

George Herbert was born on April 3, 1593, at Montgomery Castle, Wales. He was the fifth son of an eminent Welsh family who had a great love for the arts. George's mother, Magdalen Newport, held patronage to distinguished literary figures such as John Donne who dedicated his *Holy Sonnets* to her. His father Richard Herbert died when George was just three years old, leaving his mother with ten children, all of whom she was determined to educate and raise as loyal Anglicans. George's early education began at the Westminster School, after which he went on to win a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge.

Herbert received two degrees (a BA in 1613 and an MA in 1616) and was elected a Major Fellow of Trinity. Two years after his college graduation, he was appointed Reader in Rhetoric at Cambridge, and in 1620 he was elected Public Orator, a post wherein Herbert was called upon to represent Cambridge at public occasions and that he described as "the finest place in the university." Herbert's two immediate predecessors in the office had risen to high positions in the state, and Herbert was much involved with the court.

During Herbert's academic career, his only published verse was that written for special occasions in Greek and Latin. In 1624 and 1625 Herbert was elected as a representative to Parliament. He resigned as Orator in 1627, married Jane Danvers in 1629, and took holy orders in the Church of England in 1630. Herbert spent the rest of his life as rector in Bemerton near Salisbury. While there, he preached, wrote poetry, and helped rebuild the church out of his own funds.

On his deathbed, Herbert sent the manuscript of his English poems to his close friend, Nicholas Ferrar, the founder of a semi-monastic Anglican religious community at Little Gidding. He reportedly told Ferrar to publish the poems only if he thought they might "turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul," otherwise to burn them. In 1633 all of Herbert's poems were published in *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*, with a preface by Ferrar. *The Temple* met with enormous popular acclaim; it was reprinted twenty times by 1680.

Herbert's poems have been characterized by a deep religious devotion, linguistic precision, metrical agility, and ingenious use of conceit (extended metaphors). His work is notable for the purity and effectiveness of his choice of words. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote of Herbert's diction that "Nothing can be more pure, manly, or unaffected," and he is ranked with Donne as one of the great metaphysical poets.