

DOVE COTTAGE: WORDS- WORTH'S HOME

GERHARD R. LOMER.

OLD houses have a certain interest not always easily defined. There is something in the mere mention of the home in which our grandparents lived or in which we were born that evokes a response in our minds or in our hearts. The early homes of people who have subsequently become famous possess a peculiar attraction for the generations of men who come afterward. Perhaps the feeling that is aroused in us is merely akin to that simple awe with which, as children, we regarded some cherished possession of an otherwise forgotten ancestor, some bit of the flotsam and jetsam of Time which causes the child of the present to wonder and to pause for a moment in the day's occupation. But more truly, it seems to me, there is here an indication of the hero-worshipping instinct of mankind. In this affectionate reverence with which we regard the *memorabilia* of the days of yore there is a touch of the feeling that here we are on the borders of the vast land of Memory, and that the ground whereon we stand is holy. Possibly something of the glory or passion or poignancy of earlier days still haunts these walls. The greatness of a great man seems to make worthy all with which he comes in contact. The light of his personality seems to shed a radiance over even the meanest and humblest things. "What porridge had John Keats?"

It is with this conviction strong in our minds that we walk beside Grasmere Lake towards Dove Cottage, that early home of William Wordsworth, and a spot sanctified with associations of the daily round of household ministration and of quiet meditation that are part and parcel of the plain life and high thought of the rough poet and his sprightly sister Dorothy. Whatever may be the ultimate reason for their interest, there can be no doubt that few visit the English Lakes without pausing for a moment or two at least beside this humble cottage where Wordsworth lived and wrote for nine years at the beginning of the last century.

Hidden from the main road from Ambleside to Keswick by houses of a later date, the cottage stands nevertheless as it was in Wordsworth's time. Thanks to the efforts chiefly of the Rev. Stopford A. Brooke, one of the kindest of England's historians of

literature, and of Professor Knight, the editor of Wordsworth's complete works, Dove Cottage has been preserved as a Mecca for all lovers of Wordsworth and one of the greatest shrines for the thousands who yearly make a pilgrimage through the Lake District. The cottage has been carefully and intelligently restored, and now presents practically the same appearance as it did when Wordsworth lived there with Dorothy and his gentle wife, Mary Hutchinson. It is small and neat and whitewashed. Its trellises of climbing plants still cling to the walls and shade windows. The door is still hospitably open to the passerby. Memories of a century linger in the tiny rooms, and the echoes of voices well known in the literature of England still haunt the steeply sloping garden behind the house. There on memorable days and quiet evenings in times past gathered together William Wordsworth and Dorothy, Coleridge, Charles Lamb, de Quincey, Walter Scott, Southey, and many others whose dwelling-places have in turn become in other parts of England the shrines of those modern wayfarers who carry scrip and inkhorn upon their literary pilgrimage.

Turn aside awhile from the highway. Forget for the moment, if you can, the noise and the speed and the discourtesy of those who might well be called our modern highwaymen, so thoroughly do they rule the road and terrorize good slow-going folk. Try to picture the scene before you with "that inward eye which is the bliss of solitude." Approach the doorway with something of that simplicity of heart and uplift of mind which, in the midst of common and lowly things, were two of the outstanding characteristics of that poetic William by whose chimney and whose roof-tree we are now standing.

Instead of Dorothy Wordsworth at the gate, there stood for many years an old countrywoman who, in her youth, knew William and his sister Dorothy. It was she who, in neat attire and with the pride of age and the gracious ease of familiarity, was wont to show the pilgrim "Mr. Wordsworth's home". She was a sprightly old lady, was Mrs. Dixon, as many will remember the custodian of Dove Cottage. Each day would find her at the cottage from nine o'clock in the morning until five in the afternoon, and the thousands who have listened to her with interest will look back with pleasure upon their visit, recalling how much she did to make them feel that it was a good and pleasant place in which to be. Like a part of a fairy tale she seemed, as she stood at the doorway of this tiny cottage, which itself might well have come out of the pages of Grimm or Laboulaye; one forgot for the time being the hurry and bustle of the present, and at the touch of her magic wand one was

content to turn Time back in its flight and to live again in the days that she remembered so well.

"Yes," Mrs. Dixon would remark, as she stood leaning on her cane before the fireplace in the upper room which is so full of memories for lovers of Wordsworth, "yes, I remember Wordsworth well, and a fine old man he was. That's what he looked like when I knew him," and she would point to a picture on the wall, the sketch by W. Wyon, made when Wordsworth was seventy-seven years old.

