

## William and Dorothy

In the late 1790s Dorothy and Wordsworth resumed their close relationship. It was in 1798 that Dorothy first kept a journal, chronicling time spent at Alfoxden in Somerset. It was during this period that Wordsworth and [Samuel Taylor Coleridge](#) had the idea for, and wrote, many of the poems for *Lyrical Ballads*. Dorothy's journal provides a unique insight into one of the turning points of English poetry.

Also dating from this period is Coleridge's first description of Dorothy, in a letter to his publisher Joseph Cottle in July 1797:

*Wordsworth & his exquisite Sister are with me - She is a woman indeed! - in mind, I mean, & heart - for her person is such, that if you expected to see a pretty woman, you would think her ordinary - if you expected to find an ordinary woman, you would think her pretty! - But her manners are simple, ardent, impressive - Her information various - her eye watchful in minutest observation of nature - and her taste a perfect electrometer - it bends, protrudes, and draws in, at subtlest beauties and most recondite faults.*

A few years later the writer [Thomas De Quincey](#) observed similar qualities during a visit to Dove Cottage:

*Her face was of Egyptian brown; rarely, in a woman of English birth, had I seen a more determinate gipsy tan. Her eyes were not soft nor, were they fierce or bold; but they were wild and startling, and hurried in their motion. Her manner was warm and even ardent; her sensibility seemed constitutionally deep; and some subtle fire of impassioned intellect apparently burned within her.*

Dorothy and Wordsworth moved into Dove Cottage on 20 December 1799. The enthusiasm with which Dorothy threw herself into making the house a home is evident from her own and her brother's letters. This is Wordsworth just a few days after they arrived:

*D. is now sitting by me racked with the tooth-ache. This is a grievous misfortune as she has so much work for her needle among the bedcurtains etc. that she is absolutely buried in it. We have both caught troublesome colds in our new and almost empty house, but we hope to make it a comfortable dwelling... D is much pleased with the house and appurtenances the orchard especially; in imagination she has already built a seat with a summer shed on the highest platform in this our little domestic slip of mountain.*

The 'seat with a summer shed' was built and Dorothy supplies a wealth of information that we still use today in letters and, of course, in her *Grasmere Journal*.

## Dorothy's *Grasmere Journal*

Dorothy's *Grasmere Journal* begins on 14 May 1800:

*I resolved to write a journal of the time till W & J return, & I set about keeping my resolve because I will not quarrel with myself, & because I shall give Wm Pleasure by it when he comes home again.*

Dorothy too must have gained pleasure from her journal as she continues it long beyond her

brothers' return - until January 1803. The journal was never intended as a private record but as a means of recording people, places, events and impressions which could be shared with those she was close to.

Journals by women from the period are quite common: educated, middle-class women often had time on their hands and relatively few ways to spend it. Dorothy never refers to some of the common accomplishments of 'ladies' of her generation: there is no painting, drawing or playing the piano and her sewing is all practical. For Dorothy these appear to be replaced by walking, gardening, reading and transcribing her brother's poetry.

The journal is full of fresh and evocative descriptions of Grasmere and the surrounding landscape. Dorothy records the landscape at all times of day and in all seasons. She experienced the landscape by walking through it - the changing weather, the sounds, the people she met. Her reasons were often practical - the post was delivered to Ambleside, there were plants to be found for the garden and neighbours to visit. Although she always found pleasure in her walks, pleasure was often not the prime motivation in setting out. Here is a fairly typical example from 18 May 1800:

*Went to church, slight showers, a cold air. The mountains from this window look much greener & I think the valley is more green than ever. The corn begins to shew itself. The ashes are still bare. Went part of the way home with Miss Simpson ... A little girl from Coniston came to beg. She had lain out all night - her step mother had turn'd her out of doors. Her father could not stay at home 'She flights so'. Walked to Ambleside in the evening round the lake. The prospect exceeding beautiful from loughrigg fell. It was so green that no eye could be weary of reposing upon it. The most beautiful situation for a house in the field next to Mr. Benson's. It threatened rain all the evening but was mild and pleasant. I was overtaken by 2 Cumberland people on the other side of Rydale who complimented me upon my walking. They were going to sell cloth, & odd things which they make themselves in Hawkshead & the neighbourhood. The post was not arrived so I walked thro the town past Mrs Taylors, & met him. Letters from Coleridge & Cottle - John Fisher overtook me on the other side of Rydale - he talked much about the alteration in the times, & observed that in a short time there would be only two ranks of people, the very rich & the very poor, for those who have small estates says he are forced to sell, & all the land goes into one hand. Did not reach home till 10 o'clock.*

This entry has a bit of everything: landscape, people, politics, poetry - and all because she was going to fetch the post.

