

Classic Poetry Series

John Cunningham
- poems -

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John Cunningham(1729-1773)

John Cunningham was a Dublin born playwright, poet and actor, who spent much of his life in, and according to Allan, "whose name and fame will for ever be identified with Newcastle."

His parents came from a modest background of Scottish descent, but had won the lottery. Soon after, however, they went bankrupt and their social status diminished. This affected Cunningham, forcing him to leave Drogheda Grammar School after his parents' wealth was lost.

Early on, the stage and acting attracted Cunningham. He wrote his first play at 17, called "Love in a mist", performed in Dublin.

The play was later performed at Newcastle, where Cunningham settled, working as a member of the local travelling drama company. He also befriended the owners of the Newcastle Chronicle, and supplemented his income buy writing articles for publication.

Cunningham gave his last performance in Darlington on 20 June 1773. He then returned to Newcastle, became ill, and died on 18 September 1773 at the age of 44, at his home in Union Street, Newcastle. He was buried at St John's Churchyard.

A Landscape

Now that summer's ripen'd bloom
Frolics where the winter frown'd,
Stretch'd upon these banks of broom,
We command the landscape round.

Nature in the prospect yields
Humble dales and mountains bold,
Meadows, woodlands, heaths-and fields
Yellow'd o'er with waving gold.

Goats upon that frowning steep
Fearless with their kidlings browse;
Here a flock of snowy sheep,
There an herd of motley cows.

On the uplands ev'ry glade
Brightens in the blaze of day;
O'er the vales the sober shade
Softens to an ev'ning gray.

Where the rill by slow degrees
Swells into a crystal pool,
Shaggy rocks and shelving trees
Shoot to keep the waters cool.

Shiver'd by a thunderstroke
From the mountain's misty ridge,
O'er the brook a ruin'd oak
Near the farmhouse forms a bridge.

On her breast the sunny beam
Glitters in meridian pride,
Yonder as the virgin stream
Hastens to the restless tide.

Where the ships by wanton gales
Waft'd o'er the green waves run,
Sweet to see their swelling sails
Whiten'd by the laughing sun.

High upon the daisy'd hill,
Rising from the slope of trees,
How the wings of yonder mill
Labour in the busy breeze!-

Cheerful as a summer's morn,
Bouncing from her loaded pad,
Where the maid presents her corn,
Smirking to the miller's lad.

O'er the green a festal throng
Gambols in fantastic trim
As the full cart moves along:
Hearken!-'tis the harvest hymn.

Linnets on the crowded sprays
Chorus-and the woodlarks rise,
Soaring with a song of praise
Till the sweet notes reach the skies.

Torrents in extended sheets
Down the cliffs dividing break;
'Twixt the hills the water meets,
Settling in a silver lake.

From his languid flocks the swain,
By the sunbeams sore opprest,
Plunging on the wat'ry plain,
Ploughs it with his glowing breast.

Where the mantling willows nod
From the green bank's slopy side,
Patient, with his well-thrown rod,
Many an angler breaks the tide.

On the isles, with osiers drest,
Many a fair-plum'd halcyon breeds;
Many a wild bird hides her nest,
Cover'd in yon crackling reeds.

Fork-tail'd prattlers, as they pass

To their nestlings in the rock,
Darting on the liquid glass,
Seem to kiss the mimic'd flock.

Where the stone cross lifts its head,
Many a saint and pilgrim hoar
Up the hill was wont to tread
Barefoot in the days of yore.

Guardian of a sacred well,
Arch'd beneath yon rev'rend shades,
Whilome in that shatter'd cell
Many a hermit told his beads.

Sultry mists surround the heath
Where the Gothic dome appears,
O'er the trembling groves beneath
Tott'ring with a load of years.

Turn to the contrasted scene,
Where, beyond these hoary piles,
Gay upon the rising green,
Many an Attic building smiles.

Painted gardens-grots-and groves,
Intermingling shade and light,
Lengthen'd vistas, green alcoves,
Join to give the eye delight.

Hamlets-villages, and spires,
Scatter'd on the landscape lie,
Till the distant view retires,
Closing in an azure sky.

John Cunningham

A Pastoral In Three Parts

Day.

In the barn the tenant cock,
Close to Partlet perch'd on high,
Briskly crows, (the shepherd's clock!)
Jocund that morning's nigh.
Swiftly, from the mountain's brow,
Shadows, nurs'd by night, retire;
And the peeping sun-beam, now
Paints with gold the village spire.

Philomel forsakes the thorn,
Plaintive where she prates at night:
And the lark to meet the morn,
Soars beyond the shepherd's sight.

From the low-roof'd cottage ridge,
See the chatt'ring swallow spring;
Darting through the one-arch'd bridge,
Quick she drips her dappled wing.

Now the pine-tree's waving top
Gently greets the morning gale;
Kidlings, now, begin to crop
Daisies, on the dewy dale.

From the balmy sweets, uncloy'd,
(Restless till her task be done),
Now the busy bee's employ'd,
Sipping dew before the sun.

Trickling through the crevic'd rock,
Where the limpid stream distils,
Sweet refreshment waits the flock,
When 'tis sun-drove from the hills.

Colin's for the promis'd corn
(Ere the harvest hopes are ripe)
Anxious; - whilst the huntsman's horn,
Boldly sounding, drowns his pipe.

