In the midst of Wordsworth’s recollection of what the poet ‘owed to books in early life’ in The Prelude comes a characteristic exclamation to the poem’s addressee, Coleridge: ‘O Friend! O Poet! Brother of my soul’ (Prel–13, v. 180). Coleridge, ‘beloved Friend’, is asked to reflect on the ways in which wandering ‘as we did / Through heights and hollows and bye spots of tales’ might have shaped their shared poetic sensibilities (233–5). The Prelude is punctuated by such apostrophes to friendship, which bind together books and nature in a landscape of affection. Indeed, the first use of the term in the 1805 Prelude comes in line five, as the gentle breeze is greeted as a ‘welcome Friend!’ (l. 5). This is echoed in Book Twelve, where nature itself becomes the ‘best and purest Friend’ of creative genius (XII. 10). Wordsworth’s relationship with Coleridge—who, as the poet’s unnamed ‘dear Friend’, ‘my Friend! so prompt / In sympathy’ also stands in for the ideal reader—thus becomes continuous with the inspirational power of the Lake District (l. 145, 646–7). This is highlighted by the evocation of the poet’s Hawkshead schooldays where the joy of shared ‘boyish sport’ around Windermere or Levens Sands is both an expression of friendship and of appreciation for the landscape: ‘Thus daily were my sympathies enlarged’ (II. 54, 181). Reading, too, is allied both to friendship and to the natural landscape: the memory of
vainly saving for The Arabian Nights with his schoolfellows is linked to moments of greedy summer reading beside the Derwent, and even his enjoyment of books at Cambridge makes the same connection, as he laughs with Chaucer ‘beside the pleasant Mills of Trompington’ and hails Spencer as ‘Brother, Englishman and Friend’ (ll. 276, 283). Like its creator, the poem is powerfully attracted to the image of the solitary bard, but also thrives on moments of exchange and correspondence with others. Although The Prelude focuses on the growth of the individual’s mind, and on the ‘self-sufficing power of solitude’, it is also about the ‘social principle’, the act of sympathy, embedded in nature, in which the reader is invited to participate (ll. 78, 408).

Friendship, then, for Wordsworth, transcends individual relationships to become a vital aspect of his creative imagination. As a theme, it manifests itself not only in The Prelude, but in images as different as the bond between dogs, the silent companionship of saints, and the affectionate address ‘To the Spade of a Friend’. Yet while such poems are alert to the value of companionship and shared ideals, they also repeatedly suggest the potential association of friendship with loss and displacement. ‘Inscription For the Spot where the Hermitage stood on St. Herbert's Island, Derwent-Water’, first published in the 1800 Lyrical Ballads, for instance, begins with an intimate appeal to the reader—‘thou’—to recollect the ‘dear love of some one friend’ (LBOP, 179, 1.179). The deep affection between the two saints, Herbert and Cuthbert, sustained in their solitary vocations, seems a deliberate parallel with Wordsworth and Coleridge. Even in the ‘happiness of love’ with a dear friend,
however, might come thoughts to ‘make the heart sink’. Indeed, the celebration of friendship between the two saints finds its true expression in death: ‘These holy men both died in the same hour’. The connection between friendship and grief is also evident in ‘INCIDENT, Characteristic of a favourite Dog, which belonged to a Friend of the Author’, from the 1807 *Poems in Two Volumes*. Here, although we begin with the comradeship between master and dogs, the real subject of the poem is the bond which exists between the animals. As Dart the greyhound falls through the ice in pursuit of a hare, Music seeks to rescue him: ‘A loving Creature she, and brave! / And doth her best her struggling Friend to save’ (*CP2V*, 242, ll. 31–2). The awkwardness of the verse here—underlined by the changes made to the line in the 1815 edition, ‘And fondly strives her struggling Friend to save’—seems to encode an uncertainty about the expression of friendship itself. In the clustered consonants of each version, as in the clumsiness of the image where Music stretches out her paws—‘Very hands as you would say!’—Wordsworth seems deliberately to play with the problem of voicing affection. For just as the animals cannot express their bond directly, so too is the poem an unspoken tribute to Thomas Hutchinson, the ‘Friend of the Author’ in the title and Wordsworth’s future brother-in-law. The use of the dogs as an intermediary in the expression of affection is echoed in ‘Address to the Spade of a Friend’, where Wordsworth’s friendly admiration for Thomas Wilkinson is deflected onto the ‘tool of honour’ (*CP2V*, 257, l. 3). Yet even here, in Wordsworth’s playful evocation of shared love and labour, death creeps in, as the poet
wonders who will inherit the spade. It will continue as an ‘inspiring Mate’, an image of friendship which, like the poem, will live on after Wilkinson’s death (258, l. 26).

