

HOME JOURNAL

Life, Literature and Education

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

(Born 1770; died 1850.)

Wordsworth believed and his works warrant the belief that his mission was to interpret Nature to humanity, to be her spokesman to his fellows; and lovingly and faithfully he discharged that mission. Very early in his life came the realization of the sublime in the world around him, and this realization grew with his growth and widened with his manhood until he could say:—

"For I have learned to look on nature not as in the hour of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes the still, sad music of humanity."

This quick ear for the sorrow of humanity was seen in his attitude towards France, when she was in the throes of the revolution of 1791. Of all the Englishmen whom the revolution affected none were so unselfishly stirred as Wordsworth. He went to France, met the leaders among the reformers and was welcomed to their circle; but as the disorder and tumult increased, and the worst element of the country gained the ascendant, he returned to England saddened and depressed. From this despondent condition he was rescued by his sister Dorothy who was ever a brightening, sweetening influence in his life, and who at this time turned his thoughts again to poetry.

At this time, too, a lasting friendship was developed between Wordsworth and Coleridge as satisfying to their minds as to their hearts. Together they ranged the hills and valleys of Dorsetshire and formed plans for future literary work. Coleridge was to invest the supernatural or uncommon with human interest, and Wordsworth was to reveal the wonderful in the commonplace things of the earth. The result of this poetical partnership was "Lyrical Ballads" published in 1798, a volume which begins with "The Ancient Mariner," that weird and fascinating tale which made the fame of Coleridge, and which ends with "Tintern Abbey," the greatest panegyric to Nature ever written. This desire of Wordsworth to give the charm of novelty to every-day things called forth the harshest words of the critics who contended that the poet chose mean and common things and deliberately determined to force them to be of poetical interest willy-nilly. But they misjudged the poet's motive. He felt himself to be a part of the great world of Nature, to be akin to the woods, the sky, the waters, and no less near to the tiny bird, or the humble flower, the pebble on the shore or the moss on the fallen tree. Something in all of them appealed to something in him, and he was sincere when he said:

"To me the meanest flower that blows can give thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." With that as his own attitude he could not understand how any could live and move and have their being upon this earth and remain blind to its beauties. Blind indeed, for having eyes they saw not, but were like Wordsworth's Peter Bell, to whom

"A primrose at the river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him
And it was nothing more."

Matthew Arnold who was an ardent yet fair-minded Wordsworthian speaks of the poet thus:

"Wordsworth's poetry is great because of the extraordinary power with which he feels the joy offered to us in nature, the joy offered to us in the simple, primary affections and duties; and because of the extraordinary power with which, in case after case, he shows us this joy, and renders it so as to make us share it. . . . It might seem that nature not only gave him the matter for his poem, but wrote his poem for him. For he has no assured poetic style of his own, as Milton had. When he seeks to have a style he falls into ponderosity and pomposity. And yet, magical as is that power, which Wordsworth had not, of assured and possessed poetic style, he has something which is an equivalent for it—the profound sincerity with which he feels his subject, and the profoundly sincere and natural character of his subject itself. . . . Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Moliere Goethe are altogether larger and more splendid luminaries in the poetical heaven than Wordsworth, but I know not where else, among the moderns, we are to find his superiors."

The fine quality of his work is seen not so much in his most pretentious poem "The Excursion" as in some of his shorter poems,— "Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey", "Intimations of Immortality", "The Solitary Reaper", "The Character of the Happy Warrior", and some of his sonnets.

"She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the spring of Dove,
A maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love."

A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!"
(Lyrical Ballads vol. II)



WORDSWORTH.

"This prayer I make
Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life,
To lead
From joy to joy: for she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil
tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of evil
men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor
all

The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith that all which we
behold
Is full of blessings."

(Lines composed above Tintern Abbey).

