

makes so much of for the Supreme Court). See *ibid.*, pp. 46f, 74f, 175f. Compare the opening page of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.'s *The Common Law* (where "history" [chance?] is preferred to "logic" [reason?]). But see Crosskey, *Politics and the Constitution*, I, 514. Consider, also, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), where principles take precedence over history (which should be recognized to be [by nature?] inconclusive whenever serious issues must be settled by a community). Consider, further, on the relation of chance, principles and history, Anastaplo, "Notes toward an 'Apologia pro vita sua,'" 10 *Interpretation* 310 (1983).

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## *The Poet of the Lakes*

**William Wordsworth: A Biography**, by Hunter Davies, *New York: Atheneum, 1980. 367 pp.*

MANY CRITICAL WORKS of William Wordsworth's poetry have appeared steadily over the years, but no complete yet competent and manageable account of his life had come out since Mary Moorman's standard biography of 1957, which, at twelve hundred pages in two volumes, is not that manageable after all. Mr. Hunter Davies has only now provided the shorter and more popular biography we need.

It must be easy for the biographer to feel overwhelmed by the sheer size of Wordsworth's life. Besides living to a robust old age, he seems to have been natively proportioned to every fissure and outpost in English life during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: he caught the extremes. He could see and feel the power of the new industrial society, yet was known as the "Poet of the Lakes" and the leading Romantic writer in England; as a young man he was fired up with the reforming energies of radical politics but later became a staunch Tory who spied, unsuccessfully and rather comically, on suspected insurgents. And there is as well the irony that two of his boyhood contemporaries in the small provincial town

of Cockermouth included Fletcher Christian, who later became famous for his part in the mutiny on the *Bounty*, and John Dalton, the father of atomic theory.

Coleridge was to write in 1797 when he was twenty-five, only two years younger than William: "Wordsworth is a very great man, the only man at all times and in all modes of excellence I feel myself inferior. . . . The giant Wordsworth. God love him! Even when I speak in terms of admiration due to his intellect, I fear lest those terms should keep out of sight the amiableness of manners." Wordsworth's manners were indeed amiable, largely owing to a close relationship with his sister, Dorothy, a remarkable person in her own right who gave him the sense of home he needed. His parents died when he was still young—his father was an attorney—and the children, including three brothers, went to live with their uncle and grandparents. William and Dorothy were to live together all their adult lives. She was a prolific letter writer and at sixteen wrote to a friend about her brothers:

They are just the boys I could wish them, they are so affectionate and so kind to me as makes me love them more every day. Wm and Christopher are very clever boys at least so they appear in the partial eyes of a Sister. No doubt I am partial and see virtues in them that by everybody else will pass unnoticed. . . . Many a time have Wl, J, C and myself shed tears together, tears of the bitterest sorrow, we all of us, each day feel more sensibly the loss we sustained when we were deprived of our parents and each day do receive fresh insults.

F. W. Bateson argued in *Wordsworth: A Reinterpretation* (1954) that William and Dorothy had an incestuous relationship—a suggestion which immediately devolved into a furor and counter-furor of revelation and heresy—but this is evidently one of those hopelessly strained bits of interpretation that are unique to modernity. Some relationships are simply more sublime than others.

Wordsworth's relatives found him difficult to endure, and considered that they were doing him a favor by paying for his educa-

tion. He was moody and rebellious, but because of their investment, was expected to do well at Cambridge. But Cambridge was given over to dissolution and mathematics, two things which were uncongenial to the young man who had grown up in the northern country of Hawkshead—a haven of innocence and natural beauty that brought out Wordsworth's rich poetic instincts and sheltered him from the brutality and decadence of the big schools. In 1785, William Cowper could write that Cambridge contained nothing but "gamesters, jockeys, brothellers impure, spendthrifts and booted sportsmen." Wordsworth was not quite so specific, referring only to "rioting, rotting, and dissolute pleasures." He would have been better off at Oxford, with its predominant interest in classical literature. Cambridge was a disaster, but he rose above it; as he says in the *Prelude*, he had:

A feeling that I was not for that hour,  
Nor for that place. But wherefore be cast  
down?

Why should I grieve? I was a chosen Son.

The "chosen son" defied his relatives and took off for France, intending to walk across Europe. This was in 1790; the Revolution had begun and modern times were now official. Wordsworth was dimly conscious that he was seeing firsthand a vast upheaval of history, and he was, at this time, excited and overwhelmed.

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive  
But to be young was very heaven!

The Revolution before the Terror sank in was a cause of popular celebration. It is almost hilarious to read of William and his companion, Robert Jones, being invited to join the festivities as they walked through the villages of revolutionary France, bearing their belongings wrapped up in handkerchiefs on their heads. William wrote to Dorothy of the "general smile" that usually greeted their curious appearance. They met no uncivility at all in France. "But I must remind you," he continued to Dorothy, "that we crossed it at a time when the whole nation was mad with joy in consequence of the revolution."

