

WILLIAM COOK OF SALEM, MASS.

PREACHER, POET, ARTIST AND PUBLISHER

BY LAWRENCE W. JENKINS

THE booklover who is able to scan the well-filled bookshelves of some old-time Salem family is reasonably sure of finding tucked away in some odd corner a small bundle of the curious publications of the Reverend "Billy" Cook. These are pamphlets each of some twenty-five or more pages, bound in manila wrappers, and usually having on the front cover some extraordinary illustration cut in wood by the author-publisher. Between 1852 and 1876 Cook produced about forty different titles, writing the text, engraving the numerous wood-cut illustrations and, after laboriously printing the result, proceeded to peddle his pamphlets about the streets in true chapman fashion. Everybody bought them and laughed—behind his back—for Cook was a gentle soul, an educated gentleman whom unkind Nature had failed to supply with a complete and well-balanced headpiece. His verse he furnished with feet of different length and his illustrations gave small evidence of a knowledge of the elements of perspective; but many of his figure studies compare quite favorably with recent manifestations of impressionistic art. The sale of his pamphlets, however, supplemented his meagre earnings from tutoring and kept him from actual want. Everybody about town spoke of him as "Billy Cook," but always addressed him respectfully. A call on Mr. Cook, at his house on Charter Street, was one of the things to do in Salem, especially by parties of young people in search of mild diversion, for at that time golf and tennis were

unknown and croquet was the most exciting out-door sport. His "Gallery of Art" always furnished a little harmless amusement which would be paid for by the silver exchanged for his pamphlets, which he always sold at such times. In fact he was something of a local celebrity—one of Salem's "characters."

"I was born on the 7th of March, 1807," he wrote, "and my father was a sea captain and furnished me a liberal education. I fitted for college at Phillips Academy, Andover, then entered Yale College where I spent two years. I also spent two years at Washington, now Trinity, College, Hartford. Owing to the feeble condition of my health, resulting from a severe attack of typhus fever, I left college but studied for the ministry with the late Bishop Griswold, Rector of St. Peter's church, Salem. I never entered the ministry but, finding that I had a decided taste for art and literature, I adopted an independent position."

William Cook was a son of Capt. William Cook, an experienced navigator, who died in 1820 on board the brig *Rotund* while on her passage from Santiago de Cuba. At the time he was one of the oldest commanders sailing out of Salem. As a young man William Cook gave evidence of considerable ability and some literary genius. The melancholy and eccentricity that appeared in later years may have resulted from the severe attack of typhus fever that caused him to leave college. He certainly possessed ability in some directions, for the private school that he conducted was attended by children from some of Salem's best families. After this was given up he tutored for some time, teaching Greek, Latin and mathematics with considerable skill. His theological studies ended with a great disappointment. It is said that he was admitted to orders; at any rate he was ordained a deacon and not long after received permission to read a sermon by an approved author. This was in the pulpit of St. Peter's church, Salem, and misfortune overtook him, for he unhappily began to read an

ordination sermon and discovered his mistake too late and was obliged to read it through to the amusement of the congregation and the mortification of the Rector. This incident began and ended his clerical career. But he could not wholly resign the ambition of his life and afterwards frequently conducted religious services in his own house, preaching to his immediate family and such neighbors and acquaintances as might attend from curiosity. At one time he built a small wooden building on top of one of the highest hills in the Great Pastures, which he frequented for prayer and exhortation, and when this building was burned he attempted to replace it with one of stone which was never finished. His religion seems to have consisted of emotion and ecstasy and lacked thought and well-ordered expression. This mental exaltation was frequently apparent in later years when visitors called at his house to inspect his "Gallery of Art." Explaining the subjects of his painting his eyes would dilate and he would speak most earnestly and with great fluency. Sometimes he would recite with much fervor long passages from his poems.

