

William
Wordsworth
in Context

EDITED BY ANDREW BENNETT



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.

ANDREW BENNETT is Professor of English and Director of the Centre for Romantic and Victorian Studies at the University of Bristol. His publications include *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge, 1999), *Wordsworth Writing* (Cambridge, 2007), *Ignorance: Literature and Agnology* (2009) and, with Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (4th edn, 2009) and *This Thing Called Literature: Reading, Thinking, Writing* (2015).

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Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page viii
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xvii
<i>Chronology</i>	xix
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xxvi
PART I LIFE AND WORKS	I
1. Wordsworth and biography <i>Stephen Gill</i>	3
2. The Wordsworth circle <i>Susan M. Levin</i>	10
3. Dorothy Wordsworth <i>Judith W. Page</i>	19
4. Composition and revision <i>Sally Bushell</i>	27
5. Prose <i>Tim Milnes</i>	38
PART II RECEPTION AND INFLUENCE	45
6. The critical reception, 1793–1806 <i>David Higgins</i>	47
7. The critical reception, 1807–1818 <i>Peter Simonsen</i>	54
8. The critical reception, 1819–1850 <i>Richard Cronin</i>	61

9. English poetry, 1900–1930 <i>Michael O'Neill</i>	69
10. Wordsworth now <i>Maureen N. McLane</i>	78
PART III LITERARY TRADITIONS	89
11. Eighteenth-century poetry <i>Kevis Goodman</i>	91
12. The ballad tradition <i>Daniel Cook</i>	101
13. The pastoral-georgic tradition <i>David Fairer</i>	111
14. The popular tradition <i>Ann Wierda Rowland</i>	119
15. Elegy <i>Paul H. Fry</i>	127
16. The sonnet <i>Daniel Robinson</i>	136
17. Autobiography <i>Joshua Wilner</i>	145
18. Epitaphs and inscriptions <i>Samantha Matthews</i>	152
19. Sensibility, sympathy and sentiment <i>James Chandler</i>	161
PART IV CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS	171
20. Revolution <i>John Bugg</i>	173
21. Poverty and crime <i>Toby R. Benis</i>	182
22. Europe <i>Michael Ferber</i>	190

23. War <i>Simon Bainbridge</i>	199
24. Nature and the environment <i>Scott Hess</i>	207
25. London <i>Christopher Stokes</i>	215
26. Family and friendship <i>Anne D. Wallace</i>	224
27. Education <i>Frances Ferguson</i>	232
28. Animals <i>Kurt Fosso</i>	241
29. Philosophy <i>Stuart Allen</i>	250
30. Religion <i>Jonathan Roberts</i>	259
31. The senses <i>Noel Jackson</i>	267
32. Language <i>Alexander Regier</i>	275
33. The sublime <i>Philip Shaw</i>	283
34. Walking and travel <i>Robin Jarvis</i>	291
35. Spectacle, painting and the visual <i>Sophie Thomas</i>	300
<i>Further reading</i>	308
<i>Index</i>	325

Illustrations

1. Amos Green, 'Town End' (c. 1806). Image reproduced by kind permission of the Wordsworth Trust, Dove Cottage, Grasmere. *page 22*
2. Diagram of manuscript pages from 'Old Man Travelling' (DC MS 13, 2v and 3r). 32
3. Manuscript pages from 'Description of a Beggar' (DC MS 13, 2v and 3r). Image reproduced by kind permission of the Wordsworth Trust, Dove Cottage, Grasmere. 33
4. Sir George Beaumont, *Peele Castle in a Storm* (1805). Image reproduced by kind permission of the Wordsworth Trust, Dove Cottage, Grasmere. 305

Notes on contributors

STUART ALLEN is the author of *Wordsworth and the Passions of Critical Poetics* (Palgrave 2010) and has published essays on Wordsworth in *European Romantic Review*, *Romanticism* and other journals.

