

**ENGLISH MEN OF
LETTERS.
WORDSWORTH**

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English Men of Letters. Wordsworth by F. W. H. Myers & John Morley

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F. W. H. MYERS & JOHN MORLEY

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WORDSWORTH**

English Men of Letters

EDITED BY JOHN MORLEY

WORDSWORTH

BY

F. W. H. MYERS

*"From worlds not quickened by the sun
A portion of the gift is won
An intermingling of Heaven's pomp is spread
On ground which British shepherds tread"*



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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
CHAPTER I.	
BIRTH AND EDUCATION.—CAMBRIDGE	1
CHAPTER II.	
RESIDENCE IN LONDON AND IN FRANCE	15
CHAPTER III.	
MISS WORDSWORTH.—LYRICAL BALLADS.—SETTLEMENT AT GRASMERE	25
CHAPTER IV.	
THE ENGLISH LAKES	38
CHAPTER V.	
MARRIAGE.—SOCIETY.—HIGHLAND TOUR	55
CHAPTER VI.	
SIR GEORGE BRAUMONT.—DEATH OF JOHN WORDSWORTH	65
CHAPTER VII.	
“HAPPY WARRIOR,” AND PATRIOTIC FORMS	74

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER VIII.	
CHILDREN.—LIFE AT RYDAL MOUNT.—“THE EXCURSION”	PAGE 84
CHAPTER IX.	
POETIC DICTION.—“LAODAMIA.”—“EVENING ODE”	. . . 103
CHAPTER X.	
NATURAL RELIGION 123
CHAPTER XI.	
ITALIAN TOUR.—ECCLESIASTICAL SONNETS.—POLITICAL VIEWS.—LAUREATRSHIP 153
CHAPTER XII.	
LETTERS ON THE KENDAL AND WINDERMERE RAILWAY. —CONCLUSION 167

WORDSWORTH.

CHAPTER I.

BIRTH AND EDUCATION.—CAMBRIDGE.

I CANNOT, perhaps, more fitly begin this short biography than with some words in which its subject has expressed his own feelings as to the spirit in which such a task should be approached. "Silence," says Wordsworth, "is a privilege of the grave, a right of the departed: let him, therefore, who infringes that right by speaking publicly of, for, or against those who cannot speak for themselves, take heed that he opens not his mouth without a sufficient sanction. Only to philosophy enlightened by the affections does it belong justly to estimate the claims of the deceased, on the one hand, and of the present age and future generations, on the other, and to strike a balance between them. Such philosophy runs a risk of becoming extinct among us, if the coarse intrusions into the recesses, the gross breaches upon the sanctities, of domestic life, to which we have lately been more and more accustomed, are to be regarded as indications of a vigorous state of public feeling. The wise and good respect, as one of the noblest characteristics of Englishmen, that jealousy of familiar ap-

proach which, while it contributes to the maintenance of private dignity, is one of the most efficacious guardians of rational public freedom."

In accordance with these views the poet entrusted to his nephew, the present Bishop of Lincoln, the task of composing memoirs of his life, in the just confidence that nothing would by such hands be given to the world which was inconsistent with the dignity either of the living or of the dead. From those memoirs the facts contained in the present work have been for the most part drawn. It has, however, been my fortune, through hereditary friendships, to have access to many manuscript letters and much oral tradition bearing upon the poet's private life;¹ and some details and some passages of letters hitherto unpublished will appear in these pages. It would seem, however, that there is but little of public interest in Wordsworth's life which has not already been given to the world, and I have shrunk from narrating such minor personal incidents as he would himself have thought it needless to dwell upon. I have endeavoured, in short, to write as though the Subject of this biography were himself its Auditor, listening, indeed, from some region where all of truth is discerned and nothing but truth desired, but checking by his venerable presence any such revelation as public advantage does not call for, and private delicacy would condemn.

As regards the critical remarks which these pages contain, I have only to say that I have carefully consulted such notices of the poet as his personal friends have left

¹ I take this opportunity of thanking Mr. William Wordsworth, the son, and Mr. William Wordsworth, the grandson, of the poet, for help most valuable in enabling me to give a true impression of the poet's personality.

us, and also, I believe, nearly every criticism of importance which has appeared on his works. I find with pleasure that a considerable agreement of opinion exists—though less among professed poets or critics than among men of eminence in other departments of thought or action whose attention has been directed to Wordsworth's poems. And although I have felt it right to express in each case my own views with exactness, I have been able to feel that I am not obtruding on the reader any merely fanciful estimate in which better accredited judges would refuse to concur.

Without further preface I now begin my story of Wordsworth's life, in words which he himself dictated to his intended biographer. "I was born," he said, "at Cockermouth, in Cumberland, on April 7th, 1770, the second son of John Wordsworth, attorney-at-law—as lawyers of this class were then called—and law-agent to Sir James Lowther, afterwards Earl of Lonsdale. My mother was Anne, only daughter of William Cookson, mercer, of Penrith, and of Dorothy, born Crackanthorp, of the ancient family of that name, who from the times of Edward the Third had lived in Newbiggen Hall, Westmoreland. My grandfather was the first of the name of Wordsworth who came into Westmoreland, where he purchased the small estate of Sockbridge. He was descended from a family who had been settled at Peniston, in Yorkshire, near the sources of the Don, probably before the Norman Conquest. Their names appear on different occasions in all the transactions, personal and public, connected with that parish; and I possess, through the kindness of Colonel Beaumont, an almsy, made in 1525, at the expense of a William Wordsworth, as is expressed in a Latin inscription carved upon it, which carries the pedigree of the family back four