At all events, his reading progressed from the old folios to a black-letter Bible (his sister remarked many years later, in an odd phrase that has the authentic ring of Chatterton's splendid obstinacy, that 'he always objected to read in a small book') and thence to any books he could obtain. At this period he is said to have been intensely proud, and given to telling small lies to save himself

inconvenience. He spent a great deal of his time locked in the attic, where he would write and draw for hours together.

In August 1760 he began attending Colston's Hospital, a Bristol charity-school which formed probably the worst intellectual environment he could have had. Colston's was virtually an elementary business-school which aimed to teach its pupils the bare minimum required to get them an apprenticeship or place as a junior clerk. It had been founded in 1708 by Edward Colston, a bachelor business-man whose often-repeated comment on his single state had been 'Every helpless widow is my wife, and distressed orphans my children'. This Dickensian personage had left behind him a school run like a prison, where the pupils were tonsured like monks and suspected leanings towards religious non-conformity were punishable by expulsion.

Chatterton's behaviour there seems to have alternated between delinquency and sullenness. His only recorded comment on the school was that 'he could not learn so much at school as he could at home, for they had not books enough there'. His mother had done her best for him, but the school proved to be the first of a series of disastrously stultifying milieux which certainly contributed to Chatterton's tragedy.

When he was ten, he began to write poetry. At first he produced religious verses, but he soon developed a satirical vein: the poem *Apostate Will*, included in this selection, was written when he was eleven. At about this time also he made friends with Thomas Phillips, a pupil-teacher at the school who also wrote poetry. Phillips, several years Chatterton's senior, encouraged him; but it seems clear that the younger boy was greatly superior to the elder in intelligence and often became impatient with him.

It is through Phillips that we catch our first glimpse of Chatterton as literary forger, for it seems that in 1764, before he was twelve, Chatterton one day presented Phillips with a 'medieval' poem, written on parchment with dull ink and in barely legible calligraphy. The parchment was singed, and cut about the edges.

Apparently Phillips accepted the poem as a medieval manuscript, but lost interest in it after some unsuccessful attempts to read it and to clarify the letters by retracing them with his own pen. Chatterton claimed to have 'found' the parchment, and presumably had no motive in making it other than to fool his dull friend. But it was a dangerous precedent.

In 1767, when he was nearly fifteen, Chatterton left school and was apprenticed to John Lambert, an attorney. It was his first step into the business world, an environment which he found almost as oppressive as Colston's Hospital.

Bristol at this time was an overcrowded, bustling industrial city crammed into a set of streets and buildings which had changed little since the middle ages. It was, in fact, one of the places where the modern world was coming into existence. The middle classes of Bristol were well known for their ostentatious materialism and cultural obtuseness, and the men with whom Chatterton came into contact through his work at Lambert's, and whom he seems to have tried to use as patrons, were entirely incapable of appreciating his gifts.

The first of this sorry procession was Henry Burgum, partner in the firm of 'Burgum and Catcott, Pewterers and Worm- [i.e. screw-] Makers'. Burgum was a pleasant enough man, but uneducated and socially ambitious, attempting to conceal his plebeian manners and speech under an imperfect veneer of gentility. He befriended Chatterton, probably with some condescension, and so became his second dupe. Chatterton mentioned to Burgum one day that he had discovered an old pedigree showing the noble descent and heraldic achievements of Burgum's family. He soon produced the document, artificially 'aged', and (probably to Chatterton's surprise) Burgum was entirely taken in. The hoax was discovered only when Burgum sent the pedigree to the Royal College of Heralds for authentication.

Meanwhile, Chatterton was not proving a satisfactory apprentice. Set to the drudgery of copying legal precedents, he whiled