



Life, Literature and Education.

(Contributions on all subjects of popular interest, whether relating to the Literary Society discussions or not, are always welcome in this Department.)



William Wordsworth.

Of the poets of England, not one had a life, upon the whole, more uneventful, more bounded and filled by the little common things, apparent trivialities, humdrum, everyday occurrences common to the most prosaic existence, than Wordsworth; and yet, in studying his history, the question arises: Could anything be trivial, anything humdrum, anything commonplace, to one so gifted with the superordinary vision as he.

He was born at Cockermouth, April 7th, 1770, the second son of John Wordsworth, law agent to Sir John Lowther. A few years later he was sent to a school at Hawkshead, at the other extremity of the lake district, where he was happy, chiefly because he was "left at liberty to read what he liked." Fielding's works, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, Gulliver's Travels and Tale of a Tub, at this time, he says, suited him admirably.

At the age of seventeen he went to St. John's College, Cambridge; but his poetic soul still clung more closely to the rural scenes and homely shepherds of the Cumbrian country which he had left, than to the perhaps broader life and more varied company of the great university, and, although it was during this time that his poetic career was really begun, it was not while in college, but during a holiday, while going home from a rural dance at sunrise of one beautiful summer morning, that the revelation came to him, and he knew that he should be a poet.

"Oh! need I say, dear Friend! that to the brim
My heart was full, I made no vows,
but vows
Were then made for me, bond unknown
to me
Was given, that I should be, else
sinning greatly,
A dedicated Spirit."

His third vacation was spent in a walking tour in Switzerland, with his friend Jones, at a time when the fore-thrills of the great Revolution were making themselves felt. In 1791 he took his degree, and for some time afterwards led a somewhat desultory

life, not knowing what to do with himself. He did not feel himself, he said, "good enough for the church"; he shrank from the law; so, possibly with some vague hope of drifting somehow into literary pursuits, he went up to London, where for a few months he rambled idly about the streets, without any apparent aim, and subsisting upon a very small allowance.

In November of the same year he went to France to spend the winter at New Orleans and learn French, and during this visit he became so fired with the spirit of the Revolution that he even thought of putting himself at the head of a Girondist party. His friends, however, deeming this a very foolish move for a young Englishman, promptly stopped his allowance, and he was forced to make what probably appeared to him a very ignominious return to England. The experience, however, was not utterly lost to him. Later, his thoughts on the Revolution, his enthusiasm, his disappointment when greed and "ambition, o'ervaulting itself," supplanted the first noble cry of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!" were destined to become crystallized in the literature of which he was to be the parent.

In 1795, owing to a legacy bequeathed by a friend, Wordsworth and his sister, herself a poet in every sense of the word, although she wrote no "rhyme," were enabled to settle at Racedown, in Dorsetshire, where, in a small cottage, his steady work in poetry began. Two years later they removed to Alfoxden, near Netherstowey, where Coleridge was then living, and here the famous plan for the publication of the "Lyrical Ballads" was formed. The first poem of the collection, The Ancient Mariner, was planned to defray the expenses of a short trip which the poets and Miss Wordsworth thought of taking. It was to be written jointly, but, as Wordsworth has recorded, his part of the work was not fulfilled because he quickly withdrew from an undertaking upon which he "could only have been a clog." The poem fast outgrew its first object, and when it was completed it was proposed that the poets should issue a book, of which one part, including The Ancient Mariner, should deal with supernatural subjects, the other, that chosen by Wordsworth, dealing with subjects pertaining to common life. The volume was published as "Lyrical Ballads" in 1798, and Wordsworth's part in it immediately called down much criticism, even derision. It was complained—and justly—that many of his contributions were trivial, uninspired, almost devoid of the true poetical spirit. Nevertheless, this same volume contained some, such as Expostulation and Reply, and Tables Turned, which, of themselves, should have been sufficient to reveal to the discerning that a poet of a new order had arisen; and it closed with what is now considered one of the most interesting poems in the English language, "Lines Composed Above Tintern Abbey"—a poem interesting not only for its poetic beauty, but for the fact that it has become, as Myers has expressed it, "the locus classicus, or consecrated formula of the Wordsworthian faith."

When "Lyrical Ballads" were published, the poet and his sister went to Goslar, Germany, where they spent four months, and here some of Wordsworth's best work was written—Lucy Gray, Ruth, Nutting, The Poet's Epitaph, Lines on Lucy, etc. At Goslar, too, he began The Prelude, which was not published until after his death, and which, although not considered equal to many of his shorter poems, is interesting as a most minute autobiography of the poet's own life and mental experiences.