What do these examples show us? For a start, they remind us of the scope of Wordsworth’s friendships—despite the repeated critical focus on the central importance of Coleridge, familial and local acquaintances are as important to his creative development as those in the literary world. Friendship, for Wordworth, could take many forms, ranging from kinship bonds—most notably, with Dorothy and John, but also with the Hutchinsons—to the close and often life-long links with Hawkshead schoolmates such as John Spedding and John Fleming, literary peers such as Walter Scott, disciples such as Thomas De Quincey, patrons such as George Beaumont, and neighbours and local landowners such as Wilkinson. On a related note, like The Prelude, these poems remind us that Wordsworth’s concept of friendship is bound up with the Lake District landscape, and with places, like the island on Derwent Water or Wilkinson’s grounds, which become associated with affection. As such, they also work to express the importance of community for Wordsworth, with which friendship is closely connected.

Wordsworth’s is not the exuberant Coleridgean vision of ‘frendotatoi meta frendous’ (CL, l. 103), a recurrent, oft-sought, repeatedly disappointed ideal of harmony, but it does share something of Coleridge’s emphasis on the outward movement of friendly benevolence. In the 1790s, fired by reformist
thought, personal idealism and Dissenting values, Coleridge argued that universal benevolence might be premised on personal attachment: ‘Some home-born Feeling is the center of the Ball,’ he told Southey in 1794, ‘that, rolling on thro’ Life collects and assimilates every congenial Affection’ (CL, I. 86). He would return to the point in his lectures of 1795: Conciones ad Populum (1795), sent to Racedown for Wordsworth in March 1797 by his Newcastle friend James Losh, explores the way in which ‘general Benevolence is begotten and rendered permanent by social and domestic affections’ (Lectures 1795, 46). In the third of his Lectures on Revealed Religion, he famously maintains that human nature ‘expands like the circles of a Lake—the Love of our Friends, parents, and neighbours lead[s] us to the love of our Country to the love of all Mankind. The intensity of private attachment encourages, not prevents, universal philanthropy’ (Lectures 1795, 163). Such statements must have sunk deeply into Wordsworth’s thought, since that same image of spreading benevolence recurs in his Convention of Cintra (1809): ‘The outermost and all-embracing circle of benevolence has inward concentric circles which, like those of the spider’s web, are bound together by links . . . circles narrower and narrower, closer and closer, as they lie more near to the centre of self from which they proceeded and which sustains the whole’ (PrW, I. 340). For Wordsworth, as for Coleridge, friendship is an important step on that steady outward movement from the self towards wider community. But for both poets, this emphasis on private affection can contain simultaneously radical and conservative impulses:
throughout the 1790s, Wordsworth and Coleridge grapple both with William Godwin and Edmund Burke as they try to find a way to elucidate their feelings about family and friendship. If they are at first attracted to the radical freedom promised by Godwin’s prose, they then recoil from his uncompromising attitude towards personal relationship, seeking to find a way to reconcile reformist possibilities with aspects of Burke they both found appealing, in particular his emphasis on affectionate bonds as the basis for community, his argument that ‘to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind’. ¹ Wordsworth’s concept of friendship borrowed both from this Burkean imperative, and from a more radical, Dissenting concept of the reforming power of benevolence: both contributed to make up the conviction he shared with Coleridge, that, in the words of Kelvin Everest, ‘enduring personal and social values sprang from, and were sustained in, the relationships of family and private friendship’. ²


Unlike Coleridge’s spontaneous and passionate declarations of friendship, however, Wordsworth often experienced difficulty in putting his affections into words. The poems discussed above demonstrate how Wordsworth often prefers to express the intensity of friendship indirectly—his affection for Coleridge channelled through the image of two saints, for Hutchinson through the bond between two faithful animals, for Wilkinson through his honouring of a garden tool. This obliqueness shows us the importance of friendship for Wordsworth, felt so deeply that there is often a certain strained quality about its evocation in his poetry or, indeed, in his letters. A key example here is his response to De Quincey’s excitable, unsolicited appeal to him in 1803:

My friendship it is not in my power to give: this is a gift which no man can make, it is not in our own power: a sound and healthy friendship is the growth of time and circumstance, it will spring up and thrive like a wildflower when these favour, and when they do not, it is in vain to look for it. (EY, 400)

This seems sensible enough, but Wordsworth’s difficulty in articulating his feelings on friendship becomes clear as the letter progresses, as he worries about his own letter-writing abilities and fears that he may have ‘expressed myself absolutely with coldness’ (EY, 401). Indeed, his letters bristle with such anxieties: struggling to thank Beaumont for his gift of land at Applethwaite, Wordsworth describes ‘a set of painful and uneasy sensations’ impeding his writing, a sense that his writing of this friendly letter was ‘a
business with something little less than awful in it, a task, a duty, a thing not to be done but in my best, my purest, and my happiest moments’ (EY, 407). To Walter Scott, after much apology for his procrastination in writing, he signs himself; ‘Your sincere Friend, for such I will call myself, though slow to use a word of such solemn meaning to any one’ (EY, 414); and to Francis Wrangham, again excusing his difficulty in writing, he writes that it is far from his intention to slight him, ‘It is not in my Nature to neglect old Friends, I live too much in the past for anything of that kind to attach to me’ (EY, 436). Each example shows how seriously and intensely Wordsworth approached friendship, and, in turn, he had high expectations of loyalty and support from those close to him, leading to accusations of exclusivity such as Coleridge’s complaint about him ‘living wholly among Devotees’, a form of ‘Self-involution’ (CL, II. 1013).