Several descriptions are bits of prose poetry. This is just one of many examples, from 12 December 1801:

*Helm Crag rose very bold & craggy, a being by itself, & behind it was the large Ridge of mountain smooth as marble & snow white - all the mountains looked like solid stone on our left going from Grasmere i.e. White Moss & Nab Scar. The snow hid all the grass & all signs of vegetation & the Rocks shewed themselves boldly everywhere & seemed more stony than Rock or stone. The Birches on the Crags beautiful, Red brown & glittering - the ashes glittering spears with their upright stems - the hips very beautiful, & so good!! ... The moon shone upon the water below Silver-how, & above it hung, combining with Silver how on one side, a Bowl-shaped moon the curve downwards - the white fields, glittering Roof of Thomas Ashburner's house, the dark yew tree, the white fields - gay & beautiful. Wm lay with his curtains open that he might see it.*

This has: personification, simile, metaphor and the informal style of journal writing also means that image follows image in a concentrated way.

The relationship between Dorothy's journal and Wordsworth's poetry is an interesting and fruitful one. The most famous example of the journal influencing the poetry is the [daffodils](#):

*The wind was furious... the Lake was rough... When we were in the woods beyond Gowbarrow park we saw a few daffodils close to the water side, we fancied that the lake had floated the seeds ashore & that the little colony had so sprung up -- But as we went along there were more & yet more & at last under the boughs of the trees, we saw that there was a long belt of them along the shore, about the breadth of a country turnpike road. I never saw daffodils so beautiful they grew among the mossy stones about & about them, some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness & the rest tossed & reeled & danced & seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind that blew upon them over the Lake, they looked so gay ever glancing ever changing. This wind blew directly over the lake to them. There was here & there a little knot & a few stragglers a few yards higher up but they were so few as not to disturb the simplicity & unity & life of that one busy highway... -- Rain came on, we were wet.*  
(15 April, 1802)

The poem was not written until two years later and the similarities are clear. The most striking difference, perhaps, is that Wordsworth turns a shared experience into a personal one.

The [daffodils](#) poem is the most famous of several direct uses Wordsworth makes of the journal, but there are other, more subtle examples too:

*He [William], with his Basin of Broth before him untouched & a little plate of Bread & butter he wrote the Poem to a Butterfly! - He ate not a morsel, nor put on his stockings but sate with his shirt neck unbuttoned, & his waistcoat open while he did it. The thought first came upon him as we were talking about the pleasure we both always feel at the sight of a Butterfly. I told him that I used to chase them a little but that I was afraid of brushing the dust off their wings & did not catch them - He told me how they used to kill all the white ones when he went to school because they were frenchmen. Mr Simpson came in just as he was finishing the Poem. After he was gone I wrote it down & the other poems & I read them all over to him.*  
(DW Journal, 14th March, 1802)

*Oh! pleasant, pleasant were the days,  
The time, when in our childish plays  
My sister Emmeline and I  
Together chased the Butterfly!  
A very hunter did I rush  
Upon the prey: - with leaps and springs  
I followed on from brake to bush;  
But She, God love her! feared to brush  
The dust from off its wings.*

The journal entry here hints too at Dorothy's other involvement: as transcriber of poems and recorder of a poet at work.