SIMON BAINBRIDGE is Professor of Romantic Studies in the Department of English and Creative Writing, Lancaster University. Much of his research has focused on the political context of British Romanticism and he is the author of the monographs *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1995) and *British Poetry and the Revolutionary and Napoleon Wars: Visions of Conflict* (2003). He has also edited the anthology *Romanticism: A Sourcebook* (2008) and published numerous essays on the writing of the Romantic period in journals and collections.

ANDREW BENNETT is Professor of English and Director of the Centre for Romantic and Victorian Studies at the University of Bristol. With Cambridge University Press he has published *Wordsworth Writing* (2007), *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (1999), and *Keats, Narrative and Audience* (1994). He is the author of *Ignorance: Literature and Agnology* (2009), *The Author* (2005), *Katherine Mansfield* (2004), and (with Nicholas Royle) *This Thing Called Literature: Reading, Thinking, Writing* (2015), *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (4th edn, 2009) and *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* (1995).

TOBY R. BENIS is Professor of English at Saint Louis University. Her monographs include *Romantic Diasporas: French Émigrés, British Convicts, and Jews* (2009) and *Romanticism on the Road: the Marginal Gains of Wordsworth's Homeless* (2000). She has published articles on Romantic literature and culture in *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, *Persuasions*, *European Romantic Review*, *The Wordsworth Circle* and *Criticism*. Her current research project, entitled 'Jane Austen's Neighbourhood', explores representations of spatial practice in Austen,

Wordsworth, William Hazlitt and Anna Barbauld as indices of liberal subjectivity.

JOHN BUGG is Assistant Professor of English at Fordham University. He is author of *Five Long Winters: The Trials of British Romanticism* (2014) and his work has appeared in *PMLA*, *ELH*, *TLS*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, *Romanticism*, *European Romantic Review* and *Keats–Shelley Journal*.

SALLY BUSHELL is Professor of Romantic and Victorian Literature and Co-Director of the Wordsworth Centre at Lancaster University. Her primary research specialism is British Romanticism with a particular interest in Wordsworth and the Lake District as well as in the study of textual process and the draft materials which precede the published work. As well as articles published in journals such as *Studies in Romanticism*, she is the author of *Re-Reading The Excursion* (2002) and *Text as Process: Creative Composition in Wordsworth, Tennyson and Dickinson* (2009), and the co-editor of *The Excursion* (2007).

JAMES CHANDLER has taught for many years at the University of Chicago, where he is now Franke Professor of English, Director of the Franke Institute for the Humanities and Chair of the Department of Cinema and Media Studies. His work on Wordsworth includes a number of essays and the early book, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (1984). His recent publications include *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature* (2009) and *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (2013).

DANIEL COOK is a lecturer in English at the University of Dundee. He has published widely on a range of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors, from Swift and Pope to Wordsworth and Byron. He is the author of *Thomas Chatterton and Neglected Genius, 1760–1830* (2013), editor of *The Lives of Jonathan Swift* (2011) and the co-editor (with Amy Culley) of *Women's Life Writing, 1700–1850: Gender, Genre and Authorship* (2012) and (with Nick Seager) of *The Afterlives of Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge, 2015).

RICHARD CRONIN is Professor of English Literature at Oxford Brookes University. His most recent books are *Romantic Victorians: English Literature 1824–1840* (2002), *Paper Pellets: British Literary Culture after Waterloo* (2010) and *Reading Victorian Poetry* (2012).

DAVID FAIRER is Professor of Eighteenth-Century English Literature at the University of Leeds. He is the author of *Pope's Imagination* (1984) and *The Poetry of Alexander Pope* (1989), and editor of *Pope: New Contexts* (1990), *The Correspondence of Thomas Warton* (1995), and, with Christine Gerrard, *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* (2nd edn; 2003). His most recent book, *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle 1790–1798* (2009) traces the development of English poetry during the 1790s, building on the concerns of his previous comprehensive study, *English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century, 1700–1789* (2003).

