

THE WRITER

Izaak Walton's ongoing world-wide fame is due to *The Compleat Angler* but it was not his only book or even his first.

The writing career began almost by accident. John Donne died in 1631, leaving a request for his sermons to be published posthumously. It was usual for such works to be accompanied by a biography. In Donne's case this life story would be written by Sir Henry Wotton, a close friend since student days at Oxford and now, after a distinguished career as a diplomat, the Provost of Eton College. Sir Henry decided he needed help with the biography and invited their mutual friend Izaak Walton to undertake the role of research assistant to collect necessary material. Meetings to discuss progress seem to have been fairly leisurely as they often took place while the pair fished the Thames near Eton. One fact Izaak did record about his own life was that he took up angling about the year 1632. So it could well have been Sir Henry who created Walton's interest in the pastime which would ultimately become his enduring memorial.

The course of Izaak Walton's life took a major turn in 1639. Wotton died before he had written his 'Life' of John Donne. Izaak decided it was now down to him to complete the task and so put pen to paper. The book was published in 1640. What if Sir Henry had lived long enough to complete Donne's biography - would Izaak Walton have ever begun his own writing career?

The book was well received. Charles I voiced his approval. John Hales, a former colleague of Wotton, stated he 'had not seen a life written to more advantage of the subject, or more reputation to the writer'. Izaak's interest in research and writing continued. In 1651 he published his 'Life' of Sir Henry Wotton. Biographies of Anglicans were by then hardly profitable or even safe projects at a time when using the Book of Common Prayer or harbouring Anglican priests were punishable offences. So he refrained from further biographies. Fate took a hand and his thoughts turned to the more tranquil world of angling. The result was the appearance of *The Compleat Angler* in 1653.

The Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 freed Izaak from the problems with his biographies. Three more books joined his works on John Donne and Sir Henry Wotton. 1665 saw the publication of the life of country

parson and theologian Richard Hooker. This work, the only one of the series with a subject Walton never knew personally, was commissioned by Archbishop of Canterbury, Gilbert Sheldon. It was dedicated by Izaak to George Morley with the words 'it was written by me under your roof'. In 1670 came the life of George Herbert, country parson and poet, and finally in 1678 Robert Sanderson, Bishop of Lincoln. Izaak said of the George Herbert book 'I wrote that one to please myself'. There could even have been a sixth biography - in a letter to his publisher Izaak mentioned that he was collecting material for a life of 'the ever memorable' John Hales.

Walton's 'Lives' were among the first real biographies written in England. Their merit can be assessed by the fact that Dr Johnson regarded them as being among his favourite books. During his own lifetime Izaak was more famous as their author than of the book which lives on to this very day.