



William Wordsworth - Ecclestical Sonnets, In Series, 1821-22: "The flower that smells the sweetest is shy and lowly."

William Wordsworth

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William Wordsworth was born on 7 April, 1770 in Cockermouth, in Cumbria, northwest England. Wordsworth spent his early years in his beloved Lake District often with his sister, Dorothy. The English lakes could terrify as well as nurture, and as Wordsworth would write "I grew up fostered alike by beauty and by fear." After being schooled at Hawkshead he went to St. John's College, Cambridge but not liking the competitive nature of the place idled his way through saying he "was not for that hour, nor for that place." Whilst still at Cambridge he travelled to France. He was immediately taken by the Revolutionary fervor and the confluence of a set of great ideals and rallying calls for the people of France. In his early twenties he ventured again to France and fathered an illegitimate child. He would not see that daughter till she was 9 owing to the tensions and hostilities between England and France. There now followed a period of three to four years that plagued Wordsworth with doubt. He was now in his early thirties but had no profession, was rootless and virtually penniless. Although his career was not on track he did manage to publish two volumes, both in 1793; *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches*. This dark period ended in 1795. A legacy of £900 received from Raisley Calvert enabled Wordsworth to pursue a literary career in earnest. In 1797 he became great friends with a fellow poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. They formed a partnership that would change both their lives and the course of English poetry. Their aim was for a decisive break with the strictures of Neoclassical verse. In 1798 the ground breaking *Lyrical Ballads* was published. Wordsworth wrote in the preface "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." Most of the poems were dramatic in form, designed to reveal the character of the speaker. Thus the poems set forth a new style, a new vocabulary, and new subjects for poetry. Coleridge had also conceived of an enormous poem to be called "The Brook," in which he proposed to treat all science, philosophy, and religion, but soon laid the burden of writing it to Wordsworth. To test his powers for that endeavour, Wordsworth began writing the autobiographical poem that would absorb him for the next 40 years, and which was eventually published as *The Prelude, or, Growth of a Poet's Mind*. By the 1820s, the critical acclaim for Wordsworth was growing, but perhaps his best years of work were behind him. Nonetheless he continued to write and to revise previous works. With the death in 1843 of his friend and Poet Laureate Robert Southey, Wordsworth was offered the position. He accepted despite saying he wouldn't write any poetry as Poet Laureate. And indeed he didn't. Wordsworth died of pleurisy on 23 April 1850. He was buried in St Oswald's church Grasmere.

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