## Winter 1802

### Dorothy's journal entry for Sunday 14th February 1802

A fine morning the sun shines but it has been a hard frost in the night. There are some little snowdrops that are afraid to pop their white heads quite out, & a few blossoms of Hepatica that are half starved. William left me at work altering some passages of the Pedlar, & went into the orchard - the fine day pushed him on to resolve & as soon as I had read a letter to him which I had just received from Mrs Clarkson he said he would go to Penrith, so Molly was dispatched for the horse - I worked hard, got the backs pasted the writing finished, & all quite trim. I wrote to Mrs Clarkson & put up some letters for Mary H - & off he went in his blue Spenser & a pair of new pantaloons fresh from London. He turned back when he had got as far as Franks to ask if he had his letters safe, then for some apples - then fairly off. We had money to borrow for him. - It was a pleasant afternoon. I ate a little bit of cold mutton without laying cloth & then sate over the fire reading Ben Jonson's Penshurst, & other things. Before sunset I put on my shawl & walked out. The snow-covered mountains were spotted with rich sunlight, a palish buffish colour. The roads were very dirty, for though it was a keen frost the sun had melted the snow & water upon them. I stood at Sara's gate & when I came in view of Rydale I cast a long look upon the mountains beyond. They were very white but I concluded that Wm would have a very safe passage over Kirkstone, & I was quite easy about him.

## Spring 1802

### Dorothy's journal entry for Thursday 18th March 1802

A very fine morning the Sun shone but it was far colder than yesterday. ... Rydale vale was full of life & motion. The wind blew briskly & the lake was covered all over with Bright silver waves that were there each in the twinkling of an eye, then others rose up & took their place as fast as they went away. The Rocks glittered in the sunshine, the crows & the Ravens were busy, & the thrushes & little Birds sang ...

It was nearly dark when I parted from the Lloyds that is, night was come on & the moon was overcast. But as I climbed Moss the moon came out from behind a Mountain Mass of Black Clouds - O the unutterable darkness of the sky & the Earth below the Moon! & the glorious brightness of the moon itself! There was a vivid sparkling streak of light at this end of Rydale water but the rest was very dark & Loughrigg fell & Silver How were white & bright as if they were covered with hoar frost. The moon retired again & appeared & disappeared several times before I reached home. Once there was no moonlight to be seen but upon the Island house & the promontory of the Island where it stands. ... I had many exquisite feelings when I saw this lowly Building in the waters among the dark & lofty hills, with that bright soft light upon it - it made me more than half a poet.

## Summer 1800

### Dorothy's journal entry for Sunday 26th July 1800

Very warm - Molly ill - John bathed in the lake. I wrote out Ruth in the afternoon, in the morning I read Mr Knight's Landscape. After tea we rowed down to Loughrigg Fell, visited the white foxglove, gathered wild strawberries, & walked up to view Rydale we lay a long time looking at the lake, the shores all embrowned with the scorching sun. The Ferns were turning yellow, that is here & there one was quite turned. We walked round by Benson's wood home. The lake was now most still & reflected the beautiful yellow & blue & purple & grey colours of the sky. We heard a strange sound in Bainriggs wood as we were floating on the water it seemed in the wood, but it must have been above it, for presently we saw a raven very high above us - it called out & the Dome of the sky seemed to echoe the sound - it called again & again as it flew onwards, & the mountains gave back

the sound, seeming as if from their center a musical bell-like answering to the birds hoarse voice. We heard both the call of the bird & the echoe after we could see him no longer. We walked up to the top of the hill again in view of Rydale - met Mr & Mrs Simpson on horseback. The crescent moon which had shone upon the water was now gone down. Returned to supper at 10 o'clock.

## Autumn 1800

### Dorothy's journal entry for Friday 10th October 1800

In the morning when I arose the mists were hanging over the opposite hills & the tops of the highest hills were covered with snow. There was a most lovely combination at the head of the vale - of the yellow autumnal hills wrapped in sunshine, & overhung with partial mists, the green & yellow trees & the distant snow-topped mountains. It was a most heavenly morning. The Cocker-mouth Traveller came with thread hardware mustard, &c. She is very healthy, has travelled over the mountains these thirty years. She does not mind the storms if she can keep her goods dry. Her husband will not travel with and ass, because it is the trumper's badge - she would have one to relieve her from the weary load. She was going to Ulverston & was to return to Ambleside Fair. After I had finished baking I went out with Wm Mrs Jameson & Miss Simpson towards Rydale - the fern among the Rocks exquisitely beautiful - we turned home & walked to Mr Gells. After dinner Wm went to bed - I read Southey's letters. Miss Simpson & Mrs Jameson came to tea. After tea we went to Lloyds - a fine Evening as we went but rained in returning - we were wet - found them not at home. I wrote to Mrs Clarkson - sent off The Beggar &c by Thomas Ashburner who went to fetch our 9th Cart of Coals. William sat up after me writing Point Rash judgment.

