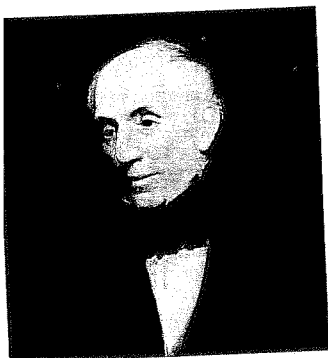


WRITERS' GALLERY



WILLIAM WORDSWORTH
(1770–1850)

LIFE

Early years William Wordsworth was born in 1770 in a little town

in the Lake District in the north-west of England. When he was just eight years old his mother died, and he also lost his father five years later. The children were separated and raised by guardians.

In 1787 Wordsworth entered Cambridge, but he was not particularly interested in his studies. While still a university student he went on a three-month walking tour of France, the Swiss Alps and Italy, and was greatly impressed by the beauty of the landscape. When he finished his degree he returned to France for a year and became a passionate supporter of the democratic ideals of the French Revolution. Financial problems, however, forced him to return to England, where he went to live

with his sister Dorothy in a small village in Dorset. In 1793 he published his first two books of verse, which received little notice from either the critics or the public.

The friendship with Coleridge Two events then changed his life forever: he inherited a sum of money which covered his daily necessities and, in 1795, he met Samuel Taylor Coleridge (► pp. E24–31), a poet with similar radical political and literary views. This friendship had a lasting impact on both poets. William and Dorothy went to live close to Coleridge. Together they discussed political issues, read, wrote, exchanged theories on poetry and commented on each other's work. In this period of intense creativity they produced the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), a landmark in English Romanticism. Coleridge contributed four poems and Wordsworth nineteen to the collection. The collection was not well-received by the literary critics of the day. Later that year Wordsworth, his sister Dorothy and Coleridge travelled to Germany. Coleridge continued his studies in philosophy, while Wordsworth wrote several of his finest lyrical poems and started work on *The Prelude*, an autobiographical poem which he continued to revise throughout the rest of his life. Two years later a second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* appeared, with new poems by Wordsworth, who also provided a prose Preface illustrating his and Coleridge's principles of poetry.

The Lake District, home and marriage William and Dorothy moved to Grasmere, one of the loveliest villages in the Lake District, a region which Wordsworth immortalised in his poetry. In 1802 Wordsworth married a childhood friend and together they had five children. During this period he produced *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807), a collection which includes some of his finest verse and most famous sonnets. His reputation began to grow and his work became increasingly popular. He did, however, suffer personal tragedy when two of his children died. His close friend Coleridge was experiencing serious health problems and the two became estranged and never fully reconciled.

Maturity and conservatism As his fame as a poet grew, Wordsworth became more conservative politically. He was given a well-paid government job and openly campaigned for the conservative Tory party. The younger generation of Romantic poets criticised him for abandoning the radical politics and idealism of his youth, while recognising the debt they owed him for the great innovations of his poetry.

WORKS

The Lyrical Ballads Wordsworth's contribution to English poetry cannot be overestimated. His work with Coleridge on the

Lyrical Ballads established Romanticism as a literary movement in England, and the prose *Preface* to the second edition came to be considered as a Romantic manifesto (► p. E118).

Many critics consider the long poem *The Prelude*, published posthumously in 1850 in twenty-four books to be his greatest achievement. The poem describes the crucial experiences and stages of the poet's life and is an introspective account of his emotional and spiritual development. Further evidence of Wordsworth's genius can be found in *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807), which contains, among other celebrated poems, 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' (► Text E7).

Nature Wordsworth was a great innovator. He found his greatest inspiration in nature, which he believed could elevate the human soul and exert a positive moral influence on human thoughts and feelings. He identified Nature with God and was more pantheistic in his vision than Christian. His poetry celebrates the lives of simple rural people, whom he sees as being more sincere than people living in cities. Children are also regarded as pure and innocent, uncorrupted by education and the evils of the world (► Visual Links E2 and E3).

Poetry as intuition Wordsworth believed that intuition, not reason, should guide the poet. Inspiration should come from the direct experience of the senses. Poetry, he wrote in the *Preface*, originates from 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' which is filtered through 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'.

Reputation Wordsworth renewed English poetry both in content and style. He started writing at a time when poetry was constrained by literary conventions, affected diction and emphasis on form. By rejecting these restraints, Wordsworth permanently extended the range of English poetry.



A drawing of Tintern Abbey, by the great romantic painter J.W. Turner (c. 1794). After a visit to Tintern Abbey William Wordsworth wrote one of his best-known poems.