

William  
Wordsworth  
*in Context*

EDITED BY ANDREW BENNETT





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## WILLIAM WORDSWORTH IN CONTEXT

William Wordsworth's poetry responded to the enormous literary, political, cultural, technological and social changes that the poet lived through during his lifetime (1770–1850), and to his own transformation from young radical inspired by the French Revolution to Poet Laureate and supporter of the establishment. The poet of the 'egotistical sublime' who wrote the pioneering autobiographical masterpiece, *The Prelude*, and whose work is remarkable for its investigation of personal impressions, memories and experiences, is also the poet who is critically engaged with the cultural and political developments of his era. *William Wordsworth in Context* presents thirty-five concise chapters on contexts crucial for an understanding and appreciation of this leading Romantic poet. It focuses on his life, circle and poetic composition; on his reception and influence; on the significance of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literary contexts; and on the historical, political, scientific and philosophical issues that helped to shape Wordsworth's poetry and prose.

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## Preface

Wordsworth lived longer than any other major British writer of the Romantic period. The eight decades of his life from 1770 to 1850 were years of unprecedented scientific, technological, political, cultural, social and literary change. Born in the era of the American revolution against British rule, Wordsworth came of age during the French Revolution and lived through twenty years of wars with France. He also witnessed the suspension of *Habeas Corpus* in 1794, the abolition of slavery in 1807, the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, Catholic emancipation of 1829, the invention of the steam engine and the introduction of regular passenger train services from 1830, and the radical democratic changes initiated by the 1832 Reform Act. It would be surprising if Wordsworth's writing did not respond in some way to the momentous social, cultural, political, technological and scientific changes of the almost-century of his life, and as Peter Simonsen comments in a discussion of his early reception, Wordsworth may indeed be said to 'capture and hold in precarious suspension many of the internal contradictions of the period'. But Wordsworth was also the poet of what John Keats famously termed the 'egotistical sublime' – a poet whose primary resource seems so often to have been his own life, thoughts, impressions, memories and moods. The two epic-length poems that he completed, *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*, seem at first glance precisely to encapsulate this dichotomy of self and society and indeed to announce themselves as such: *The Prelude* is concerned with what its title page calls the 'Growth of a Poet's Mind' while *The Excursion* has to do with what its preface calls 'Man, Nature, and Society'. What recent criticism has managed decisively to confirm, however, is that these two modes overlap, interlink and ultimately merge. The poet of the egotistical sublime, the poet who writes the first great literary autobiography in English and whose poetry is remarkable not least for its investigation of personal impressions, memories and experiences, is also the poet who critically engaged with the transformative cultural and political developments of the era in which he

lived: he produces, as James Chandler comments, ‘extraordinary act[s] of cultural stocktaking to contextualize his own poetic experiments’.

This book’s division into four sections reflects the different contexts in which Wordsworth’s poetry is written and to which it responds. The chapters in the first section discuss Wordsworth’s life and the immediate circle of family and friends so crucial to his work, and explore questions related to the composition and revision of his poems and to the writing of his major prose works. Wordsworth’s immediate reception and later influence is then addressed in a series of chronologically arranged chapters that consider his contemporary and posthumous critical reception, and his influence on twentieth-century writers. The third section examines the various literary traditions, particularly the poetic genres and modes, on which Wordsworth so heavily depended and which he helped so decisively to transform. The final section of the book addresses the various historical, political, scientific and philosophical contexts that illuminate and help us to better understand Wordsworth’s poetry and prose.

Keats’s off-hand but influential comment on Wordsworth as the poet of the ‘egotistical sublime’ helped to promulgate one of the many myths and preconceptions that have grown up around the older poet’s work since his earliest publications – that he is unremittingly humourless, conservative and old; that he is obsessed by his own memories, thoughts and moods, and by Nature just in so much as it reflects aspects of himself; that his poetry is univocal, monotonous and preachy; that he writes in prosaic inconsequential detail exclusively of daisies and daffodils, or at best of children and beggars; that his work is either pedestrian and uninspiringly quotidian in emphasis, or that it is tendentiously transcendental and oppressively religious in orientation. The chapters in this book should help to separate Wordsworth from the many myths and popular misapprehensions that have developed around him in the two centuries since his singular and strangely haunting poems first began to be published. In their focus on the multiple literary, cultural and political contexts of his work, the chapters that follow will help to ‘liberate’, as Maureen McLane puts it in her contribution, ‘Wordsworth from “Wordsworth”’.

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## Chronology

1770 7 April	William Wordsworth (WW) born in Cockermouth in the English Lake District, second son of Ann (née Cookson; b. 1747) and John (b. 1741) (brother Richard b. 1768).
1771	Birth of WW's sister, Dorothy (DW).
1772	Birth of WW's brother, John.
1774	Birth of WW's brother, Christopher.
1775	
18 April	American War of Independence begins.
1777	
22 June	Slavery outlawed in England.
1778 March	Death of WW's mother. DW sent to live with relatives in Halifax.
1779 May	WW enrolled at Hawkshead Grammar School, lodging with Hugh and Ann Tyson.
1782	James Watt patents the steam engine.
1783	
30 December	Death of WW's father.
1784	
2 August	First mail coaches in England (Bristol–London).
1785	WW composes 'Lines Written as a School Exercise at Hawkshead' (first surviving poem).
1787 March	WW's first published poem: 'Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress' in the <i>European Magazine</i> .
Summer	WW writes main parts of <i>The Vale of Esthwaite</i> . Enters St John's College, Cambridge University.