MICHAEL FERBER is Professor of English and Humanities at the University of New Hampshire. He is the author or editor of seven books about English and Continental Romanticism, as well as *A Dictionary of Literary Symbolism* published by Cambridge University Press (2nd edn; 2007).

FRANCES FERGUSON is Ann L. and Lawrence B. Battenwieser Professor in the English Department at the University of Chicago. She has published *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-spirit* (1977), *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (1992) and *Pornography, The Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action* (2005), and has written numerous essays on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century subjects and on literary theory.

KURT FOSSO is Associate Professor of English at Lewis and Clark College. He is the author of *Buried Communities: Wordsworth and the Bonds of Mourning* (2004) and, recently, 'Oedipus Crux: Reasonable Doubt in *Oedipus the King*' (2012). His work on animality and representations of animals in the Romantic period includes "'Feet of Beasts": Tracking the Animal in Blake' (2014) and "'Sweet Influences": Human/Animal Difference and Social Cohesion in Wordsworth and Coleridge, 1794–1806' (2001).

PAUL H. FRY is William Lampson Professor of English and Director of Graduate Studies, English, at Yale University. Author of books on the ode and on Romanticism-related topics in theory and criticism, together with a critical edition of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Fry's most recent books are *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (2008) and *Theory of Literature* (2012).

STEPHEN GILL now retired, was for many years a fellow of Lincoln College and a professor of English in Oxford University. He has worked on texts throughout the long nineteenth century, editing novels by Gaskell, Eliot, Dickens, Gissing, Trollope and Lawrence. His primary concern, though, has long been Wordsworth. His edition of *The Salisbury Plain Poems*

inaugurated the Cornell Wordsworth series and he has edited selections of Wordsworth's poems and prose for Oxford University Press (1984 and 2010) and Penguin (2004). His major works are three monographs – *William Wordsworth: A Life* (1989), *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (1998) and *Wordsworth's Revisitings* (2011). He has also edited *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth* (2003) and *The Prelude: A Casebook* (2006).

KEVIS GOODMAN is Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge, 2004) and her articles on eighteenth-century and Romantic literature and criticism have appeared in *ELH*, *Studies in Romanticism*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *European Romantic Review*, *The Wordsworth Circle* and elsewhere. Her current book project explores problems of place and displacement as they are taken up collaboratively in the poetry, medicine and earth science of these periods.

SCOTT HESS is Associate Professor of English at Earlham College, in Richmond, Indiana. His published books are *Authoring the Self: Self-Representation, Authorship, and the Print Market in British Poetry from Pope through Wordsworth* (2005) and *William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship: The Roots of Environmentalism in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (2012).

DAVID HIGGINS is Associate Professor in English Literature at the University of Leeds. He is the author of *Romantic Englishness: Local, National, and Global Selves, 1780–1850* (2014) and *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine* (2005), and has also co-edited with John Whale a special issue of the *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* (2011). His pedagogical publications include *Studying English Literature* (2010; co-edited with Ashley Chantler), *Teaching Romanticism* (2010; co-edited with Sharon Ruston) and *Frankenstein: Character Studies* (2008).

NOEL JACKSON is Associate Professor of Literature at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is the author of *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge, 2008) and of essays on Romantic literature and culture appearing in *ELH*, *MLQ*, *Studies in Romanticism* and elsewhere.

ROBIN JARVIS is Professor of English Literature at the University of the West of England, Bristol. He is the author of *Wordsworth, Milton and the Theory of Poetic Relations* (1991), *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel* (1997), *The Romantic Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1789–1830* (2004), *Romantic Readers and Transatlantic Travel: Expeditions*

and *Tours in North America, 1760–1840* (2012) and of numerous shorter pieces on Romantic literature and travel writing. He is also co-editor (with Philip W. Martin) of *Reviewing Romanticism* (1992).