After their return they settled at Grasmere, where Wordsworth was married, in 1802, to a Miss Mary Hutchinson, a Cumbrian maid, well fitted by temperament and intellect to be his companion. Like his sister, she also was a poet in spirit, and two of the finest lines in "Daffodils" have been attributed by her husband to her:

"They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude."

The remaining forty-eight years of Wordsworth's life, with the digression of a tour in Scotland and another in Italy, and the domestic excitement of a removal to Rydal Mount, a few miles distant, was spent quietly in the beloved lake district which has since been inseparably connected with his name. On April 23, 1850, just as his favorite cuckoo-clock struck the hour of noon, he passed very peacefully away, and his body was buried, as he had wished, in Grasmere churchyard.

Perhaps no English poet has been so mercilessly attacked as Wordsworth. He began by an iconoclasm which was as misunderstood as it was unpopular, a rebellion against the smooth-shaven, cut-and-dried imitations of Pope, which had come to be recognized as the standard of English poetry. Instead of dealing with heroic themes, and couching them in stilted or grandiloquent language, he chose to tell of the common life of common people, and in the common language in which they talked, and it was long, long, indeed, before the public learned to see ever so little beneath the plain exterior, and to realize there a poetry of thought higher almost than it could wholly grasp, a loftiness of aim whose object was to glorify, or, rather, perhaps, to reveal the glory of the things of common life. This is far from asserting that even a great percentage of Wordsworth's work was of the essence of poetry. Like all iconoclasts, he was, perhaps, inclined, at times, to go to too great an extreme, and as a consequence of his common-life ideal, much of his work is of an ordinariness incomprehensible in so great a man.

On the other hand, however, much of his most tedious writing is irradiated here and there, by flashes which could only have emanated from a distinct individuality, while his best efforts are to-day acknowledged by the most competent critics as reaching the highest point of poetic thought and expression.

Owing to this long misunderstanding, it was not until late in life that honor came to him, and he was recognized as the most illustrious literary man in England, tangible evidence of the esteem in which he

was held being shown to him in the degree of D. C. L., conferred on him by Oxford University in 1839, an annuity of £300 a year bestowed on him for distinguished literary merit in 1842, and the conferring upon him of the distinction of Poet Laureate in 1843.

His poetic fortunes have, in fact, been peculiarly erratic. Thrown into the shade by the meteoric brilliancy of Byron, his works, after his death, fell again into disrepute, and at the present day he is just beginning to come again to his own, but so strongly that he is now placed by many next to Shakespeare and Milton in the scale of English poets. Upon the other hand, it is not uncommon, even to-day, to find many who discover no interest whatever in Wordsworth. Closer inquiry, however, seldom fails to reveal the fact that adverse opinions of his poetry are, as a rule, expressed by those who know the least about it, or by those who have been unfortunate in their selections from his works. To the latter we would recommend the following (outside of those incorporated in the public-school readers): Michael, To the Daisy, Ruth, Daffodils, To the Cuckoo, Nutting, Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, The Solitary Reaper, The "Yarrow" Poems, Peele Castle, Expostulation and Reply, The Tables Turned, A Poet's Epitaph, The Fountain, Ode to Duty, Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood. Having really "studied" these poems, the lover of literature may well be trusted to seek out such other pearls as may lie hidden, perhaps, among much of less potent inspiration in Wordsworth. His longest work, The Excursion—part of an unfinished poem, The Recluse—is not considered of as high poetic worth as many of his shorter inspirations; nor are his later works, published subsequent to 1815, after which he seems to have lost, to a great extent, the "magic touch" and degenerated into "sermonizing and classical imitations."

To give an idea of Wordsworth's work or his philosophy within the compass of a short essay, is a task as hopeless as unadvisable. An understanding of these can only be arrived at by a thorough study of his thought as he has himself written it, and a striving (possibly to some, of the Peter Bell type, ineffectually) to enter into it. Yet, to those who insist that the poet was circumscribed, perhaps prevented from obtaining breadth of mind by the quietness of his life and his persistent ramblings about the Cumberland Lakes, it may be repeated that Wordsworth saw more, lived more in such a life than the ordinary mortal might in a cycle of events. Possibly the very calmness of his days, the freedom of preoccupation by outer events, gave time for his philosophy, for his observation. Thoreau said: "I have travelled much in Concord," and with equal truth Wordsworth might have said, "I have travelled much, lived much, among the Lakes of Cumberland."

Wordsworth was, in some respects, truly a seer, penetrating deep into the heart of things; and for him, especially in youth, Nature was, as it were, a genius continually opening to his vision glimpses of a Beyond