What led Wordsworth to place such emphasis on friendship, and to approach it with such solemnity? Partly, the answer lies in the close association of friendship with death which we have witnessed in the poems already discussed. For the subject of each poem—the saints who die simultaneously, the dog who mourns her fellow, the spade which bears testament to its owner’s character—friendship outlasts life. In the face of grief and loss, it takes on a restorative, healing function. The reasons for this lie deep in Wordsworth’s early life. ‘Grief was the making of Wordsworth,’ comments Duncan Wu, arguing for a reconsideration of the poetry and relationships of boyhood as central to Wordsworth’s creative identity (Wu, 1).
The powerful effect of early bereavement and separation from his siblings shaped not only his juvenilia, but his whole inner landscape, and are thus central to his conception of friendship. It is therefore important to explore the early friendships fully, since with these Wordsworth was remaking his circle—friends, in some ways, formed his new family. Friends facilitated his early writing; friends were his first readers and patrons.

The pattern started early, at Hawkshead Grammar School, where, in a foretaste of future friendships, Wordsworth’s social and literary affections ran alongside the appreciation of nature. *The Prelude* recalls how he and his friend John Fleming, for example, walked around Esthwaite ‘repeating favourite verses with one voice’, and the friendship is celebrated in *The Vale of Esthwaite* (1787): ‘Friendship and Fleming are the same’ (*EPF* 454, l. 397).

Fleming and his brothers William and Fletcher Raincock were sons of the rector of Ousby (John had early become heir to his uncle’s estate, Rayrigg on Windermere, and had therefore changed his name). Other Hawkshead companions included Robert Greenwood, the ‘minstrel’ of Windermere jaunts, William and Raisley Calvert, and John Spedding of Armathwaite. In several cases patterns of shared reading and book borrowing, inspired by the enlightened headmaster William Taylor, continued into later life. Wordsworth

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3 For more information on these years, see *Wordsworth’s Hawkshead*, T. W. Thompson and Robert Woof (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).
stayed with the Spedding family several times in the 1790s and repeatedly used their considerable library at Mirehouse; in June 1809, for example, he was drawing both on Spedding’s discussion and his ‘Collection of Cobbets’ (the *Weekly Political Register*) to help inform his writing of the *Convention of Cintra*.4

In 1787, when he began his studies at Cambridge, Wordsworth encountered the ‘welcome faces’ (*Prel–13*, III. 20) of many Hawkshead friends again: John Fleming, for example, had come up two years before, followed by his brother Fletcher Raincock, with whom Wordsworth had hunted for raven’s eggs, and other schoolmates included the poet Charles Farish.5 Yet despite these connections, and the academic advantages which his Hawkshead education had given him, Wordsworth at first found Cambridge a disappointing experience, not least because he felt in retrospect that it had retarded his poetic development. ‘Companionships, / Friendships, acquaintances’ he had in plenty, but early literary enthusiasms were replaced by reading ‘lazily in lazy books’ and ‘superficial pastimes’ (*Prel–13*, III. 249–50, 254, 212). It was only in his second year that he began to gather around

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4 See Duncan Wu, *WR, 1800–1815*, 56.

5 For a fuller account of Wordsworth’s Cambridge friendships, see Ben Ross Schneider, *Wordsworth’s Cambridge Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957).
him a more select group of friends who echoed his literary interests. These included Hawskhead acquaintances such as Raincock and Greenwood, and also new friends Robert Jones and William Mathews; he may also have met Francis Wrangham at this time. It was also the period when he began to break away more definitively from the path his guardians would have chosen for him. One sign of this was the walking tour he undertook with Jones through France and Switzerland in summer 1790, at a time when he should have been preparing for his Senate House examinations. Instead, Wordsworth was intent on experiencing the excitement both of the Alps and of revolutionary France. The trip helped him to develop his poetic skills, test his physical fortitude and defy those who had called the proposed journey—nearly three thousand miles—‘mad and impracticable’ (EY, 37). It also cemented a life-long friendship with Jones, despite what must have been, at times, a challenging experience, as the pair covered up to thirty miles a day, ‘two travellers plodding along the road, side by side’, with their knapsacks on their shoulders. ‘I can assure you,’ wrote Jones, remembering the tour in 1821, ‘that a Day seldom passes that I do not think of you with feelings of inexpressible affection’ (Gill, Life, 44). We can gauge the playful warmth between the two from Wordsworth’s 1800 poem, ‘A Character’, in which ‘the principal features are taken from my friend Robert Jones’: the verse marvels at ‘so many strange contrasts in one human face’ and closes with a celebration of ‘such an odd, such a kind happy creature as he’ (LBOP, 238, l. 20). More seriously, Descriptive Sketches, Wordsworth’s reflection on this tour, written
in 1791–2, is dedicated to Jones, and carries a preface celebrating the poet’s esteem for his friend. The poem displays the same interest in linking concepts of friendship, intellectual companionship and natural landscapes which had been visible in ‘The Vale of Esthwaite’. Here it is Jones, rather than Fleming, whose friendship runs alongside interpretation of nature, but again the shared element of experience is important—while this is a profoundly personal experience for the poet, sympathetic company helps him to articulate his deepest feelings.