It is a curious fact that his religious aberrations in no way affected his mathematical understanding. For many years he had students in arithmetic and book-keeping which he taught successfully and he was well informed in matters of business accounting and unusually sensible and practical in his consideration of such matters. The story is told that a sum of money having been loaned to him at the regular rate of interest, but without security, many years went by without any tender of interest and finally the gentleman who had made the loan mentioned to Mr. Cook that he would waive the interest if Mr. Cook could see his way clear to pay the principal. This he readily agreed to and the next day appeared with a savings bank book which he indorsed over to Mr. H. When the latter came to look over the book he found that the

interest on the loan had been deposited at each period as it became due and that it, together with the accumulated interest, now equalled the principal. Mr. Cook lived with a sister and a brother, a tailor by trade, and they always seemed to accept him at his own valuation as a man of attainments.

During middle life "he experienced a disappointment in his affections which produced melancholy" and one of the results was his attention to authorship and his conception of art. The author always seeks a printer; but William Cook could not afford to pay for his fame in the printed page, so he built a small hand-lever press, bought a few pounds of battered type from a local newspaper office and began work on a small book which he at last published under the title of "Hope," being Number I of "The Eucleia." This was followed by "The Olive Grove," "The Ploughboy," "Fremont," "Chestnut Street," and many others.

The press on which these books were printed in general appearance resembled an old-fashioned high-back hand-organ. Unfortunately it is no more. The thoughtless administrator of his estate broke it up and threw it out of the window. Cook possessed only type enough to set one page at a time. The many inserted plates were printed from wood-blocks of birch or maple, which he engraved with an ordinary jack-knife, and usually each impression was touched up with a lead pencil. No one but a man of tenacious purpose and great patience could have produced finished results with such a handicap.

Cook's books treat of a great variety of subjects and his literary style is as varied as his themes. Some are grave, some are gay, some descriptive and some historic. Some contain odd translations from the Greek and Latin which found their way into the hands of learned men who, we are told, marvelled at Cook's scholarship and "were forced to admit that he had brought out a meaning in the words never discovered before." His pamphlet on Chestnut Street, Salem,

is of some interest and has a certain historical value because it preserves pictures of houses along this residential street, well known for its excellent architecture. All of these houses are yet standing and it is possible to recognize many of their representations in Cook's drawings without too great a strain on the imagination.

His poem on Chestnut Street begins with a "Cantus Latinus" of three lines and is followed by "Notes," in which the author records that the illustrations were sketched while "winter had a jubilee—the mercury in thermometers often sixteen degrees below zero—therefore no foliage was seen." He further remarks that the "Poem" was composed upon the invitation of "friends, ladies and gentlemen," and that the First Canto was read in Chestnut Street "at a June-sunset" in 1856. It appears that this event took place on the steps of No. 34 which he had pre-empted without asking permission of the owners. Quite a crowd collected and after he had finished reading he offered copies of his book for sale with gratifying results.

The following gem from Canto Second of this literary effort by Cook may be accepted as an excellent example of his verse. It will be noted that he most skillfully incorporates the names of those who live in Chestnut Street.

"Surely 'tis not wrong in my lay
A few words for Dunlap to say.
As lamps burn not without a wick,
'Tis well to have a good Chadwick;
Thus the light glimmering not
Blends with historic Endicott.
Of Williams and Hodges to speak
From bright themes 'tis for one we seek.
Where morn shakes her bright fleecy locks
At elm-shade-entrance dwells a Cox,
Fenollossa to his song-glee
Wooded his Lady-Love Silsbee,
Safford with the grace of martial folks
And Gardner classic cheer these walks.

Of those who have to the grave gone
 Remembered is good Robinson,
 We also to song-strain bring
 The late departed Lady King,
 In respect for every one,
 Thus has this my poem flowed on."

Another of his poems—"The Ploughboy"—which was published in several parts, was not lacking in length nor in variety of topic. He draws upon all the world for his facts and illustrations, not forgetting the Kansas emigration, the Jewett Festival at Rowley, the Pickering homestead in Salem and the Bunker Hill monument, thus making "The Ploughboy" rank high among the "curiosities of literature." Of Cupid he writes:

"Some folks call him a boy with wings,
 And very light they say,
 One that does some curious things,
 And then he flies away.
 I think he must be more than boy,
 Or a fading flower,
 For he does greatest wits employ,
 Swayed by his power."