In Bristol, in 1795, there was a group of young men who founded a scheme called Pantisocracy—"the equal government of all"—and, because they thought England was hopelessly corrupt, they were going to move to the banks of the Susquehanna River in America. They weren't sure where it was, but, as Davies says, "they liked the mellifluous sound of its name." The leaders of this group were Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey. It was at this time that Wordsworth met them. His relationship with Coleridge, of course, was to become one of the most interesting and fruitful alliances in literary history. Southey was to become the Poet Laureate of England, just before Wordsworth. Together they comprised the famous "Lake Poets." Coleridge immediately thought he recognized a genius of the first rank in the unknown Wordsworth.

They soon collaborated on writing a book of poems. It was not difficult to do since they lived nearby and spent much of their time together—including long hikes in the country—to the neglect of Coleridge's new wife. The *Lyrical Ballads* came out in a rush. The "single most influential book of poetry in the history of English literature," as Davies calls it, was produced to help finance a two-year stay in Germany. When it was released they were already settled abroad with Dorothy but minus Mrs. Coleridge.

Critical notice of the *Lyrical Ballads* was vehemently negative. Southey, in the first review, called the book a failure. Wordsworth never became very popular with the critics, who thought his poetry consisted mainly of juvenile silliness and unnecessary or embarrassing odes to the emotions. Byron later wrote of Wordsworth's poem, "Moods of my Mind"—"We certainly wish these Moods had been less frequent," and suggested that many of Wordsworth's poems had the "same exquisite measure" as the nursery rhyme "Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle." Another reviewer said Wordsworth should stop "drivelling to a redbreast and pouring out nauseous and nauseating sensibilities to weeds and insects." It is remarkable to think this was more than a century before John Simon was even born. But Wordsworth stuck to his

guns. The final poem in *Lyrical Ballads* is "Tintern Abbey":

For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing often-  
times  
The still, sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample  
power  
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting  
suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of  
man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of thought,  
And rolls through all things. . . .

In 1802 Wordsworth wedded Mary Hutchinson, a childhood friend. The relationship appears to have been somewhat passionless at first, despite the consequent appearance of several children, but later it warmed up and some unsubdued love letters passed between them. And then there is the fabled relationship with Coleridge.

Coleridge appears in life as a phantom figure. He is the most important poet-critic in the English language and a profound political theoretician and Christian apologist, but he was also for much of his career an irresolute drifter and opium addict. This seems surprising at first, for his writing is the impressive display of a mind that was stable and yet absorbingly democratic and dialectical; he didn't miss a thing, apparently, in his reflections. But his relationships and personal habits were something else: here there is a desultory lack of will and conviction. Now he's in Rome to get revived by the sunny climate and then in Paris engaging in literary discussions and losing his health. The Wordsworths are concerned that he never writes. The only thing he's firm about is staying away from his wife. Dorothy in particular was profuse in her feelings for the afflicted poet; she was always busy with concern. "Poor Soul!" she wrote, "He is

sadly deficient in moral courage." William explained Coleridge's emotional dereliction by saying that:

. . . he neither will nor can execute anything of important benefit to himself, his family or mankind. Neither his talents nor his genius, mighty as they are, nor his vast information will avail him anything; they are all frustrated by a derangement in his intellectual and moral constitution . . . nor is he capable of acting under any constraint of duty or moral obligation. . . . The disease of his mind is that he perpetually looks out of himself for those obstacles to his utility which exist only in himself.

If it had not been for William and Dorothy, Coleridge would indeed have been in a bad way, caught in a vicious circle of listlessness, paranoid fears and despondency, as well as addiction to opium and other stimulants. It was pathetic, of course, to see him in this condition, but he held onto a margin of inner strength that kept him from a serious collapse. Much later he was to recover his stability while staying in the home of a doctor. In the meantime his profligacy finally created a rift; there was a misunderstanding about something Wordsworth had said about him, and Coleridge was so upset that on a visit from London to see his children, who lived near the Wordsworths, he went right past their cottage without stopping to say hello. The relationship never was to attain the warmth of its earlier moments.

The Lake Poets, Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth, had all been sympathizers of the French Revolution when they were young but all of them wound up as conservatives. Wordsworth had a great fear of the danger to England if reformers were allowed to have their indiscriminate way. He was worried that perhaps a too thorough plan of social change would dissolve the permanent things that were woven into the fabric of English life. Thus his political thinking was very much like Burke's. The three of them were criticized for the sharp change of political temperament that characterized their thinking as they grew older; the radical who becomes a conservative has always, some-

what unnecessarily, been a suspicious figure in intellectual life. But Southey defended the political transformation by rather cleverly noting of his critics: "They had turned their faces towards the east in the morning to worship the rising sun, and in the evening were looking eastwards still, obstinately affirming that still the sun was there. I, on the contrary, altered my position as the world went round."

In his last, declining years Wordsworth became the archetype of the Grand Old Man of English letters. He was famous, he was genial, and he had contributed inestimably to the "dialect of the tribe." Coleridge rated him only after Shakespeare and Milton; and even the sarcastic Byron admitted his lasting importance. In his worst moments with the critics, Wordsworth insisted that history would vindicate him, and he was right. History apparently means never having to say you're sorry—unless, of course, you are.

Davies' book is informative, humorous, and fills a noticeable gap in literary biography. It fully captures the life of a great man who sought to reconcile the paradoxes of his time.

Reviewed by KENNETH ZARETZKE