"And next to it," she would continue, in her reminiscent way, with her kindly old eyes smiling out of the wrinkled face framed in its neat white cap, "is Dove Cottage as it used to be in the old days before all these houses were built," and she would point with her cane through the leaded glass of the casement window at the grey buildings which press close upon the little cottage and hide from view the lovely lake of Grasmere and the slope of Loughrigg Fell.

In this little water colour sketch, dating from the time when Wordsworth lived in the cottage, you can see the house as he found it with his sister Dorothy a few days before Christmas in 1799. It had formerly been an inn, with the sign of *The Dove and Olive Bough*, and in recognition of this earlier existence it has since been known as Dove Cottage, a little nest of peacefulness between the fair waters of Grasmere and the swelling slopes of hills that rise some thirteen hundred feet behind it. The cottage was for many years the centre of the literary life of the Lake District, even after Wordsworth found it too small for his growing family and moved in 1808 to Rydal Mount, for de Quincey then lived in it during some twenty years. It was beneath this roof and underneath these garden boughs that Wordsworth read aloud his *Excursion* and Coleridge his *Christabel*, and that Dorothy would read to the poets Spenser's *Epithalamium*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Thomson's *Castle of Indolence*, and the plays of Ben Johnson and of Shakespeare. It was over the "half kitchen and half parlour fire" that the poet and his friends were "very merry" often far into the night, with the firelight falling on plain faces animated by the zest of discussion and of talk such as is rarely heard beneath a roof so humble.

In a letter dated September 1800, after they had been in Dove Cottage for almost a year, Dorothy Wordsworth writes: "Our cottage is quite large enough for us, though very small; and we have made it neat and comfortable within doors; and it looks very nice on the outside, for though the roses and honeysuckles which we have planted against it are only of this year's growth, yet it is covered all over with green leaves and scarlet flowers; for we have trained scarlet beans upon threads which are not only exceedingly

beautiful, but very useful, as their produce is immense. We have made a lodging-room of the parlour below stairs, which has a stone floor, therefore we have covered it all over with matting. We sit in a room above stairs, and we have one lodging-room with two single beds, a sort of lumber-room, and a small low unceiled room which I have papered with newspapers, and in which we have put a small bed."

De Quincey, writing some sixteen years later, also affectionately describes the cottage as it was during the years in which it was his home, and the spot where he wrote much of *The Confessions of an Opium Eater*:

Let there be a cottage, standing in a valley, eighteen miles from any town; no spacious valley, but about two miles long by three-quarters of a mile in average width. . . . Let the mountains be real mountains, between 3,000 and 4,000 feet high, and the cottage a real cottage. . . . a white cottage, embowered with flowering shrubs, so chosen as to enfold a succession of flowers upon the walls, and clustering around the windows, through all the months of spring, summer and autumn; beginning, in fact, with May roses, and ending with jasmine. . . . but here, to save myself the trouble of too much verbal description, I will introduce a painter, and give him directions for the rest of the picture. . . . Paint me, then, a room seventeen feet by twelve, and not more than seven and a half feet high. This, reader, is somewhat ambitiously styled, in my family, the drawing-room; but, being contrived "a double debt to pay," it is also, and more justly, termed the library; for it happens that books are the only articles of property in which I am richer than my neighbours. Of these I have about five thousand, collected gradually since my eighteenth year. Therefore, Painter, put as many as you can into this room. Make it populous with books; and, furthermore, paint me a good fire, and furniture plain and modest, befitting the unpretending cottage of a scholar. And near the fire paint me a tea-table; and (as it is clear that no creature can come to see me on such a stormy night) place only two cups and saucers on the tea-tray; and if you know how to paint such a thing, symbolically or otherwise, paint me an eternal tea-pot,—eternal, *a parte ante* and *a parte post*; for I usually drink tea from eight o'clock at night to four in the morning.

Truly Dove Cottage, with its garden, is one of the miniature beauty spots of England, a cameo of landscape, infinite riches in a little room. Its white walls are covered with vines which hang over the well-proportioned casements and help to link the cottage with the rich background of green in the garden behind. The cottage snuggles right into the hillside; the kitchen window is on a level with the lower slope; and one steps from a doorway on the

second floor immediately on to the narrow garden path. When Wordsworth first came here, this hillside was a small wilderness of wood and a tangle of undergrowth. He and his sister set to work to make the wilderness blossom. They cleared it, they made steps in the huge stones which jutted out of the ground, they planted fruit trees and honeysuckle and flowers, and they built a shelter—Dorothy's bower—at the top of the little garden where Wordsworth used to muse and gaze out across the lake to the hills beyond, while his sister read to him. Here, too, he composed some of his most notable poetry, and here in the evenings Dorothy and Coleridge would walk to and fro in the moonlight for long hours together, their eager minds answering one another with no thought of Time.