As the author was a bachelor, of mature years, this picture of the blind God who makes so much mischief in the world, must be considered as entirely unprejudiced.

Cook viewed with respect his literary audience and made frequent use of Latin and French phrases. His English, however, was sometimes puzzling and leads one to exclaim with Sam Slick, Esq., when conversing with the Yorkshireman: "Hullo! What in nature is this? Is it him that can't speak English, or me that can't understand?" One thing is certain; Cook's verse strongly resembles poetry in one respect: that each printed line always begins with a capital letter. "My rhythm is original and varied to suit my taste," said Cook.

From illustrating books it was but a step for him to try his hand at portraiture, and even landscapes, in oil

and when he announced the opening to the public of his "Art Gallery," much merriment arose and the curious went to his house in considerable numbers, inspected his struggles with a paint brush and after buying his books went away feeling well repaid for the visit. The walls of the front parlor supplied the required space for the gallery. The carved frames in which the "paintings" hung were his handiwork and also the rugs on the floor and a large cricket which was covered with a worsted-work picture of a scene in Salem. One of his pictures represented "The Resurrection from the Ocean" in which the dead are "coming forth from the depths of the sea; from the coral groves and foundered vessels" as was earnestly and fluently explained by Cook, who always took great pride in describing to visitors the subjects and intended symbolism of his paintings. Most of the canvases were of a religious character, but he attempted a "Scene from the Life of the Vicar of Wakefield" and also a "Lexington Minuteman." His portraits of Raphael, Shakespeare, Lord Byron, Lincoln, Grant, George Peabody, Benjamin Butler and others, were undoubted achievements and some of them have been preserved to posterity.

Cook said that he worked by inspiration, although he did not aver that he was controlled by any particular spirit, and he remarked to one visitor that he "saw no reason why Raphael or Shakespeare might not be interested in his work," but, as he expressed it, "they have a great deal to do." This wondrous "Gallery of Art" is feelingly described by a visitor who may have received one of Cook's characteristic postal cards reading:

"To you I privilege impart
To visit my Gallery of Art."

At any rate, in a communication to the Salem Gazette of Nov. 11, 1874, this visitor writes:

"You will find Mr. Cook more than willing to entertain his guests, and as we made the tour of his gallery of art, 'world

renowned and unequalled,' to use his own expression, we listened with close attention to his description of each picture. Many of them were of a sacred character and required 'months of labor' to complete. He called our attention to one in particular, the chief beauty of which, consisted in the quantity of paint used in execution; he put on, as he said, all the paint he could and after exposing it to the weather for some days, administered another dose, and so on, till the thickness of the article was satisfactory. Two of the largest and most grotesque (unique, I should say) he had been offered a large sum for, but, as he said, what was three thousand dollars to the possession of such works of art and the pleasure of exhibiting them to appreciative visitors. We asked him what would become of them all when he should be called away. The answer was, that the Essex Institute was very desirous of obtaining the collection and he should probably so dispose of it. There was one picture I should like to call your attention to—that of a young lady reclining in a boat, so that she might see her reflection in the water beneath. It must be, for our host said so, true to nature, but we thought the lady too large for the boat, or the boat too small for the lady, as her head projected over the bow while her limbs were some feet beyond the stern. However, the innocent ram, caught in the thicket above, was all right. Farther on you will notice a picture of our martyred President, wrapped in the American flag. He is in the act of ascending, with one toe resting on the topmost ball of the Capitol, while one finger points heavenward. The idea is very good and wholly original, though to our unartistic eye, the whole design was a little too square and angular, especially the flag. I will not weary you longer with description of things that must be seen to be appreciated. At our urgent solicitation our modest host next read to us selections from his latest publication, "Ode on Woman." He reads with distinctness and fine expression, and occasional hints thrown in by way of explanation, make it very entertaining. This book is an essay on woman, in her domestic relations, her social life and lastly her relations to politics—voting, &c. Mr. Cook gladly offers this for sale, with others of his own manufacture. Next in the programme came the 'Musical' or chanting by the Rev. Sir. The words as well as the harmony were extempore and executed with vigor, especially the part illustrative of 'thunder and lightning.' Some of the ladies present, inclined all the evening to be hysterical, were so much overcome, at this part of the proceedings, that one of them hastened to the entry and there on the stairs gave free vent to her pent up emotions. The commotion did not seem to disturb the singer however, who kept on the even *tenor* of his way, with closed eyes and face beaming with satis-

