

Wordsworth in Easedale

H. A. L. RICE

IN THE autumn of the year 1839 Lancrigg, a small farm under Helm Crag, in the valley of Easedale, near Grasmere, became vacant and for sale. It was purchased almost at once by a Mrs Elizabeth Fletcher, the widow of a prominent Edinburgh advocate and Whig Reformer. Mrs Fletcher and her family had frequently stayed for holidays in the neighbourhood of Grasmere, several times at Thorney How which adjoined the Lancrigg property.

Mrs Fletcher was a lady of great beauty and intellect. In Edinburgh she had moved freely in leading literary and political circles, numbering among her friends such celebrated figures as Allan Cunningham, Lord Brougham, Joanna Baillie, Sir Walter Scott, Lord Cockburn and the Italian patriot Mazzini. In the Lakes she had at once been accepted on terms of intimate friendship by the famous Dr Arnold and his family at Fox How, by the Hardens of Brathay Hall, by the Southeys at Greta Hall, Keswick, and, most gratifyingly of all, perhaps, by the great poet and his family at Rydal Mount. It was no less a person than Wordsworth himself who acted on Mrs Fletcher's behalf in the negotiations over the purchase of Lancrigg.

Mrs Fletcher had two sons, Miles and Angus, and two daughters, Margaret and Mary. The former had married, in March 1830, Dr John Davy, brother of the famous Sir Humphrey. Mary was later, in August 1847, to marry Sir John Richardson, the naturalist and Arctic explorer.¹

Both daughters kept diaries, and after Wordsworth's death in 1850 Mrs Davy expanded her memories of the poet for the benefit of her children. So far as is known, these reminiscences have never been published,² though Mrs Moorman makes a brief

¹ For a fuller account of the Fletchers of Lancrigg see H. A. L. Rice, *Lake Country Portraits*, 1967, Ch. 7.

² The extracts from Mrs Davy's diary subsequently quoted were found after his death, among the papers of the present author's step-father, the late Anthony A. Fletcher, great-great-nephew of Mrs Davy. They appear to have been copied by him at some early period of his life. As he never mentioned them, he had presumably forgotten their existence.

reference to (and quotation from) them in her great biography of Wordsworth.¹

Mrs Davy thus records on 16 January 1844:

An agreeable little dinner party (at Lancrigg) — Mr Wordsworth, Miss Fenwick, Mr Crabbe Robinson and others. Mr Wordsworth, on entering our parlour, seemed to have about him the remains of some unpleasant mood of mind, but very soon after sitting down to dinner the cloud cleared from his venerable face and, as it seemed, from his mind. My mother and he went back to reminiscences of the olden time — the early days of the French Revolution. He spoke of Helen Maria Williams, and of Mrs Charlotte Smith, on which my mother took up an old favourite sonnet of hers, 'Queen of the silver bow — by the pale beam . . .' and she and Mr Wordsworth repeated it together in a sort of duet, their fine voices in happy contrast.

On coming into the little parlour after dinner, he began to speak of the annoyances to which Authors — Poets especially — are subject from criticism, and then more particularly of the various criticisms to which his lately composed epitaph² had been exposed. We thought that he met very eloquently one of the objections made by his nephew, Dr Christopher Wordsworth, Head Master of Harrow, to the concluding lines of the epitaph:

But he to Heaven was vowed
Thro' a life long and pure,
And Christian faith calmed in his soul
the fear of change and death.

Dr Wordsworth had observed in a letter to the Poet that day: 'You might have said the same of any ordinary Christian.' 'Now,' said Mr Wordsworth, 'I know of nothing ordinary or extraordinary in relation to a man as a Christian. If he is really a Christian and conforms in practice to his faith, then, be he what he may, he is the highest type of man. Highly as I thought of Southey, it never occurred to me that as a Christian he could differ from any other, or be more exalted than any other.'

The diary continues: While Mrs Quillinan³ was sitting with us, H. Fletcher⁴ ran in to say that he must be off to Oxford within the hour. . . . Some

¹ Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth: a Biography, The Later Years, 1803-1880*, Oxford, 1957, II, 73.

² On Robert Southey, for his memorial in Crosthwaite Church, Keswick. Southey had died on 25 July 1843, and Wordsworth had been appointed to succeed him as Poet Laureate.

³ Wordsworth's greatly-loved daughter, Dora.