Friendship also helped him develop his political consciousness. The choice of revolutionary France as a destination for the trip with Jones reminds us of the political edge to Wordsworth’s friendships in the period, also evident in his letters to Mathews about the possibility of founding a periodical called The Philanthropist. In his correspondence with Mathews we see him working to express his political identity—‘I am of that odious class of men called democrats’ (EY, 119)—and the way in which it might be best expressed in print. As with Coleridge, friendship could carry a radical resonance, a way of remaking social bonds, whether that was through shared political writing with ‘fellow labourer and friend’ Mathews (EY, 129), or through admiration for the commitment of peers such as ‘patriot Friend’ Michel Beaupuy (Prel–13, ix. 554). It might well have been through Mathews that Wordsworth gained entry to reformist circles in London. Certainly, by 1795, he was associating with a group including Thomas Holcroft, William Frend, James Losh, George Dyer and William Godwin, whom Wordsworth would visit several times, and who,
while never a very close friend, would exert a powerful influence over the development of his thought and poetry in the 1790s.

Friends helped, too, to provide a practical way for his literary aspirations to be realised through patronage and help. Again, it was old Hawkshead acquaintances who established the pattern—William Calvert and his brother Raisley, left comfortably off at the death of their father. A tour with William Calvert in 1793 was followed by Calvert’s loan of the farmhouse Windy Brow near Keswick where William and Dorothy stayed in early 1794. This would be the first in a series of important sites of domestic creativity for the pair; indeed, Gill pinpoints this as the time when Wordsworth began ‘the attempt to establish what really mattered to him and to take more command of his own life’ within a space afforded by friendship, supported by the love of his sister (Gill, *Life*, 81). Moreover, this flowering of creativity sparked confidence in others ‘that I had powers and attainments which might be of use to mankind’ (*EY*, 546). In May 1794, Raisley Calvert, younger brother of William, offered Wordsworth part of his income. Raisley was becoming dangerously ill with tuberculosis, and must have known that he would not survive to make use of his inheritance. Wordsworth nursed him at Windy Brow through late 1794, and he died in January 1795, leaving Wordsworth a legacy of £600, later increased to £900. It was an act of friendship that invaluably confirmed Wordsworth’s sense of poetic destiny.

This was strengthened by other acquaintances such as Basil Montagu and Wrangham, both of whom were associated with the Godwin circle.
Through Wrangham he was introduced to the Pinney brothers, John and Azariah, sons of a Bristol merchant and heirs to a sugar plantation fortune. Like the Calverts, the Pinneys were impelled to help Wordsworth. Not only did John introduce him to influential Bristol circles, he also offered him his father’s house at Racedown in Dorset rent free, so that he could settle with Dorothy, partly funded by educating Basil Montagu’s little son. Racedown was, like Windy Brow, another important site of shared creativity for Wordsworth, just as the Pinneys were, like the Calverts, important early patrons. In Mary Moorman’s words, ‘John Pinney had fallen, like Raisley Calvert and Montagu, under Wordsworth’s spell’ (Moorman, I. 267).

But these relationships were not entirely straightforward. On the one hand, such generous friendships show both the level of affection and loyalty Wordsworth could inspire, and the ways in which his poetry was facilitated by friendship. But these acts of friendly patronage could also prompt doubt and uncertainty on Wordsworth’s part; as Richard Matlak comments, Raisley Calvert’s legacy led Wordsworth into a ‘muddle of self-interest, money and death’. Since Wordsworth ‘had had but little connection’ (EY, 546) with him, the obligation of the legacy may have weighed heavily upon him, as his ‘To the Memory of Raisley Calvert’ seems to demonstrate, with its image of the

youth wasting ‘root and stem’ to nourish Wordsworth’s poetry (*CP2V*, 152, l. 5). Would he adequately fulfil such hopes? Such uncertainties are reflected in ‘Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree’, probably mostly written at Racedown in the early part of 1797, which would become Wordsworth’s first contribution to *Lyrical Ballads*. It is a poem of misanthropy, of a man who, after disappointment, has turned away from friendship and worldly interaction. He has found no sympathetic response, no outlet for social participation and sits, instead, in sombre embowerment in ‘the lonely yew-tree’ (*LBOP*, 48, l.1). The poem acts as a reflection on wider questions about post-Revolutionary social participation and concepts of self and community also worried at by Burke and Godwin. As such, it may be taken as a companion piece to a poem such as Coleridge’s ‘Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement’, which Wordsworth may have encountered in the *Monthly Magazine*, also included in the parcel of books sent by Losh in March 1797 (*WR, 1770–1799*, 101). But it may also be taken as a highly personal exploration of the poet’s place in society, since Wordsworth was still tormented by questions of where and how he was going to fit into society as a poet, and how he would adequately repay the trust shown by friends such as Calvert.

