

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

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# William Wordsworth:

## Interviews and Recollections

edited by

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*To Tim Farmiloe, editor, friend, and inspiration*

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# Preface

This anthology deals largely with opinions evaluating Wordsworth the man, and the selections for the most part represent the views of well-known men of letters. The major exception, Sir Humphry Davy, known primarily for his scientific work, was in fact deeply interested in literature, and greatly admired Wordsworth's poetry. Only a few selections (e.g., by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Matthew Arnold) were recorded after Wordsworth's death in 1850.

The texts, always readable and possessing, I believe, a high entertainment quotient, may occasionally be anecdotal or digressive, but their main value resides in the fact that their authors are rendering judgments that have a special authority: these writers had met and conversed with the living poet. The lone exception to this generalization about the value bestowed by a first-hand witnessing of Wordsworth's appearance and behavior is Shelley, who never met Wordsworth; even so, his high praise of Wordsworth's poetry – dinned into Lord Byron's ear until the latter modified his harsher views of Wordsworth's talent – entitles him to be heard.

The selections demonstrate how and why Wordsworth became an inescapable presence for both Romantic and Victorian writers, and indeed for all readers of poetry during the nineteenth century. Taken as a whole, the testimony presents a humanized portrait of a poet who early in his career had become a sage, somewhat forbidding in demeanor, and whose changing reputation even before 1850 was closely related to that stern image, often at the expense of a nuanced judgment of his poetry. And, almost needless to add, Wordsworth's opinions of most of these writers, sometimes pungently expressed, are worth recording too, if only to make more clear why some friendships flourished over a long period of years and others withered on the vine.

The selections are not intended to deliver a collective verdict on the quality of Wordsworth's art, or to recapitulate the arguments about the nature and objectives of poetry in which Wordsworth engaged. Nevertheless, the running story of Wordsworth's relations to his contemporaries frequently includes evidence of an assumption by an individual author that the time had come (well before 1850) to summarize Wordsworth's total career. Most such assessments, we now know, were made prematurely, since Wordsworth continued to write serious poetry, and to undertake massive poetical projects, till the very end.



Sir Walter Scott in his unsigned review, 'The Living Poets of Great Britain' (*The Edinburgh Annual: Register for 1808* [1810]), made a strong point of linking Wordsworth's 'secluded study' to the limited popularity of his poems. Wordsworth, he argued, would have benefitted if he had compared his own feelings with those of others; if he had depended less on theory and observed more closely the impulses that moved the mass of humanity. Wordsworth, Scott believed, needed more observation and knowledge of the world.

This line of argument, perhaps more ubiquitous during Wordsworth's lifetime than afterwards, has colored much that has been written about the greatest of the Lake poets.

But it remains an open question whether Wordsworth could or would have strengthened his 'moral poetry' by entering more wholeheartedly on the social rounds urged upon him by Scott. Any student of Wordsworth's life is inevitably impressed by the number of visitors who made a pilgrimage to the poet in his seclusion, and who came away from a meeting, however brief, with a sense that they had met a man who was secure in several convictions: that he was loved by wife and sister, that his opinions on all kinds of subjects were generally irrefutable, and that the work he was producing possessed high merit. There was, in brief, more *busyness* in the comings and goings of Wordsworth's life than Scott appreciated.

Several matters affecting the development of Wordsworth's reputation are treated in the letters, diary entries, essays, and reminiscences from which these excerpts have been drawn: Wordsworth's opinions of his rivals in the production of poetry, his generosity (or perceived lack of it), his handling of money matters, his steadfast loyalty to those who believed in him, his sense of obligation to patrons and various literary influences, and – in both general and particular instances – his wit and wisdom. Often those opinions changed over time, and occasionally Wordsworth regretted something he had said or written. Even so, Wordsworth is remarkably consistent in both the substance of his beliefs and the reasons he provided for having reached a particular point of view, and this consistency was noted, and respected, by all who knew him.