SUSAN M. LEVIN is Professor of the Humanities at Stevens Institute of Technology, the author of *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* (1987; revised edn 2009), *The Romantic Art of Confession* (1998), and the editor of *The Longman Cultural Edition of Dorothy Wordsworth* (2009). She is active in recovering, writing about and performing works by artists of the Romantic period and is currently working on a book about Romantic theatre with special focus on women composers.

MAUREEN N. MCLANE is Professor of English at New York University. She is the author of *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge, 2008), *Romanticism and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, 2000), and co-editor of *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*. She has published three books of poems: *This Blue* (2014), *World Enough* (2010) and *Same Life* (2008) – as well as *My Poets* (2012), a hybrid of memoir and criticism. She has written extensively on romantic mediality, comparative poetics and contemporary poetics in English. She continues to work on (and with) poets dead and alive.

SAMANTHA MATTHEWS is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Bristol. She is the author of *Poetical Remains: Poets' Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century* (2004). She is writing a book on album poetry and nineteenth-century manuscript culture, and editing Charles Lamb's poetry for Oxford University Press's new standard edition of the *Works of Charles and Mary Lamb* (general editor, Gregory Dart).

TIM MILNES is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of *The Truth about Romanticism: Pragmatism and Idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge* (Cambridge, 2010), *Knowledge and Indifference in English Romantic Prose* (Cambridge, 2003) and *William Wordsworth: The Prelude* (2009). He is also the co-editor (with Kerry Sinanan) of *Romanticism, Sincerity, and Authenticity* (2010).

MICHAEL O'NEILL is a professor of English at Durham University. His books include *The Human Mind's Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley's Poetry* (1989), *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (1997) and *The All-Sustaining Air: Romantic Legacies and Renewals in British, American, and Irish Poetry since 1900* (2007), all with Oxford University Press. With the same publisher he has co-edited (with Zachary Leader)

Percy Bysshe Shelley: *The Major Works* (2003) and (with Anthony Howe and with the assistance of Madeleine Callaghan) *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (2013). He is the editor of *The Cambridge History of English Poetry* (2010) and the co-author (with Michael D. Hurley) of *Poetic Form: An Introduction* (2012), both with Cambridge University Press. His third collection of poems *Gangs of Shadow* was published in 2014.

JUDITH W. PAGE is Professor of English, Distinguished Teaching Scholar, and Director of the Center for Women's Studies and Gender Research at the University of Florida. She is the author of numerous publications, including *Wordsworth and the Cultivation of Women* (1994), *Imperfect Sympathies: Jews and Judaism in British Romantic Literature and Culture* (2004) and *Women, Literature, and the Domesticated Landscape: England's Disciples of Flora, 1780–1870* (2011; co-authored with Elise L. Smith). She has been the recipient of several fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities as well as a Skirball Fellowship at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies and a Visiting Fellowship at the Chawton House Library.

ALEXANDER REGIER is Associate Professor of English at Rice University and editor of the scholarly journal *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*. He is the author of *Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2010) and the co-editor of *Wordsworth's Poetic Theory* (2010). His articles on rhetoric, Wordsworth, Walter Benjamin, ruins, utopianism, contemporary poetry, the aesthetics of sport and other topics have appeared in *FMLS*, *European Romantic Review*, *Germanic Review*, *Sport in History* and elsewhere.

JONATHAN ROBERTS is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Liverpool. His publications on literature and religion include *William Blake's Poetry* (2007) and *Blake. Wordsworth. Religion* (2011), and, as co-editor, *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature* (2009) and *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible* (2010).

DANIEL ROBINSON is Homer C. Nearing Jr Distinguished Professor at Widener University. He is the author of *Myself and Some Other Being: Wordsworth and the Life Writing* (2014), *The Poetry of Mary Robinson: Form and Fame* (2012) and *William Wordsworth's Poetry: A Reader's Guide* (2011). He is co-editor (with Richard Gravil) of *The Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth* (2015), (with William Richey) *Lyrical Ballads and*

Related Writings (2002), and (with Paula R. Feldman) *A Century of Sonnets: The Romantic-Era Revival* (1999).

