

Poetry for Young People

# William Wordsworth

Edited by  
Dr. Alan Liu

Illustrated by  
James Muir

For my daughter, Lian, age 10  
—Alan Liu

For my dad James  
—James Muir

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Portrait of William Wordsworth by Henry Edridge on page 4  
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## INTRODUCTION



He loved to walk alone among the mountains, lakes, and wilds of the Lake District in England, his home. Sometimes it was as if there was no one else in the world, and he would look at the way the light fell on a tree or the wind came through the grasses as if they had something secret to tell him. Many times, he would write his poetry outside while walking—write it aloud without pen or paper.

But nature was only complete for him when shared with a few, special people. Once, at a time when he was writing some of his best poetry, he and his friends carved their initials on a large rock. “W.W.” it said at the top, and then beneath: “M.H., D.W., S.T.C., J.W., S.H.”

His name was William Wordsworth, and the other initials carved on the rock were

those of his beloved younger sister Dorothy and younger brother John, his future wife Mary Hutchinson and her sister Sara, and his best friend and fellow poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. William, Coleridge, and Dorothy (who described their life in her famous journals) were at the heart of a new movement in poetry called Romanticism—a movement of strong “feeling” and “imagination” inspired by nature, the lives of common people, and often the poets’ own lives. Even John, who captained a ship at sea, was what William called a “silent poet” who shared their interests.

William was born on April 7, 1770, in the Lake District, a land in the northwest of England famous for its mountain and lake scenery, its small towns, and its simple way of life. Many people farmed or raised sheep there. William’s father was a lawyer who was often away from home on business for the biggest landowner in the area. His mother let William and his brothers (one older, two younger) and his sister play by themselves much of the time among the fields, streams, and hills outside their house in the town of Cockermouth. Those were happy, carefree days when William and Dorothy played at chasing butterflies (see page 12, “To a Butterfly”).

But then tragedy came to the family. When William was seven, his mother suddenly became sick with pneumonia and died. Near the end, he walked quietly past the door to her bedroom and saw her sitting still in her easy chair. That was the last time he saw her. Afterwards, his father was very sad and did not know how he could take care of all five of the children by himself.

Dorothy was sent to some relatives in another part of England (it would be many years before William would see her again). The boys went to a boarding school in Hawkshead, a little town in the middle of the Lake District where a kindly woman named Ann Tyson gave them a place to stay and took care of them almost as if they were her own children. They only went home to their father twice a year for holidays.

But death had not yet finished with the family. When William was 13, his father lost his way on one of his business travels and slept outside all night at Christmas time on a cold hillside. He became very sick and soon died, too. Now the children were really alone in the world. Other relatives in the area took care of the boys, but their Uncle Kit was very strict and did not think much of the children's free-spirited ways, especially William's. "Many a time have William, John, Christopher, [another of their brothers] and myself shed tears together, tears of the bitterest sorrow," Dorothy wrote to a friend, "we all of us, each day, feel more sensibly the loss we sustained when we were deprived of our parents..."

It was from this time on, perhaps, that William truly learned about loneliness ("solitude," he called it in his poetry) and how to make something good from it. When he was alone he was free to imagine and feel things that others didn't. And he learned, too, that he was never really alone when he had nature around him. The mountains, lakes, woods, and winds were like a ghost family to him. Sometimes he even felt they had a hidden "spirit" that guided him like a mother or father. In the poem he later wrote about his life called *The Prelude*, he remembered that it was these childhood years—in both their joy and sorrow—that made him a poet. He remembered the times he ran out like "a naked savage" into thundershowers, bathed in streams, climbed cliffs to steal birds' eggs, skated under the stars at night, and even once stole a rowboat for a ride on a lake (see pages 36–38, "The Stolen Boat"). "Fair seed-time had my soul," he said. And he remembered, too, all the sad and scary times in those years—like the time just after stealing the boat when a giant, dark mountain seemed to chase after him, or the "stormy, and rough, and wild" day when he waited on a hilltop to go home to his father from school just before his father died.

William wrote his first poems while at school in Hawkshead. He had a talent for it. But when he went away to college at Cambridge University, his guardian uncles thought he should study hard and take a position (become a "fellow") at the university or perhaps become a lawyer. But William did not do especially well in college. Instead, he read freely in many subjects (he was especially fascinated by geometry), and continued writing poetry. Coming home to the Lake District during the



summers, he would walk alone in the hills with his dog, a terrier, and compose poems aloud. The dog barked if anyone was coming, and he would stop so as not to seem crazy.