The appearance of Coleridge at Racedown in June 1797 went some way towards answering those questions. His arrival is itself the stuff of Romantic legend: ‘he did not keep to the high road’, the Wordsworths later recalled, ‘but leapt over a gate and bounded down the pathless field, by which he cut off an angle’ (*LY*, iv. 719). This impetuous moment has been seen by
generations of critics as a moment where English poetry itself changes direction: a joyous challenge to boundaries, a rewriting of the literary landscape. It was a rewriting, too, of Wordsworth’s emotional landscape. He and Dorothy had self-consciously sought out creative isolation at Racedown. After three weeks of Coleridge’s friendship, they changed course for Somerset, renting a house at Alfoxden an easy walk from Nether Stowey. As Coleridge reported triumphantly to his brother-in-law, and former fellow Pantisocrat, Robert Southey: ‘I brought him & his Sister back with me & here I have settled them’ (CL, I. 334). Wordsworth had become a new mentor for Coleridge in the same way that he had once looked up to Southey: ‘Wordsworth is a very great man—the only man, to whom at all times & in all modes of excellence I feel myself inferior—the only one, I mean, whom I have yet met with’ (CL, I. 334). Both the possessive tone and the performance of intellectual subordination must have been galling to Southey, as must the inclusion of a manuscript version of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, which would have left his former collaborator in no doubt of his changed allegiances.

‘This Lime-Tree Bower’ is an evocation of mutual creativity which gives a good insight into the literary friendship Wordsworth and Coleridge enjoyed in the annum mirabilis. Imprisoned in the bower through injury, the poet imagines his friends—William, Dorothy, and the London visitor Charles Lamb—first looking down into a ‘riften Dell,’ enclosing wild ash trees and ‘plumy ferns’, then walking out into the wide sunlit scene of the Quantock
Hills (CL, I: 335). In the published version of 1800, the ferns have changed into weeds, and attention is specifically drawn to the way in which the friends observe them: ‘And there my friends, / Behold the dark-green file of long *lank weeds’. 7 That asterisk, interrupting the flow of the poem, is a coded message of closeness with the Wordsworths. Directing the reader toward the correct type of fern, the ‘Asplenium scolopendrium, called in some countries the Adder’s Tongue’, the asterisk and footnote covertly allude to Dorothy Wordsworth’s Alfoxden notebook, which makes reference, in 10 February 1798, to ‘the adder’s tongue and the ferns green in the low damp dell’; the three subsequent entries (11–13 February) all mention walks with Coleridge ‘near to Stowey’ (DWJ, 145). 8 So, as Mays suggests, the fern may have been ‘among the first near-private emblems shared by Coleridge and the Wordsworths’, and its inclusion in the poem shows the way in which the friendship must have been structured around shared reading, walking, and mutual allusion. 9 It had been a pattern early established: Coleridge’s Poems (1796) pays public tribute to Wordsworth in the poem ‘Written at Shurton

7 Annual Anthology (1800), 141.


9 Mays, Works, I:i,351.

9 Mays, Works, I:i,351.
Bars’, which quotes the phrase ‘green radiance’ from An Evening Walk, noting that this belongs to a poet whom Coleridge deems ‘unrivalled . . . in manly sentiment, novel imagery and vivid colouring’.

We are witnessing, as Lucy Newlyn comments, ‘a construction of literary myth’, in which Coleridge sets himself up as true reader, respondent and friend, an exchange which would be intensified in the ‘conversation’ poems and in Lyrical Ballads. ‘This Lime-Tree Bower’ is both a homage to ‘my Sister & my Friends!’ and also a self-conscious response to Wordsworth’s poetry since it reworks ‘Lines Left upon a Seat’. Coleridge’s similarly embowered poet answers Wordsworth’s yew-tree misanthrope, suggesting that friendship might be a way through the ‘littleness’ of pride and disappointed idealism. Whereas each aspect of the landscape becomes, for Wordsworth’s misanthropic subject, ‘an emblem of his own unfruitful life’ (l. 29), the Quantock hills, by contrast, are alive with shared emblems of friendship, down even to the ferns; the ‘gloomy boughs’ of Wordsworth’s yew-tree are now lit up with sympathetic radiance. The poets take their place in a larger literary community, sustained by each other and by other authors, such as John Thelwall, whose prison poems are echoed in ‘This

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10 Poems (1796), 185-6.

Lime-Tree Bower’ and Lamb, to whom the published version of the poem is
dedicated.