The garden stands to-day practically as it did a century ago, with the same flowers blossoming, and it is not difficult to conjure up the figure of Dorothy, especially as she has left us so excellent a help as her *Journal*. In it we find page after page expressive of the most loving delight in this quiet retreat, and of constant solicitude for her brother whose helper and inspiration she so constantly was. Indeed, among the peasantry round about Grasmere who daily saw the Wordsworths, it was generally said that "Dorothy was the cleverest man of the two at his job, and he always went to her when he was puzzled. Dorothy had the wits." It was here that she divided her time between the humblest cares of her humble household and the best that has been thought and written in the English language. Witness the following entries which give with a frank naïveté a vivid picture of those days:

Sauntered a good deal in the garden, bound carpets, mended old clothes, read *Timon of Athens*, dried linen. . . We put the new window in, I ironed and worked about a good deal in house and garden. . . I sat with William in the orchard all the morning and made my shoe. . . All the morning I was busy copying poems. Gathered peas, and in the afternoon Coleridge came. . . In the morning I copied *The Brothers*. Coleridge and William went down to the lake. They returned, and we all went together to Mary Point, where we sate in the breeze and the shade, and read William's poems. We drank tea in the orchard. . . William was composing all the morning. I shelled peas, gathered beans, and worked in the garden. . . I read a little of Bosworth's *Life of Johnson*. I went to lie down in the orchard. . . At eleven o'clock Coleridge came when I was walking in the clear moonshine in the garden. He came over Helvellyn. William was gone to bed, and John also, worn out with his ride round Coniston. We sate and chatted till half past three, Coleridge reading a part of *Christabel*. . . After William had composed a little, I persuaded him to go into the orchard. We walked backwards and forwards. The prospect most divinely beautiful from the seat; all colours, all melting into each other.

I went in to put bread in the oven, and we both walked within a view of Rydale. William again composed at the sheepfold after dinner . . . William worked on *The Pedlar* all the morning. He kept the dinner waiting till four o'clock . . . William went into the orchard after breakfast, to chop wood . . . William worked at *The Pedlar* . . . After tea I read aloud the eleventh book of *Paradise Lost*. We were much impressed and also melted into tears . . . While we were at breakfast, he wrote the poem *To a Butterfly*. He ate not a morsel, but sate with his shirt neck unbuttoned and his waistcoat open while he did it. The thought first came upon him as we were talking about the pleasure we both always felt at the sight of a butterfly . . . A sweet morning. We have put the finishing stroke to our bower, and here we are sitting in the orchard. It is one o'clock. We are sitting upon a seat under the wall, which I found my brother building up when I came to him . . . It is a nice cool shady spot. The small birds are singing, the lambs bleating, cuckoos calling; the thrush sings by fits . . .

As one sits to-day in the bower at the top of the garden that slopes downward to the little cottage, it is not difficult to picture the poet's sister Dorothy and his wife Mary busy about their housework while William works in this garden, mending the lock or laying the stone steps that lead up the grassy bank. Nor is it difficult to see again the three sitting in the quiet of the evening in the "orchard" amid the flowers that they themselves have planted and tended, reciting verses that the poet himself has written or some of those sonnets of Milton which so moved Wordsworth. The smoke still ascends from the kitchen chimney as it did a hundred and more years ago and mingles with the haze in the evening sky, the flowers still bloom, the birds twitter in the branches of the trees that Wordsworth planted; and in our hearts as we sit in that little bower in quietness and solitude there echo the words of the poet himself:

Oh, if such silence be not thanks to God
For what hath been bestowed,
Shall gratitude find rest?

It is not strange that the Lake District should have encouraged Wordsworth to poetical expression. Few spots combine such a variety of summer peace and winter storm, of luxuriant meadow and barren crag, of meandering stream and dashing waterfall. There are few nobler prospects than the stretches of luminous heather and bracken reaching upward to the rocky summits of these everlasting hills. Here we begin to understand Wordsworth's new attitude to nature, and to realize the significance of his early poems in the world of literature. If nature endowed him with power to become a poet, it would seem that humanity constrained him to

be a philosopher. It is difficult, at any rate, to separate these two aspects in his writings, for he sees into the heart of things, and he is one of the great interpreters of nature in terms of humanity.