ANN WIERDA ROWLAND teaches at the University of Kansas. She is the author of *Romanticism and Childhood: The Infantilization of British Literary Culture* (Cambridge, 2012) as well as of articles on Wordsworth, Walter Scott, Romantic fiction and Romantic ballad collection. She is currently at work on American collectors of Keats and the transatlantic construction of Keats's posthumous reputation.

PHILIP SHAW is Professor of Romantic Studies at the University of Leicester. He maintains research interests in Romantic poetry and prose and the visual arts. His publications include *Suffering and Sentiment in Romantic Military Art* (2013), *The Sublime* (2006), *Waterloo and the Romantic Imagination* (2002), and, as editor, *Romantic Wars: Studies in Culture and Conflict, 1789–1822* (2000). From 2008 to 2010 he was a co-investigator for the AHRC-funded Tate Research project 'The Sublime Object'.

PETER SIMONSEN is Professor of European Literature at the University of Southern Denmark. He has published *Wordsworth and Word-Preserving Arts: Typographic Inscription, Ekphrasis and Posterity in the Later Work* (2007) and (in Danish) *Lifelong Lives: Nursing Home Novels and Retirement Stories from the Welfare State* (2014); he has also edited and co-edited a number of volumes and published essays on Romanticism's later phase, book history, literary gerontology and literature and the welfare state.

CHRISTOPHER STOKES is Lecturer in English at the University of Exeter. He is the author of *Coleridge, Language and the Sublime* (2010) and has written on, among others, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Smith and Hemans in a range of journals including *Studies in Romanticism*, *European Romantic Review* and *Women's Writing*. His current research project is Romantic prayer.

SOPHIE THOMAS is Associate Professor of English at Ryerson University in Toronto, where she teaches eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. She is the author of *Romanticism and Visuality: Fragments, History, Spectacle* (2008) and has contributed chapters to numerous books on Romantic literature and visual culture. She has published articles in *Studies in Romanticism*, *European Romantic Review*, *Romantic Circles* and the *Journal of Literature and Science*. She is currently working on a book about objects, collections and museums in the Romantic period.

ANNE D. WALLACE is Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she was head of the English department from 2005 to 2014. She is the author of *Walking, Literature, and English Culture: the Origins and Uses of Peripatetic in the Nineteenth Century* (1993) and co-editor of *The Walker's Literary Companion* and *The Quotable Walker* (2000). She has published articles on William and Dorothy Wordsworth, John Clare, Charlotte Smith and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and recently contributed 'The Deceased Wife's Sister Controversy, 1835–1907' to *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*.

JOSHUA WILNER is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the City College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He is the author of *Feeding on Infinity: Readings in the Romantic Rhetoric of Internalization* (2000), which received the 2000 Jean-Pierre Barricelli prize of the American Conference on Romanticism, and his essays have appeared in numerous journals and collections. His current book project is entitled 'Wordsworth and Mandelbrot on the Coast of Britain: Romantic Poetics and the Fractal Geometry of Nature'.

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”’.

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	Part 1 of Thomas Paine’s <i>The Rights of Man</i> published (Part 2 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 *Lyrical Ballads*, with revised preface.
- August WW visits Annette and Caroline in France.
- October *Edinburgh Review* 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 *Lay of the Last Minstrel*.
- 5 February WW's brother John dies when his ship, the *Earl of Abergavenny*, sinks off Portland Bill, Dorset.
- May WW completes the thirteen-book version of *The Prelude*.
- 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 *Poems, in Two Volumes*.
- May The Wordsworth family move to a larger house, Allan Bank in Grasmere.
- 1808 WW writes *The Convention of Cintra* criticizing the British government's foreign policy.
- September WW's daughter, Catherine, is born.

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