## Point Rash Judgment

### from Poems on the Naming of Places

A NARROW girdle of rough stones and crags,  
 A rude and natural causeway, interposed  
 Between the water and a winding slope  
 Of copse and thicket, leaves the eastern shore  
 Of Grasmere safe in its own privacy:  
 And there myself and two beloved Friends,  
 One calm September morning, ere the mist  
 Had altogether yielded to the sun,  
 Sauntered on this retired and difficult way.  
 ----Ill suits the road with one in haste; but we

Played with our time; and, as we strolled along,  
 It was our occupation to observe  
 Such objects as the waves had tossed ashore--  
 Feather, or leaf, or weed, or withered bough,  
 Each on the other heaped, along the line  
 Of the dry wreck. And, in our vacant mood,  
 Not seldom did we stop to watch some tuft  
 Of dandelion seed or thistle's beard,  
 That skimmed the surface of the dead calm lake,  
 Suddenly halting now--a lifeless stand!

And starting off again with freak as sudden;  
In all its sportive wanderings, all the while,  
Making report of an invisible breeze  
That was its wings, its chariot, and its horse,  
Its playmate, rather say, its moving soul.  
--And often, trifling with a privilege  
Alike indulged to all, we paused, one now,  
And now the other, to point out, perchance  
To pluck, some flower or water-weed, too fair  
Either to be divided from the place

On which it grew, or to be left alone  
To its own beauty. Many such there are,  
Fair ferns and flowers, and chiefly that tall fern,  
So stately, of the queen Osmunda named;  
Plant lovelier, in its own retired abode  
On Grasmere's beach, than Naiad by the side  
Of Grecian brook, or Lady of the Mere,  
Sole-sitting by the shores of old romance.  
--So fared we that bright morning: from the fields  
Meanwhile, a noise was heard, the busy mirth

Of reapers, men and women, boys and girls.  
Delighted much to listen to those sounds,  
And feeding thus our fancies, we advanced  
Along the indented shore; when suddenly,  
Through a thin veil of glittering haze was seen  
Before us, on a point of jutting land,  
The tall and upright figure of a Man  
Attired in peasant's garb, who stood alone,  
Angling beside the margin of the lake.  
"Improvident and reckless," we exclaimed,

"The Man must be, who thus can lose a day  
Of the mid harvest, when the labourer's hire  
Is ample, and some little might be stored  
Wherewith to cheer him in the winter time."  
Thus talking of that Peasant, we approached  
Close to the spot where with his rod and line  
He stood alone; whereat he turned his head  
To greet us--and we saw a Man worn down  
By sickness, gaunt and lean, with sunken cheeks  
And wasted limbs, his legs so long and lean

That for my single self I looked at them,  
Forgetful of the body they sustained.--  
Too weak to labour in the harvest field,  
The Man was using his best skill to gain  
A pittance from the dead unfeeling lake  
That knew not of his wants. I will not say  
What thoughts immediately were ours, nor how

The happy idleness of that sweet morn,  
With all its lovely images, was changed  
To serious musing and to self-reproach.

Nor did we fail to see within ourselves  
What need there is to be reserved in speech,  
And temper all our thoughts with charity.  
--Therefore, unwilling to forget that day,  
My Friend, Myself, and She who then received  
The same admonishment, have called the place  
By a memorial name, uncouth indeed  
As e'er by mariner was given to bay  
Or foreland, on a new-discovered coast;  
And POINT RASH-JUDGMENT is the name it bears.

**William Wordsworth, 1800**

<http://www.wordsworth.org.uk/history/index.asp?pageid=219>