Glance through his poems on the *Naming of Places*, if you would realize how closely the spots around Grasmere are associated with his life at Dove Cottage. Turn over the pages of *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*, if you would see how this land of lakes and mountains entered into the soul of Wordsworth when he was but a boy and appeared again, transformed and ennobled, when he had become a man and a poet. Read again the *Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey*, where he describes how at one time

The sounding cataract
 Haunted me like a passion; the tall rock,
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
 Their colours and their forms, were then to me
 An appetite, a feeling and a love,
 That had no need of a remoter charm
 By thought supplied, nor any interest
 Unborrowed from the eye:

and how, later on, this unthinking and instinctive love of nature merely for its own sake gave place to a deeper and truer conception through which the poet, now initiated,

Learned
 To look on nature, not as in the hour
 Of thoughtless youth; but hearing often-times
 The still, sad music of humanity,
 Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
 To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
 A motion and a spirit that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
 And rolls through all things.

It is interesting to try to reconcile our conception of the poetic mind which could thus conceive of life with the external reality of that plain and somewhat uncouth man who went about on foot amid these hills and lakes, drinking inspiration from the simplest sights of the country, and then giving utterance to poetry whose greatest qualities are its simplicity, its sympathy, and its truth. There lived till lately men and women who remembered him well, having often, when they were children, seen him trudging along the roads and hillsides, a solitary and disconcerting figure.

Canon Rawnsley has preserved for us an interesting description of Wordsworth in the midst of the process of poetical composition as he appeared to one of the natives of this district: "I think I can see him at it now—he was out upon his gres walk and then he would set his head a bit forrad, and put his hands behint his back. And then he would staat a bumming, and it was bum, bum, bum, stop; then, bum, bum, bum, reet down till t'other end, and then he'd set down and git a bit o' paper out and write a bit; and then he'd git up, and bum, bum, bum, and goes on bumming for long enough right down and back agean. I suppose, ye kna, the bumming helped him out a bit. However, his lips was always goan' whoale time he was upon the gres walk."

Small wonder that Wordsworth's deep voice in the country lanes used to frighten the children; and his habit of mumbling or "bumming" as he walked through the fields did not cause the farmers to look with overmuch respect upon their neighbour who was afterwards to become the Poet Laureate of England. Wordsworth was a tall, active man, very fond of walking, but fonder of his own meditations than of conversing with the country people, with whom, on the contrary, Hartley Coleridge was on the best and most familiar of terms. Wordsworth was an excellent skater, and there is still preserved in Dove Cottage a pair of his skates. No lover of Wordsworth will forget how, when a schoolboy at Hawkshead, that delightfully quaint old village a few miles away, the young William—one cannot think of him as "Bill"—used "all shod with steel" to skate on Esthwaite Water and, symbolic of his later work, to "cut across the reflex of a star."

Dorothy Wordsworth has not only left us very valuable and interesting biographical material in her *Journal*, but she is to be remembered as the constant adviser and helper of her brother, to whom she was bound by the deepest affection. Frequently she refers to him as "my beloved", and her diary is a touching record of her solicitude and helpfulness. Wordsworth's affection for his "dearest friend" was no less deep and lasting, and there are constant references to "the blessing of my later years" in his poems.

She gave me eyes, she gave me ears,
And humble cares and delicate fears,
A heart, the fountain of sweet tears,
And love, and thought and joy.

De Quincey's description of her as he first saw her at Dove Cottage is interesting:

"Her face was of Egyptian brown; rarely in a woman of English birth had I seen a more determined gipsy tan. Her eyes were not

soft as Mrs. Wordsworth's, 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."

In striking contrast was Wordsworth's wife whom he brought to Dove Cottage in the year 1802, Mary Hutchinson, that beautiful and gentle spirit to whom he refers as "the phantom of delight," a woman who, De Quincey says, appeared to be the embodiment of sunny benignity and radiant graciousness.

These were the unusual trio who inhabited this little cottage, so symbolical of peace. Perhaps nowhere could three be found who combined in so rare a degree the simplicity of country living with high seriousness of thinking, as they dwelt together in unity, peace, and concord.

Surely it was, within doors, a kingdom small enough; yet outside there was an empire of woods and fells and lakes to roam at will. And indoors and out there was the whole wide region of the spirit and the league-long stretches of the imagination through which these choice spirits delighted to wander in warm companionship. To these last, one has the "Open Sesame" in the pages of Wordsworth's poems. Over the hills and dales one can still wander as one pleases, treading the roads that Wordsworth trod, and gazing in philosophic meditation upon the very hills on which his eyes so often rested. But it is perhaps only in the quietness of Dove Cottage that one can come to realize fully the sources of that inspiration which made Wordsworth one of the great interpreters of Nature and of Humanity.