Both Thelwall and Lamb spent time with the Wordsworths in the
summer of 1797. ‘Citizen Thelwall’ was in temporary retreat from political
persecution; Lamb was on a brief holiday from his post at the East India
House to see his schoolfriend Coleridge. Both men would exert a long-lasting
effect on Wordsworth’s creative development. Yet, especially in the case of
Thelwall, this has only fairly recently been acknowledged in criticism.12
Judith Thompson goes so far as to call Thelwall the ‘silenced partner’ in the
Wordsworth circle, and certainly in later life, Wordsworth seems to have
striven to play down his relationship with the reformist and agitator.13 If their
political views post-1797 diverged, Thelwall’s thoughts on poetry and prosody
continued to impress Wordsworth: The Excursion owes much to The
Peripatetic, and it is Thelwall’s autobiography, as much as Wordsworth’s,
which shapes the Solitary. The one surviving letter from Wordsworth to

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12 See especially Nicholas Roe, The Politics of Nature (Basingstoke: Palgrave
Macmillan, 2002).

13 See Judith Thompson, John Thelwall in the Wordsworth Circle: The Silenced
Partner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and John Thelwall’s ‘The
Peripatetic’, ed. Judith Thompson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press,
2001).
Thelwall pays homage to their shared ‘passion of metre’ (EY, 431-35) and shows lively and active awareness of Thelwall’s elocutionary theories.

Thelwall, for his part, thought of Wordsworth late in life ‘with much pleasure, . . . great admiration and friendship’, and his role in Wordsworth’s biography is now being fully uncovered. Lamb, meanwhile, has always been acknowledged as an important friend of Wordsworth, yet his contribution to the poetry has also remained relatively little discussed. From the start, however, Lamb was an important critic and reader of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s work, responding particularly enthusiastically to ‘Lines Left upon a Seat’: ‘But above all, that Inscription!—’ he wrote, ‘it will recall to me the tones of all your voices—’ (Lamb, Letters, 1: 117–18). He would remain involved with the Wordsworth circle for the rest of his life as a shrewd, often critical, reader of the poetry and as a supportive friend.

But Lamb’s response to ‘This Lime-Tree Bower’ presaged deeper difficulties in the Wordsworth-Coleridge friendship itself. Coleridge had portrayed his friend as ‘gentle-hearted Charles’: Lamb fiercely, if comically, answers back, as a ‘drunken dog, ragged-head, seld-shaven, odd-ey’d, stuttering’ individual (Lamb, Letters, 1: 224). The poem’s empathetic, outward movement, suggests Lamb, might merely be a projection of the poet himself—not an expression of mutual feeling but a moment of ventriloquism. Similarly,

14 Thompson, Silenced Partner, 186.
Wordsworth gradually began to detect differences with Coleridge, and to realise the difficulty of collaboration. Whereas in March 1798 he had painted a picture to Losh of shared creativity—‘Coleridge is now writing by me at the same table’ (EY, 213)—in reality, writing together proved problematic, as in the abortive attempt to collaborate on ‘The Wanderings of Cain’. In 1828, Coleridge remembered Wordsworth’s ‘look of humorous despondency fixed on his almost blank sheet of paper, and then its silent mock-piteous admission of failure’ (PW I: 360); Wordsworth’s participation in ‘The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere’ proved equally short-lived. More seriously, Wordsworth would struggle for many years with the essentially Coleridgean vision of ‘The Recluse’, an epic that would encompass the ‘whole state of man and society’ (Table Talk, II. 177). Coleridge had had the poem in mind as the supreme proof of Wordsworth’s poetic skill since at least 1797, and the letter to Losh reports triumphantly that at least 1300 lines of this poem of ‘considerable utility’ has been written (EY, 214). But, like the ‘gentle-hearted’ Lamb of ‘This Lime-Tree Bower’, ‘The Recluse’ was an unachievable ideal; an ideal, moreover, in Wu’s words, ‘inextricably intertwined with the ups and downs of the thwarted love affair between [Wordsworth] and Coleridge’ (Wu, Wordsworth, 110).

In retrospect, summer 1798 seems at once the high point of the friendship and also a moment of change. The years to come would be marked by increasing tensions between the poets, and by an outright quarrel in 1810. By this time, the whole Wordsworth family had begun to feel the strain of
Coleridge’s spurts of manic creativity and self-destruction, and of his domestic troubles, including his fixation on Wordsworth’s sister-in-law, Sara Hutchinson. Coleridge’s superhuman attempts to found a short-lived collaborative periodical – poignantly named *The Friend* – also taxed the relationship. Even before the inevitable demise of *The Friend*, Wordsworth had come to the opinion that ‘Coleridge neither will nor can execute any thing of important benefit either to himself his family or mankind’ (*MY*, 352); Dorothy declared herself ‘hopeless of him’ (*MY*, 450). When Basil Montagu suggested that Coleridge should live with him in London, Wordsworth warned him what this might mean. But Montagu wasted no time in sharing – and probably embroidering – Wordsworth’s opinions with Coleridge himself, saying he had been ‘commissioned’ to do so; the phrases ‘rotten drunkard’ and ‘absolute nuisance’ were bandied about. Coleridge was deeply hurt, feeling that his friend and collaborator had become his ‘bitterest Calumniator’ (Griggs, III: 389). It was a sorry end to the high ideals of mutual support and intellectual endeavour which had characterised the early part of their friendship. After almost two years of pain, the rift between the men was patched up by the intervention of Henry Crabb Robinson, who encouraged Wordsworth to write to Coleridge, explaining – while not actually refuting – his words to Montagu. A semblance of peace was restored between them; the intense sympathy of the Somerset period would, however, never be recaptured. ‘Tintern Abbey’ stands as a superb reflection of the peak of collaborative creativity between Coleridge, Dorothy and William. As the poet
sits embowered beneath the dark sycamore, he looks back not only to his own earlier anxieties, both political and poetic, but also to ‘This Lime-Tree Bower’ and the literary friendship of the past year. The lines are ‘interfused’ not only with the tidal rhythms of nature, but with the echoes of innumerable Coleridgean conversations. Yet the poet ends by looking toward his ‘dearest Friend, / My dear, dear Friend’—not Coleridge, but Dorothy. We see in this a moment of poise: the poem beautifully demonstrates what Wordsworth has learnt from Coleridge’s friendship, but also shows the future direction of his creative relationships. The ‘language of sympathetic identification’, as Gurion Taussig puts it, has become restricted to ‘familial friendship’.15 This would become increasingly important for Wordsworth, as he created his ‘Home at Grasmere’, a ‘Nook’ of friendship and family support which drew its strength primarily from his childhood loves—Dorothy, and, later, Mary Hutchinson and her sister Sara. As he settled into this self-created community, supported by his womenfolk, the focus of his literary friendships shifted slightly, and he began to seek sympathetic readers rather than collaborators.