The specifics of a particular relationship are treated in the brief essays that precede each author's selections, and annotations have been added to provide additional details for the reprinted texts. In the pages that follow a reader may be informed or reminded of the great value placed by Wordsworth's contemporaries on the new direction in poetical statement and subject matter that his life provided. More than a century and a half later his writings still inspire faith in that value.

# Abbreviations

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor

*STC, CL* *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, I–VI, edited by Earl Leslie Griggs (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1956–71)

*STC, N* *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, III, 1794–1826, edited by Kathleen Coburn; IV, co-edited by Kathleen Coburn and Merten Christenson; Bollingen Series L (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973)

*STC, UL* *Unpublished Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, I–II, edited by Earl Leslie Griggs (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1933)

De Quincey, Thomas

*DeQ, W* *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, I–XXI; Vol. XIX, *Autobiographical Sketches*, edited by Daniel Sanjiv Roberts (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003)

Emerson, Ralph Waldo

*RWE, CW* *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, I–VI: V, *English Traits*, edited by Douglas Emory Wilson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994)

Haydon, Benjamin Robert

*BRH, D* *The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, I–V, edited by Willard Bissell Pope (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960–63)

Hazlitt, William

*WH, CW* *Collected Works, Centenary Edition*, I–XXI, edited by P. P. Howe ('After the Edition of A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover') (London: J. M. Dent, 1930)

*WH, SW* *Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, I–IX, edited by Duncan Wu (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998)

Keats, John

*JK, L* *The Letters of John Keats*, I–II, edited by Maurice Buxton Forman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931)

Lamb, Charles and Mary

*CL, L* *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, I–III, edited by Edwin W. Marris, Jr. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975–78)

Landor, Walter Savage

*WSL, W, V* *The Complete Works of Walter Savage Landor*, edited by T. Earle Welby (London: Chapman and Hall, 1927)

*WSL, L* *Letters and Other Unpublished Writings of Walter Savage Landor*, edited by Stephen Wheeler (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1897)

Mill, John Stuart

*JSM, A* *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, edited by John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 1981)(Vol. I in *Collected Works*, I–XXXIII, 1963–)

*JSM, EL* *The Earlier Letters of John Stuart Mill, 1812–1848*, XII, edited by Francis E. Mineka (Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 1963)

Reynolds, John Hamilton

*JHR, L* *The Letters of John Hamilton Reynolds*, edited by Leonidas M. Jones (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1973)

*JHR, SP* *Selected Prose of John Hamilton Reynolds*, edited by Leonidas M. Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966)

Robinson, Henry Crabb

*HCR, C* *The Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson with the Wordsworth Circle (1808–1866)*, I–II: I, 1808–1843; II, 1844–1866, edited by Edith J. Morley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927)

Scott, Sir Walter

*WS, J* *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, edited by W. E. K. Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972)

Southey, Robert

*RS, NL* *New Letters of Robert Southey*, I–II, edited by Kenneth Curry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965)

*RS, SL* *Selections from the Letters of Robert Southey/ &c. &c. &c.*, I–IV, edited by John Wood Warter (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1856)

Tennyson, Alfred Lord

*AT, L* *Letters*, II (1851–1870), edited by Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987)

Wordsworth, William and Dorothy

- WW, L            *Letters*, I–IX, 2nd edn, edited by Ernest De Selincourt et al. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967–93). [Specific volume editors are named below.]
- WW, L, I        *Letters, the Early Years 1787–1808*, revised by Chester L. Shaver (1967)
- WW, L, II       *Letters, the Middle Years 1806–1811*, revised by Mary Moorman (1969)
- WW, L, III      *Letters, the Middle Years 1812–1820*, revised by Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill (1970)
- WW, L, V        *Letters, the Later Years, Part II, 1820–1834*, revised by Alan G. Hill (1970)
- WW, L, VII      *Letters, the Later Years, Part IV, 1840–1853*, revised by Alan G. Hill (1988)
- WW, PrW, III   *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, III: Critical and Ethical*, edited by Alexander B. Grosart (London: Edward Moxon, Son, 1876)