⁴ Henry Fletcher, son of Mrs Davy's brother, Miles. Henry later took Holy Orders and ultimately became Rector of Grasmerc from 1878 to 1893.

of us went down with him to the Mail. We met Mr W. at the Post Office in charming mood — his spirits excited by the sunshine. We entered at once on a full flow of discourse, introduced I cannot say how, and continued as we walked to and fro, waiting the arrival of the Mail, first on the evil of allowing knowledge of natural things to take the place either of enjoyment in those, or of devotion to the Author and Giver. He mentioned the common saying, from Chaucer downwards, of a physician's being naturally undevout. He looked benevolently on H.F. as he mounted the coach, and seemed quite disposed to give an old Man's blessing to the young man setting forth on an untried field, and then, no wise interrupted by the hurrying to and fro of ostlers with their steaming horses, or passengers with their carpet bags, he launched into a dissertation in which there was, I thought, a remarkable union of his powerful diction and his practical good sense — on the subject of College habits, and of his utter distrust of all attempts to nurse virtue by an avoidance of temptation.

On the 6th of March Mr W. went with us to — and during the drive mentioned with marked pleasure a dedication written by Mr Keble¹ and sent to him for his approval and permission to have it prefixed to Mr Keble's new volume of Latin Lectures on Poetry given at Oxford. Mr W. said that he had never seen any estimate of his poetic powers, or more especially of his aim in poetry that seemed to him so discriminating and so satisfactory.

Another famous name appeared in Mrs Davy's reminiscences later that year. On 16 July she wrote:

Mr and Mrs W. dined with us. He spoke of Charles James Fox and mentioned (the only such mention I ever heard from him) 'a *bon mot* of my own'. It was when Fox and he were introduced to each other in London at one of the great Whig houses [Holland House?] Fox rose from a table (a card table, I think) at which he was seated and as he advanced to meet the poet he said, 'I am glad to see Mr Wordsworth, though we differ as much in our views of Politics as we do in our views of Poetry'. 'To which,' said Wordsworth, 'I replied: "You must admit that in Poetry I am the Whig and you the Tory."' This meeting took place in 1806, only a few weeks before Fox's death.

It was on this occasion at Lanerigg that Wordsworth, so Mrs Davy remembered, spoke of his old friend and collaborator, S. T. Coleridge:

Mr and Mrs Price (Mr Bonamy Price, afterwards Professor of Political Economy at Oxford) with two lady relatives and Mr Rose, a brother of Mrs Price's and a devout admirer of Wordsworth, joined us later.

¹ The Rev. John Keble (1792-1866) of Oriel College, Professor of Poetry at Oxford, and one of the founding fathers of the Tractarian Movement.

A circle was made as large as our little parlour could hold. Mr Price sat next to Mr W. and by design or fortunate accident introduced some remark on the powers and discourse of Coleridge. Mr W. entered heartily on this subject. He said that the liveliest and truest image he could give of Coleridge's talk was that of a majestic river, the sound or sight of its course being those which one caught at intervals — sometimes concealed by forests, sometimes lost in sand, then flashing out broad and distinct, then again taking a turn which one's eye could not follow though one knew it to be the same river. . . . Mr W. went on to say that in his opinion Coleridge had been spoiled as a poet by going to Germany; that the bent of his mind, which was at all times very much towards metaphysical theology, had there been fixed in that direction.

From Coleridge the talk then turned to Scott, and Mr W., in his best manner and with earnestness and in noble diction, gave his reasons for thinking that as a poet Scott would not live. 'I don't like,' he said, 'to say all this or to take to pieces some of his best reputed passages, especially in the presence of my wife because she thinks me too fastidious,¹ but as a poet he cannot live for he has never, in verse, written anything addressed to the immortal part of man'. As a prose author, Mr W. admitted that Scott had touched a higher vein, because there he had really dealt with feelings and passions. As historical novels, professing to give the manners and customs of the past, he (Mr W.) did not attach much value to the works of Scott, holding them to be an attempt where success was impossible.

Whatever may be thought of this last generalization, which Wordsworth might well have modified had he lived to read the works of modern writers of historical fiction, it will probably be widely agreed that the most recent dispassionate estimate of Scott's literary genius does not differ greatly from that of his friend and contemporary, Wordsworth.

On matters religious, Mrs Davy was 'glad to note', in her recorded remembrances at the beginning of 1845,

some really interesting discourse from W. At the beginning of the evening he was grave and silent. On something being said, however, relating to the present state of the Church, he opened his own views and gave expression, as I have only once heard him do before, to his own humble, devout faith. Speaking of St Paul, 'Oh, what a character that is!' he said. 'How well we know him; how human, yet how noble; how little outward suffering moved him. It is not in thinking of *them* that he calls himself wretched, but when speaking of the inward conflict . . . Paul and David may be called the two Shakesperian characters of the Bible; both types, as it were, of human nature

¹ An interesting sidelight, this, on the unobtrusive Mary Wordsworth.

in its strength and weakness. Moses is grand, but then it is chiefly from position, from the office entrusted to him. We do not know him as a brother man.'

