



Reviewer
Russell Harris QC

Radical Wordsworth: the Poet Who Changed the World

By Jonathan Bate

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There has never a better time to revisit the work of William Wordsworth. April saw the 250th anniversary of the poet's birth. It also witnessed the biggest forced exclusion of the modern British population from its countryside: a countryside which is seen as 'beauteous' and worthy of protection in large part as a direct result of the Romantic Movement that Wordsworth fostered.

For many of us now (even in the slightly relaxed late spring circumstances) Wordsworth's ability, on the page, to evoke a memory of Britain's landscape and its profound relationship with the human spirit is the closest that we will get to the truly wild outdoors.

To mark this anniversary (but obviously oblivious to the potential for lockdown) Professor Sir Jonathan Bate, the renowned English academic and 'ecocritic', has produced a hugely insightful biography of the poet.

It is not a linear description of the poet's life. Rather, it is episodic and fragmentary. It seeks to concentrate on those key 'spots in time' which Wordsworth himself believed profoundly affect and alter every human life.

Its main thesis is that Wordsworth's still hugely relevant creative genius expressed itself early and best when he was working with the more erudite, more mercurial but less talented Coleridge. Once this creative cord was severed, Wordsworth's powers and the quality of his work suffered a long decline.

Bate begins his book, not with the poet's birth but with the surreal events of a day in 1806 which resulted in Coleridge storming out of a shared house in a fit of sexually charged jealousy and anger aimed at Wordsworth. This particular 'spot in time' marks the beginning of the collapse of the two men's close friendship and of Wordsworth's eventual artistic fall.

Thereafter, Bate spends most of the text in a careful consideration of Wordsworth's earlier works; of his ability to recall his painful youth, its losses and its places and of his skill at conjuring up the memory of the natural world and its relationship to human 'sensibility'.

And, it is to the insights in this part of the book that readers, and especially lockdown readers forbidden the reality of the countryside, will be most drawn. Wordsworth's ability to explain and to explore the connection between 'man and nature'

from a distance of time and place is still movingly arresting – even to the modern ear. This, most famously, from Tintern Abbey:

'... 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...'

Bate expertly explains why and how such simple blank verse, describing the memory and impact of the countryside on the human spirit, was both radically new and why it remains so evocative and so moving to a modern, largely urban population.

Those looking to this book for the more conventional left-leaning political biography of a type which the title might first suggest will not find it. That was not Bate's intention. It is true that Wordsworth was deeply influenced by his time in France and by the ideas of the Revolution. It is true also that the concept of the common man and the rejection of formal religion permeate his best work. Bate explains this fully. But Wordsworth's radicalism is shown to be more subtle, more pervasive and more relevant to today's world than any of that.

Indeed, Bate concludes this thoughtful and excellent biography with a wider political call-to-arms. A call which is now more powerfully profound than he might have imagined when he wrote it in a (just) pre-pandemic world. In a closing chapter entitled 'Love of Nature Leading to Love of Man' he explores the importance of the love of and safeguarding of nature (what we might now call sustainability) and its inexorable relationship with the 'love of mankind'. He tells us explicitly that religion and science have failed us and that mankind needs now to look to poetry (and the other arts that move us) to drive the protection of the planet and our place in it. He reminds us that we need to heed the younger Wordsworth who, through his poetry, is still warning us of the fragility of human existence and the need for us all to take care of:

'... the pristine earth:
The planet in its nakedness...
Man's only dwelling.' ●



About the reviewer
Russell Harris QC is a planning and environment silk and special advocate at Landmark Chambers.