



The Hidden Wordsworth

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Kenneth R. Johnston surprises his readers in small ways in his large and impressive biography of William Wordsworth. Based on Johnston's research, Wordsworth emerges as the odd boy of Westmorland, a solitary child of nature only because the local populace largely disdained his family. His father was the land agent for Sir James Lowther, the hated aristocrat who owned or controlled much of the land in Westmorland and Cumberland.

The inclination to chart a separate course consequently continues throughout Wordsworth's life. His father had separated the four Wordsworth brothers at the death of their mother, when Wordsworth was only seven. They were raised separately by women who boarded students at the local schools they attended. They saw their sister Dorothy only rarely and their father mostly on school holidays.

Perhaps it was this that made Wordsworth something of a solitary at St. John's College, Cambridge. He certainly could have excelled there, and University honors would have assured the kind of career most middle-class boys sought. Johnston shows, however, how empty the Cambridge honors system could be and that it depended on University politics.

Johnston discusses Wordsworth in France, his relationship with Annette Vallon and their daughter Caroline, in considerable detail. This, too, was a mark of his independence, and of his love for republican France. Some form of marriage had occurred, though the only surviving document referring to it contains so many errors as to render it dubiously legal.

The most controversial section of Johnston's study is his conjecture that Wordsworth maintained some connection with the British secret service during the French Revolution, and that Vallon played some part in this. The conclusion of the study is much more predictable, as Wordsworth's career continues its upward trajectory following publication with Samuel Taylor Coleridge of *LYRICAL BALLADS* (1798).

Sources for Further Study

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