faction. And thus our evening closed and we bade our venerable host 'good night,' with many thanks—and would say to our friends—Whenever you wish to drive dull care away, 'go there and do likewise.'"

William Cook was a man of quiet habits, temperate and courteous to all. He was never morose but always cheerfully accepted conditions of life as they came to him, even when funds were low and food scarce, as at times was the case; and when relief came through unexpected sales of his books, he gave hearty and devout thanks to Divine Providence to whose guiding hand he always attributed his good fortune. He was of stocky build, a little below medium height, of dark complexion and with bushy, iron-grey hair. He was a great walker and had a short, quick step. As he walked he held his head up with his eyes well opened. He usually wore a dark blue cape or cloak of the fashion of 1840-1850, with a soft hat, and was a familiar sight on Salem streets in the days when most Salemites were known to each other and he always received a pleasant greeting for, with amusement over his eccentricities, there was mingled a certain respect for his industry and ability to support himself. A well-informed man and level headed in the practical affairs of life, it is most unaccountable that he should have been so irrational whenever his imagination came into play.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

All pamphlets were printed in Salem. They vary in size from 4 x 6 to 5½ x 9, average 5 x 8. There are irregularities in pagination; in most cases the illustrations and covers are counted although not numbered. Many of the pamphlets have a design on the cover and some six of the earlier ones have one or two text illustrations each. The blocks for the illustrations were re-cut or touched up for a number of the reprints.

There are large collections of William Cook's works at the Essex Institute, Boston Public Library and American Antiquarian Society. A collection of twenty-three items were in the Albert A. Bieber sale at the American Art Association on November 13, 1923.

1. *Monition to Parents. A Sermon for the Promotion of Piety.* 14 pp. Printed at the Gazette Office. 1839

2. Hope. 1852
Part I of the "Eucleia." No example of the 1852 edition located. Reprinted in 1859 with preface dated Oct. 1858. 18 pp.
3. Sunbeam through Pagan Clouds, A Poem. 15 pp.
(March) 1853
Part II of the "Eucleia." Not printed by Cook. Reprinted by Cook in 1861.
4. The Olive Grove. Poems. 25 pp., 5 pl.
(December) 1853
Part III of the "Eucleia." Reprinted, n. d., with illustrations re-drawn or touched up.
5. The Ploughboy. A Poem. Part first. 32 pp., 6 pl.
1854
Part IV of the "Eucleia." Reprinted with same date but with an appendix and illustrations touched up. pp. 1-36.
6. The Ploughboy. A Poem. Part second. pp. 37-68,
7 pl. (January) 1855
Part V of the "Eucleia." Plates colored, probably later. Reprinted (Feb.) 1855.
7. The Ploughboy. A Poem. Part third. pp. 69-108,
7 pl. (August) 1855
Part VI of the "Eucleia." Copyrighted in 1857. Reprinted, same date, with notes added on p. 108. Some copies colored later.
8. The Martial Wreath Twined Respectfully for The Salem Independent Cadets. Broadside. (1855)
9. A Jubilant Canzonet for The Salem Light Infantry. Broadside. (1855)
10. The Telegraph, or Star-Banner Song. A Poem. 40 pp.,
8 pl. (March) 1856
Part VII of the "Eucleia." Reprinted in 1869.
11. Fremont. A Poem. 32 pp., 3 pl. October, 1856
Part VIII of the "Eucleia." Reprinted in 1868. Some copies colored.
12. Chestnut Street. A Poem. 41 pp., 10 pl. April, 1857
Part IX of the "Eucleia." Copyrighted in 1857. Reprinted in Oct. 1857, 1858 and Sept. 1874. 40 pp. Some copies colored. 1874 issue paged 295-334.
13. The Neriah, part first for The Metrical Apocalypse. pp. 1-39, 4 pl. February, 1858
Copyrighted in 1858.