Early in 1846, while her husband was abroad on medical duties of a more or less official nature, Mrs Davy records a visit she paid to Rydal Mount:

Went today to pay my respects to the Poet on his birthday, April 7th. He seemed pleased. Both he and dear Mrs W. very happy in the arrival of their four grandsons; the three elder to go to school at Rossall next week. Some talk concerning schools led Mr W. into a discourse, which I thought very interesting, on the dangers of emulation. He had written very lately to his nephew Charles remarking on a sermon of his, preached as a farewell to his Winchester pupils, speaking of emulation as a help to school progress. Mr W. thinks that envy is likely to go along with this, and therefore would hold it to be unsafe. 'In my own case,' he said, 'I never felt emulation with another man but once, and that was accompanied by envy — it's a horrid feeling! This was in the study of Italian, which I entered on at College along with —. I never engaged in the proper studies of the University, so that I had no temptation in those to envy anyone. But I remember with pain that I had envious feelings when my fellow-student in Italian got before me. I was his superior in many mental departments, but he was the better Italian scholar and I envied him. The annoyance this gave me made me feel that emulation was not for me, and it made me very thankful that as a boy I had never experienced it.' In the course of the conversation Mr W. said, smiling: 'One other time in my life I felt envy. It was when my brother was nearly certain of success in a foot race with me. I tripped up his heels; this must have been envy.' 'It was worse,' quoth Mrs W. 'It was malice. Oh, William! very bad indeed.' Mr — came in before I left the Mount today, and enjoyed as I did the pleasant flow of talk in the Poet of 76.

Another entry, for 11 January 1847, runs:

Met Mr W. He turned with me to L. How¹ and something led to the mention of Milton whose poetry, he said, was early more a favourite with him than that of Shakespeare. Speaking of Milton's not allowing his daughters to learn Greek, or at least not exerting himself to teach it to them, he admitted that this seemed to betoken a low impression of the condition and purposes of a woman's mind. 'And yet,' Mr W. went on, 'where could he have picked up such notions in a country which had seen so many women of learning and ability? But his opinion of what women ought to be, it may be presumed, is given in his Eve as contrasted with the right condition of man, *He for God only,*

¹ Perhaps this is Butterlyphow (a rocky knoll or 'how' on the way to Easedale).

she for God in him. Now that is a low, a very low, and a very false estimate of woman's condition.' Mr W. was amused at my showing the almost contemporary notice of Milton by Wycherley, and after reading it spoke a good deal of the obscurity of men of genius in or near their own time. He had just been reading, he said, Miss Strickland's *Life of Queen Elizabeth*¹ in which hardly (*sic*) or nothing of Shakespeare was to be found. 'But,' he continued, 'the most singular thing is that in all the works of Bacon there is not an allusion to Shakespeare.'

Later in that same Spring Mrs Davy recorded the great sorrow of the ageing poet in the mortal illness of his beloved daughter Dora; her entry for 29 April 1847 reads:

My notebook says — A mournful visit from Mr W. . . . yet it is a comfort now, and will always be a pleasure to remember that his gentleness in the hour of grief, his uncomplainingness as to any person or circumstance connected with the sad event, were exactly such as Christianity, and that only, teaches to an affectionate and afflicted heart.

Dora [Mrs Quillinan] died on 9 July 1847. A few days later, Mrs Davy remembered her impression of the bereaved father's self-composure:

Those who saw her father after her death were surprised by his calmness. The close of the weary suffering was a relief to him and to her dear, admirable mother, but there were sad days to them both to come afterwards. The 14th of July was the funeral day. No friends were invited, but Mrs Arnold² and I went to Grasmere Church to pray along with those deep mourners. . . . I shall long remember the still, soft, warm summer beauty of that morning. Never were life, the joyous summer life of Nature, and Death and bereavement more solemnly and sadly contrasted than on that day.

The following year, 1848, Mrs Davy recorded a visit from Wordsworth on a summer evening, on the occasion of the Ambleside Rushbearing:

After seeing the field party out of doors, we had a large miscellaneous one within. The presence of Judge Crampton emboldened me to ask Mr W. to join us and when we were all assembled he came in. When he and the 'upright Judge' sat down in the middle of the room to converse we were all delighted with the beauty of their heads. They were,

¹ In Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England*, 1840-8.