Sweet - O sweet, the warbling throng,
On the white emblossom'd spray!
Nature's universal song
Echoes to the rising day.

Noon.

Fervid on the glitt'ring flood,
Now the noontide radiance glows:
Drooping o'er its infant bud,
Not a dew-drop's left the rose.

By the brook the shepherd dines,
From the fierce meridian heat,
Shelter'd by the branching pines,
Pendant o'er his grassy seat.

Now the flock forsakes the glade,
Where uncheck'd the sun-beams fall,
Sure to find a pleasing shade
By the ivy'd abbey wall.

Echo, in her airy round,
O'er the river, rock, and hill,
Cannot catch a single sound,
Save the clack of yonder mill.

Cattle court the zephyrs bland,
Where the streamlet wanders cool;
Or with languid silence stand
Midway in the marshy pool.

But from mountain, dell, or stream,
Not a flutt'ring zephyr springs;
Fearful lest the noontide beam
Scorch its soft, its silken wings.

Not a leaf has leave to stir,
Nature's lull'd - serene - and still
Quiet e'en the shepherd's cur,
Sleeping on the heath-clad hill.

Languid is the landscape round,
Till the fresh descending show'r,
Grateful to the thirsty ground,
Raises ev'ry fainting flow'r.

Now the hill - the hedge - are green,
Now the warblers' throats in tune;
Blithsome is the verdant scene,
Brighten'd by the beams of Noon!

Evening.

O'er the heath the heifer strays
Free - (the furrow'd task is done),
Now the village windows blaze,
Burnish'd by the setting sun.

Now he sets behind the hill,
Sinking from a golden sky:
Can the pencil's mimic skill
Copy the refulgent dye?

Trudging as the ploughmen go,
(To the smoaking hamlet bound,)
Giant-like their shadows grow
Lengthen'd o'er the level ground.

Where the rising forest spreads
Shelter for the lordly dome!
To their high-built airy beds,
See the rooks returning home?

As the lark, with vary'd tune,
Carols to the ev'ning loud;
Mark the mild resplendent moon,
Breaking through a parted cloud!

Now the hermit owlet peeps
From the barn or twisted brake;
And the blue mist slowly creeps,
Curling on the silver lake.

As the trout in speckled pride,

Playful from its bosom springs;
To the banks a ruffled tide
Verges in successive rings.

Tripping through the silken grass
O'er the path-divided dale,
Mark the rose-complexion'd lass
With her well-pois'd milking pail!

Linnets with unnumber'd notes,
And the cuckoo bird with two,
Tuning sweet their mellow throats,
Bid the setting sun adieu.

John Cunningham

Content

O'er moorlands and mountains, rude, barren, and bare,
As wilder'd and weary'd I roam,
A gentle young shepherdess sees my despair,
And leads me-o'er lawns-to her home,
Yellow sheaves from rich Ceres her cottage had crown'd,
Green rushes were strew'd on her floor,
Her casement sweet woodbines crept wantonly round,
And deck'd the sod seats at her door.

We sat ourselves down to a cooling repast:
Fresh fruits! and she cull'd me the best:
While, thrown from my guard by some glances she cast,
Love slily stole into my breast!
I told my soft wishes; she sweetly reply'd,
(Ye virgins, her voice was divine!)
I've rich ones rejected, and great ones deny'd,
But take me, fond shepherd-I'm thine.

Her air was so modest, her aspect so meek!
So simple, yet sweet, were her charms!
I kiss'd the ripe roses that glow'd on her cheek,
And lock'd the lov'd maid in my arms!
Now jocund together we tend a few sheep,
And if, by yon prattler, the stream,
Reclin'd on her bosom, I sink into sleep,
Her image still softens my dream.

Together we range o'er the slow-rising hills,
Delighted with pastoral views,
Or rest on the rock whence the streamlet distils,
And point out new themes for my muse.
To pomp or proud titles she ne'er did aspire,
The damsel's of humble descent;
The cottager, Peace, is well known for her fire,
And shepherds have nam'd her Content.

John Cunningham

The Hawthorn Bower

Palemnon, in the hawthorn bower,
With fond impatience lay,
He counted every anxious hour
That stretch'd the tedious day.

The rosy dawn, Pastora nam'd,
And vow'd that she'd be kind;
But ah! the setting sun proclaim'd
That woman's vows are-wind.

The fickle sex, the boy defy'd!
And swore, in terms profane,
That beauty in her brightest pride
Might sue to him in vain.

When Delia from the neighb'ring glade
Appear'd in all her charms,
Each angry vow Palemon made
Was lost in Delia's arms.

The lovers had not long reclin'd
Before Pastora came;
'Inconstancy,' she cry'd, 'I find
In every heart's the same.

'For young Alexis sigh'd and press'd,
With such bewitching power,
I quite forgot the wishing guest
That waited in the bower.'

John Cunningham

The Sheep And The Bramble-Bush

A Thick-Twisted brake, in the time of a storm,
Seem'd kindly to cover a sheep:
So snug, for a while, he lay shelter'd and warm,
It quietly sooth'd him asleep.

The clouds are now scatter'd-the winds are at peace,
The sheep to his pasture inclin'd;
But ah! the fell thicket lays hold of his fleece,
His coat is left forfeit behind.

My friend, who the thicket of law never try'd,
Consider before you get in;
Tho' judgment and sentence are pass'd on your side,
By Jove, you'll be fleec'd to your skin.

John Cunningham