1788–9	WW composes <i>An Evening Walk</i> (first published in January 1793).
1789	
14 July	Storming of the Bastille: beginning of French Revolution.
1790	
July–September	With Robert Jones, WW undertakes 3,000-mile walking tour through France and Switzerland.
1791	
January	WW graduates from Cambridge University with a BA degree.
February–May	WW living in London.
March	<a href="#">Part 1</a> of Thomas Paine’s <i>The Rights of Man</i> published ( <a href="#">Part 2</a> published in February 1792).
June–September	WW stays in North Wales with Jones.
November	WW travels to London and from there to France.
1792	WW composes <i>Descriptive Sketches</i> . Mary Wollstonecraft publishes <i>A Vindication of the Rights of Woman</i> . WW meets and has an affair with Annette Vallon (1766–1841).
2 December	Napoleon proclaimed Emperor of France.
15 December	Caroline, WW’s daughter with Annette Vallon, is born.
December	WW returns to England.
1793	WW living in London December 1792 to late June 1793.
21 January	Execution of Louis XVI.
February	France declares war on Britain. WW writes (but does not publish) public letter to the Bishop of Llandaff defending the French Revolution.
Summer	WW walks across Salisbury Plain and sees Tintern Abbey on his way to visit Jones in North Wales. Writes first version of <i>Salisbury Plain</i> . William Godwin publishes <i>Political Justice</i> .
September–October	WW may have revisited France.
1794	In January WW is reunited with DW in Halifax, from where they travel to Keswick to live in William Calvert’s house Windy Brow; WW nurses Raisley Calvert (from whom, after his death in January 1795, WW inherits £900).

- 28 July Habeas corpus is suspended in May until June 1995.  
Execution of Robespierre.
- 1795 Government introduces the 'gagging acts' outlawing mass meetings and political lectures.
- August–September WW meets Samuel Taylor Coleridge (STC), Robert Southey, and the publisher Joseph Cottle in Bristol. WW moves with DW to Racedown in Dorset, a house owned by the Bristol plantation-owning Pinney family, where they live rent-free until July 1797.
- 1797 By June, WW has completed his play *The Borderers*; writes first version of *The Ruined Cottage*.
- June STC visits the Wordsworths at Racedown.  
July WW and DW move to Alfoxden House at the foot to the Quantock Hills in Somerset, four miles from STC's house in Nether Stowey.
- 1798 WW rewrites *The Ruined Cottage*; working closes with STC, he composes most of the poems included in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*.  
Thomas Malthus publishes *Essay on Population*.
- July WW revisits the Wye Valley with DW and writes 'Lines Written a few Miles Above Tintern Abbey'.
- 16 September WW, DW and STC sail for Germany, where WW and DW stay in Goslar for the winter. WW begins writing autobiographical verses that will become *The Prelude*.
- October *Lyrical Ballads* published in Bristol and London.  
1799
- May WW and DW return to England.  
December WW and DW move into Town End (Dove Cottage), Grasmere, in the Lake District.
- 1800 Humphrey Davy first produces electric light.  
WW begins *Home at Grasmere*; writes poems for second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* together with the Preface.
- 1801 January Act of Union creates United Kingdom. Second (1800) edition of *Lyrical Ballads* published.
- May WW composes 'The Leech Gatherer'.  
1802
- 25 March In March and June WW composes much of the 'Ode. Intimations of Immortality'.

	Peace of Amiens creates temporary cessation of conflict between England and France until May 1803.
April	Publication of third edition of <i>Lyrical Ballads</i> , with revised preface.
August	WW visits Annette and Caroline in France.
October	<i>Edinburgh Review</i> founded.
4 October	WW marries Mary Hutchinson (b. 1770).
1803	War with France resumes.
18 June	WW's son, John, is born.
Summer	Meets Sir George Beaumont.
August–September	WW takes a six-week tour of Scotland with DW and STC, where he meets Walter Scott.
1804	
9 April	STC leaves England for Malta.
16 August	WW's daughter, Dora, is born.
2 December	Napoleon becomes Emperor of France.
1805	Publication of Walter Scott's <i>Lay of the Last Minstrel</i> .
5 February	WW's brother John dies when his ship, the <i>Earl of Abergavenny</i> , sinks off Portland Bill, Dorset.
May	WW completes the thirteen-book version of <i>The Prelude</i> .
21 October	Battle of Trafalgar.
1806	
May–June	WW writes 'Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle'.
15 June	WW's son, Thomas, is born.
August	STC returns to England.
1806–7	The Wordsworths spend the winter in Sir George Beaumont's house at Coleorton, Leicestershire.
1807	Abolition of slavery in British Empire.
25 March	British navy defeats French and Spanish fleet at Battle of Trafalgar.
28 April	Publication of <i>Poems, in Two Volumes</i> .
May	The Wordsworth family move to a larger house, Allan Bank in Grasmere.
1808	WW writes <i>The Convention of Cintra</i> criticizing the British government's foreign policy.
September	WW's daughter, Catherine, is born.



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