Then, in the summer before he graduated from college, William went to Europe with a friend and walked through France, Switzerland, and northern Italy with just the clothes on his back and a knapsack. It was an exciting time. The French Revolution had just begun a year before in 1789. Many poor and middle-class French people joined with writers, philosophers, lawyers, and politicians to rebel against the old France of aristocrats ruled by King Louis XVI. They wanted to start a democracy like that in America (the American Revolution had taken place just about a dozen years earlier).

At this time, though, William was mainly a tourist: he was impressed by the scenery of the Swiss mountains. But his feelings about the French Revolution soon deepened. After graduating from college—and while still very unsure about what to do with his life—he returned by himself to France. Here he met a young, well-educated revolutionary named Michel Beaupuy who helped him learn what the Revolution was about. Before long, he found himself siding strongly with the revolutionaries, becoming a “patriot of the people.” And something else important happened, too. For the first time, he fell in love. She was a young French woman named Annette Vallon, and soon the two would have a baby.

But then things went badly wrong. The French Revolution changed into something William had nightmares about. The “Terror” started. This was the time when the revolutionaries used the guillotine to cut off the heads of many French people and finally the French king and queen. Many thousands of people lost their lives, and France went to war with the rest of Europe and England.

Meanwhile, William and Annette’s love seemed doomed. Though they very much wanted to marry, they were not able to. After all, he was a penniless young man from another country. At last, William returned to England without Annette. She gave birth to their child without him, and it would be ten years before he saw their daughter for the first time (see page 31, “It is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free”).

Back in England, William was very unhappy. It seemed like the end of the world. All his hopes for the French Revolution were at an end. (Sometimes he woke up with nightmares about France.) He couldn’t even write a letter to Annette because the war between England and France had cut off the mail between the two countries. And meanwhile, he still didn’t know what to do with his life.

In the next few years while he lived here and there in London and other places in England, William wrote poems and even a play (a tragedy) about all the pain and suffering in the world. But these poems borrowed from the way other poets wrote. He had not yet found his own voice as a poet.

Finally, life became better. William came to accept the fact that the French Revolution had not turned out the way he wanted. And, though he would not see Annette again except for once or twice many years later, his personal life became happier. His sister Dorothy, who was separated from him when their mother died, came to live with him again. They were inseparable from this time on—walking together, reading books together, and working on his poems together (often she would write down his verses).

In 1799, the two moved into a small house in Grasmere—a little town in the Lake District on the shores of a beautiful lake with a perfect little island in the middle. The house was called Dove Cottage (it still exists today, with the Wordsworth Museum near it). They would live at Dove Cottage for many years. When William later married Mary Hutchinson—a friend both he and Dorothy had known since their youth—she came to live with them in Dove Cottage, too. Meeting Coleridge was another very important event in his life at this time. The two poets discovered how close they were in their beliefs and feelings. They became each other's teachers of poetry.

Finally, another event improved William's life in a practical way. A well-to-do friend, who believed in William's talents as a poet, died and left in his will a small sum of money for him enough to free him to write poetry without worrying about making a living doing something else.

The conditions were now right. With the help of Coleridge and Dorothy, William found a way to make a new kind of poetry that was truly his own—that came out of who he was and what he had lived through. His poetry, he discovered, would be about ordinary people. The French Revolution had promised power to "the People," but William now felt that the ordinary farmers and shepherds he lived among in the Lake District were the true "people."

He would write about them—about what they thought and felt during the great events of their life: childhood, friendship, work, and death. So, too, his poetry would be about his own everyday self—about his thoughts and feelings as he grew up to be a poet. And above all, he would write about nature—about the mountains, lakes, and wilds that brought out the best in people.

William became the first poet of the "ordinary." He believed that country folk, his own life, and nature were every bit as magical as all the gods and devils, kings and queens, and elegant city people that earlier poets wrote about. Even little children, the subject of many of his best poems, were in their way greater than any king or queen.

In 1798, when he was 28, William published his famous *Lyrical Ballads*, a book of poems that included a few by Coleridge as well. Two years later, he published the book again with additional poems. The "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* explained what his poetry was about. He wanted, he said, "to choose incidents and situations from common life" and to describe them in a way that gave them "a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way..."



William Wordsworth's finest poems take you on a captivating adventure to another time and place. Fantastic color paintings portray the mountains and lakes, and the people who lived by them, that Wordsworth writes about in his lyrical verses.

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