14. The Neriah, part second for The Metrical Apocalypse.
pp. 41-82, 5 pl. March, 1859
Copyrighted in 1859.
15. The Ploughboy's Harrow, Number one. pp. 1-4.
October, 1859
16. The Ploughboy's Harrow, Number two. pp. 5-8 |
November, 1859
17. The Ploughboy's Harrow, Number three. pp. 9-16,
2 pl. January, 1860
Part X of the "Eucleia" is composed of the three
parts of The Ploughboy's Harrow.
The Eucleia, in ten parts, bound, was issued in 1861 and
in 1865.
18. The Neriah, part third for The Metrical Apocalypse.
pp. 85-120, 5 pl. May, 1860
Copyrighted in 1860.
19. The Neriah, part fourth for The Metrical Apocalypse.
pp. 121-160, 5 pl. March, 1861
Copyrighted in 1861.
The Neriah, volume one, in four parts, was issued
bound.
20. The Star-Banner Song. Broadside. May 16, 1861
Paged as 41 of number 10.
21. The Fragments. 20 pp., 2 pl. March, 1862
Part I of "The Guides."
22. The Bank. 22 pp., 2 pl. November, 1862
Part II of "The Guides." Reprinted in 1871.
23. The Result. 13 pp., 1 pl. May, 1863
Part III of "The Guides."
24. Potsandove. 15 pp., 1 pl. July, 1864
Part IV of "The Guides."
25. The Columbia. An Address. 12 pp., 2 pl.
November, 1863
Part V of "The Guides." Reprinted in Jan. 1864
and 1868.
26. Burnside. Broadside. (1864?)
No example located.
27. A Christmas Carol for Engine Company No. Three,
Fire Department, Salem, Mass. Broadside.
December 25, 1864

- 38 *American Antiquarian Society* [April,
28. The Firemen's Liturgy. 10 pp., 2 pl. August, 1865
Part VII of "The Guides."
29. The Eudromia. 6 pp., 1 pl. March, 1866
Part VI of "The Guides."
30. The Motiveboat. 8 pp., 1 pl. May, 1867
Part VIII of "The Guides."
31. The Hearttrier. 18 pp., 2 pl. May, 1867
Part IX of "The Guides."
32. Lilygrow. 8 pp., 1 pl. May, 1867
Part X of "The Guides."
"The Guides," in ten parts, was issued, bound, in one volume.
33. Dona Bona. pp. 1-20, 3 pl. June, 1869
First division of part I of "Cor Felix." This may be
a reprint.
34. The Incarnation. pp. 21-40, 3 pl. December, 1869
Second division of part I of "Cor Felix." This may
be a reprint.
35. The Water Lily. pp. 41-60, 3 pl. March, 1869
Part II of "Cor Felix." Reprinted in 1874, plates
colored.
36. The Correspondent. pp. 61-80, 3 pl. April, 1870
Part III of "Cor Felix."
37. College. pp. 81-100, 3 pl. August, 1871
Part IV of "Cor Felix."
38. Text Song. pp. 101-120, 3 pl. May, 1872
Part V of "Cor Felix."
39. A Protest. Broadside. September 2, 1872
40. Martyn. pp. 121-142, 3 pl. June, 1873
Part VI of "Cor Felix."
41. Talk about Indians. pp. 143-164, 3 pl. June, 1873
Part VII of "Cor Felix."
42. Woman. pp. 165-186, 3 pl. May, 1874
Part VIII of "Cor Felix." Reprinted in Sept. 1874.
Plates of both editions colored.
43. Woman, second part. pp. 187-210, 3 pl. February, 1876
Part IX of "Cor Felix." Plates colored. Part X
of "Cor Felix" was never issued.

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