² Widow of Dr Thomas Arnold of Rugby, then still living at Fox How, Rydal.

indeed, unusually fine in form. Mr W. seemed to take pleasure in the interview, and when the party dispersed some of us escorted Mr W. to the foot of his Mount. I am sure, dear A., you will not forget the still beauty of that evening. Nothing interrupted it but the note of a bird which I did not know till Mr W. said it was one of the notes of the owl . . . and in this he was confirmed by his servant James, who had come to meet his master with a cloak to keep the night air from hurting him.

An entry for Monday, 22 April 1850 throws light on Wordsworth's revisions:

I had some talk which interested me much today with good Mrs Nicholson at the [Ambleside] Post Office, concerning Mr W. She has known him perhaps longer than anyone here, and in her simple, homely, hearty manner does as full justice to his sweet and fine qualities as anyone could. She went back, in the manner of the old, on her earlier days of acquaintance with the poet and his sister — when they lived at Grasmere — and when, as she said, they [William and Dorothy] would often walk to Ambleside together after dark in order to repair some omission or alter some arrangement in the proof sheets of his poems, which had been posted for the press. 'At the time,' said Mrs Nicholson, 'the Mail used to pass through at one in the morning, so my husband and me used to go early to bed, but when Mr and Miss Wordsworth came, let it be as late as it would, my husband would get up and let them in, and give them their letter out of the box, and then they would sit in our parlour or in the kitchen discussing over it, and reading and changing, till they had made it quite to their minds. Then they would seal up the packet again, and knock at our bedroom door, and say, 'Now, Mrs Nicholson, please will you bolt the door after us? Here is our letter for the post. We'll not trouble you any more this night.' And, oh, they were always so friendly to us, and so loving to one another.'

On Tuesday, 23 April 1850 she wrote:

On returning from his early visit to [Rydal] Mount this morning, your father [Dr Davy] told me that Mr W. was dying but still conscious, knowing those about him. It must have been about half-past-ten when your father left him. It seems that soon after eleven the difficulty of breathing increased, and the sound in the throat indicating that the end was very near, all in the house were summoned to his bedside. He said something, not very articulate, but supposing it to refer to the Commendatory Prayer for the Departing his son John read that passage of the last service, and his father showed some satisfaction in having been understood. Exactly at 12, when, as old Mrs Cookson told me, 'the cuckoo clock was singing noon', he passed gently away.

As soon as the last breath was drawn, Mrs W went to his poor sister and said to her 'He is gone to Dora'. The poor old lady [Dorothy Wordsworth] received the tidings with unusual calmness; indeed during the whole illness she has been gently patient.

This departure is a heart sorrow. There is no saying how much of the interest of life it takes from this valley in our daily walk. And then we have to think of the sorrowing loneliness of her who loved him better than her life, and who knew herself to be beloved as few can deserve to be in like degree. The simplest prose could not better express all that Mrs W. actually is, than do those sonnets of finished poetical beauty which he has addressed to her picture. There can indeed be little earthly brightness for her affectionate spirit now, but I can believe that this night she is earnestly thanking God for his release from pain and weariness, and from the grief of being the survivor as she is now.

On 25 April Dr and Mrs Davy went to Rydal Mount, at Mrs Wordsworth's invitation, to take their last sight of the dead poet. After commenting at some length upon the gentleness and repose of the expression upon his face, Mrs Davy remembered how her husband had been struck by a remarkable likeness to portraits he had seen of Dante. Mrs Davy, too, was struck by this resemblance:

. . . I thought if the laurel wreath had been there, it would have been nearly the same face as that which we see in the portraits considered authentic of that poet of an older time.

There is an article in yesterday's *Times*, well-written, wisely and kindly. But, oh, it seems so cold to what we are all feeling in the extinction of this light of our valley, this household, neighbourly remembrancer of high and pure thoughts. But let us be thankful for the privilege of having had some intercourse with him. Let us cherish the thoughts of his simplicity, his love of Nature, his benevolence for his brother man in all conditions. He had cast aside all speculative democracy, but he was practically democratic in no common degree. In the frugality of his habits, the considerate attention to his servants, the sociable conversing intercourse which he kept up with persons inferior in the scale of society according to ordinary estimates, he was admirable as an example in the small community in which he lived. In all such respects, his life was a constant illustration of his verse, a living protest against all that was artificial or false, or ungentle in the conventional notions and arrangements of our modern life.