"Earth has not anything to show
more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could
pass by

A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning, silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres and
temples lie

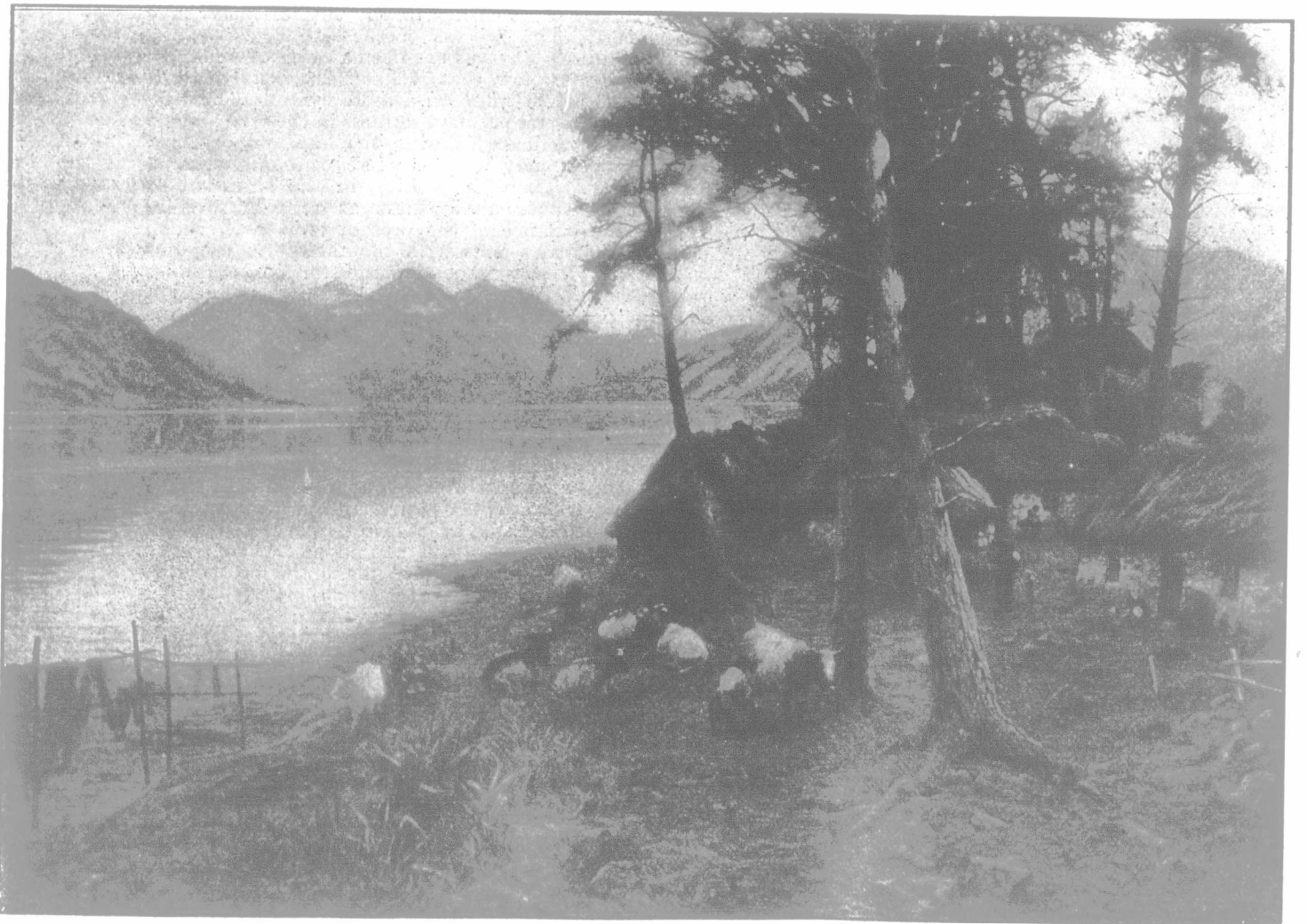
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smoke-
less air.

Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!"
(Composed upon Westminster Bridge).

EUGENE FIELD ON BOOKS.

Strange indeed are the vicissitudes which befall books, stranger even than the happenings in human life. All men are not as considerate of books as I am; I wish they were. Many times I have felt the deepest compassion for noble volumes in the possession of persons wholly incapable of appreciating them. The helpless books seemed to appeal to me to rescue them, and too many times I have been tempted to snatch them from their inhospitable shelves, and march them away to a pleasant refuge beneath my own comfortable roof tree.

Too few people seem to realize that books have feelings. But if I know one thing better than another I know this, that my books know me and love me.



J. FARQUHARSON, A.R.A.

EVENING ON LOCH DUICH.