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Bowles, William Lisle

(1762–1850)

J. W. Marston, revised by Leon Litvack

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Bowles, William Lisle (1762–1850), Church of England clergyman and poet, was born at Kings Sutton, Northamptonshire, on 24 September 1762, the son of William Thomas Bowles (*d.* 1786), vicar of Kings Sutton from 1760 to 1773, and his wife, Bridget, daughter of Richard Grey, rector of Hinton, Northamptonshire. In 1776 he was placed at Winchester School, under Joseph Warton, who, discerning his taste for poetry, did his best to foster it; on the death of his old master, Bowles wrote a monody which expressed his regard for his character. On leaving Winchester in 1781 he was elected a scholar of Trinity College, Oxford, of which Joseph Warton's brother, Thomas Warton—professor of poetry at Oxford and eventually poet laureate—was the senior fellow. In 1783 Bowles won the chancellor's Latin verse prize for his poem 'Calpe obsessa, or, The siege of Gibraltar'. After leaving university in 1787 Bowles experienced two thwarted engagements, and turned for consolation to poetry. His first collection, *Fourteen Sonnets Written Chiefly on Picturesque Spots during a Journey*, was published in 1789, and was an immediate success, owing to his ability to harmonize the moods of nature with those of the mind. It attracted the attention of the young Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who paid tribute to Bowles in later years in a sonnet. Having entered holy orders Bowles first officiated as curate of Donhead St Andrew in Wiltshire. In 1792 he was appointed to the rectory of Chicklade in Wiltshire, which he resigned in 1797, on being presented to the rectory of Dumbleton in Gloucestershire. In the same year he was married to Magdalene (*d.* 1844), daughter of Dr Charles Wake, prebendary of Westminster, whom he survived. In 1804 he became vicar of Bremhill, Wiltshire, where he lived until shortly before his death.

In 1806 Bowles published the work for which he is best known: a ten-volume edition of the work of Alexander Pope with a sketch of his life and strictures on his poetry. His comments on the poet's life were written in a severe, even hostile spirit. Bowles's estimate of Pope as a poet gave rise to a long controversy, in which much bitterness was displayed; Byron, for example, attacked him severely in both verse and prose. While his best work was in the field of poetry. Bowles displayed competence in other areas. He was an

antiquary, and in 1828 published a volume entitled *Hermes Britannicus*. He also wrote on ecclesiastical matters, crime, education, and the condition of the poor. His sermons are notable for their dignity and simplicity of style. He was also an active but lenient magistrate. Several honours were bestowed upon Bowles during his lifetime: he was appointed chaplain to the prince regent in 1818, and canon residentiary at Salisbury Cathedral in 1828.

In character Bowles seems to have been ardent and impulsive, but genial and humane. The journal of the poet Tom Moore contains some allusions to him which illustrate his keen susceptibility to impressions, his high-church principles, his love of simple language in the pulpit, together with certain eccentricities, such as his constant refusal to be measured by a tailor. His health had failed some time before his death, which occurred when he was eighty-eight at the close, Salisbury, on 7 April 1850.

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Harvard U., Houghton L., letters and proofs

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Likenesses

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Grey, Richard (1696-1771), Church of England clergyman and writer

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