One such reader was Sir George Beaumont, who became both Wordsworth’s most important patron and close friend. As with so many of Wordsworth’s friendships, the relationship was rooted in shared appreciation

of the Lakes landscape. Beaumont and his wife had toured the Lake District and Wales extensively, gathering inspiration for Beaumont’s art. In 1803, they rented part of Greta Hall, Keswick, and were won over by Coleridge’s enthusiasm for Wordsworth and his poetry. This resulted in an extraordinarily generous gift of land at Applethwaite, which Beaumont hoped would benefit both poets. Wordsworth responded somewhat nervously, only reassured by Beaumont’s heartfelt wish that he might ‘live & die with the idea the sweet place with its rocks, its banks, & mountain streams are in the possession of such a mind as yours’. The gift demonstrated Beaumont’s appreciation of the link between friendship and landscape in Wordsworth’s poetry, and setting the tone for his tactful, supportive and long-lasting patronage. Similar acts of friendship included hospitality at his estate at Coleorton in Leicestershire—and indeed, the loan of the hall farm to the whole Wordsworth family in 1806, accompanied by the invitation to design a winter garden there. Wordsworth eagerly accepted the commission, weaving into his design allusions to their shared love of the Lake District landscape—it included hollies in ‘profusion’, ‘for the sake of the Hills and crags of the North’. Wordsworth’s intention that the winter garden provide ‘a place of comfort and pleasure from the fall of its

leaf to its return’ also served as a subtle tribute to the solace the Beaumonts had given the family after the drowning of John Wordsworth in 1805. ‘I esteem your friendship one of the best gifts of my life,’ wrote Wordsworth in 1806, ‘I and my family owe much to you and Lady Beaumont’ (MY, I: 94); the sentiments were echoed by Beaumont, ‘your friendship has been one of the chief blessings of my life and I shall remain deeply in arrears’ (LY, I: 350). The financial metaphors, as John Powell Ward comments, seem knowing, but this remained a friendship which managed to hold money and artistic respect in delicate balance.  

Alongside Beaumont’s assistance, both financial and emotional, Wordsworth enjoyed important friendships with literary peers and, later, with disciples. While none could ever supplant the creative relationship with Coleridge, and the power he would continue to draw from Dorothy and Mary, these literary friends helped to shape his writing and public persona. Charles Lamb’s early enthusiasm for ‘Lines Left upon a Seat’ set the tone for a lifetime of thoughtful, responsive readings of Wordsworth’s poetry from a resolutely urban perspective: his Essays of Elia act as a reinterpretation of key Wordsworthian ideas filtered through a metropolitan lens. He would also act as the Wordsworths’ host in London; the visit of 1802, for example, when the

Lambs took their guests to Bartholomew Fair, is recast in *The Prelude*, to provide a chaotic, startling, but inspirational vision of the city, with, at its heart, a tribute to the Lambs’ birthplace in the Inner Temple. While his occasional critiques of Wordsworth’s poems could provoke testy replies, their correspondence continued until his death, when Wordsworth wrote a loving—if exceptionally lengthy—memorial bemoaning the loss of this ‘good Man’ (*LP* 299, l. 33), the ‘frolic and the gentle’ friend he also recalls in ‘Extempore Effusion Upon the Death of James Hogg’ (*LP* 306, l. 19). Southey, another Coleridgean acquaintance, also proved a valuable associate after a somewhat rocky beginning to the relationship, including his unfavourable notice of *Lyrical Ballads* in the *Critical Review*. Despite this early disparagement, there are important intertextual links between their work; it was, however, more as neighbours and family men that the two became close.\(^{18}\) Both were devoted to their families; both, too, were embedded in the Lake District community, and enjoyed mutual outings. As ever, friendship and respect grew out of shared landscape appreciation. Moreover, both Lamb and Southey provided support after the death of John: Lamb using his East India House contacts to establish the circumstances surrounding the shipwreck, Southey offering emotional

consolation and visits to the Wordsworths’ ‘house of mourning’: ‘he comforted us much,’ wrote Wordsworth, ‘and we must for ever bear his goodness in memory’, while Dorothy, moved by the way he wept for their sorrow, found him ‘so tender and kind’ (EY, 541, 544, 577). This, comments W. A. Speck, ‘marked the real beginning of friendship’ between Southey and the Wordsworths.19 As in the poems with which we began, friendship becomes a way to look beyond death.

The relationships with Lamb and Southey demonstrate how Wordsworth could benefit from literary friendships where there were important differences in approach. With John Wilson, the controversial ‘Christopher North’ of Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, Wordsworth enjoyed a long-lasting association, formed on Wilson’s first reading of Lyrical Ballads and cemented when Wilson purchased a house at Elleray in 1805. This ‘attachment made up of love and admiration’, to quote Wilson’s undergraduate letter to Wordsworth, withstood not only temperamental differences but also some strikingly harsh critical judgements in the pages of Blackwood’s. 20 Henry Crabb Robinson, similarly, was an acquaintance who


could be sharply critical but whose friendship was valued. The same could be said, too, of Walter Scott, whom Wordsworth first met in Edinburgh in 1803 near the beginning of his Scottish tour. They seemed immediately compatible; John Gibson Lockhart, Scott’s son-in-law and biographer, commented that they met ‘as if they had not been strangers’, and ‘parted friends’.  

Part of the reason for this was their mutual acquaintance, the lawyer and writer John Stoddart—in part too, they became close because of their shared feeling for landscape. Scott was at home in his native country just as Wordsworth was in the Lakes, with a similar feeling for community and environment: Dorothy commented that Scott’s ‘local attachments are more strong than those of any person I ever saw’ (EY, 590). Those ‘local attachments’ were on show as Scott showed them around Melrose and talked to them about its history; they were in Wordsworth’s mind, too, as he sent Scott ‘Yarrow Unvisited’, commenting that he had composed it ‘not without a view of pleasing you’ (EY, 530). Given these shared interests, the friendship might have been expected to develop into a close literary bond. Its potential might be glimpsed in such overlapping poems as Wordsworth’s ‘Fidelity’ and Scott’s ‘Helvellyn’, both centred on the tragic story of artist Charles Gough, and both also alluding to the two men’s shared experiences walking together in the Lakes, and Scott’s present of a

terrier dog to Wordsworth. Yet the attitudes of the two towards literature differed considerably. Wordsworth was surprised by Scott’s hard-headed literary professionalism, his certainty that he could ‘get more money than he should ever wish to have from the booksellers’ and his ‘confidence in his own literary resources’ (Lockhart, II. 164–5). Meanwhile, Scott could be critical of what he saw as Wordsworth’s insistence on incorporating ‘trivial and petty incidents’ into his verse. Yet despite this, and the long periods when they did not actually see one another, they remained close: ‘I love that Man,’ wrote Wordsworth in 1830, ‘though I can scarcely be said to have lived with him at all’ (LY, II. 310).

Another important strand of Wordsworth’s literary friendships was made up of younger readers, some of whom cast themselves almost as disciples, such as Thomas Noon Talfourd and Barron Field. The first, and arguably most important of these, was Thomas De Quincey, fifteen years his junior, who wrote a rapturous letter of friendship to Wordsworth in 1803. *Confessions of an Opium Eater* pictures him seeking solace by looking to the North and to Grasmere: ‘if I had the wings of a dove,’ he retrospectively

thinks, ‘that way I would fly for comfort’. Astutely, De Quincey responds to the Wordsworthian link between reading, landscape, and friendship, and becomes one of the first in a long line of readers to identify Dove Cottage itself as a place of literary pilgrimage. Some four years later, he would actually carry out the pilgrimage and install himself as, in Dorothy’s words, ‘one of the Family’ (MY, II. 283), particularly beloved by the children – among whom, perhaps, he positioned himself. So strong, indeed, was De Quincey’s identification with the mythology of the Wordsworths and Dove Cottage that he would, in February 1809, become tenant at the ‘hallowed’ Town End, his desire to follow in the poet’s footsteps taking literal shape. His devotion was not, however, fully appreciated: his ‘unfeeling’ pruning of trees in the garden left Dorothy ‘so hurt and angry that she can never speak to him more,’ reported Sara Hutchinson. This might be seen, in the words of Charles Rzepka, as a ‘symbolic act of desecration’ which might be rooted in De Quincey’s attempts to help The Convention of Cintra into print.

23 Thomas De Quincey, Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, ed. Joel Faflak (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2009), 85.


Wordsworth’s editing and publishing methods proved, as so often, deeply frustrating, involving multiple changes and delays, and the time and effort De Quincey invested met with little gratitude. De Quincey seems to have become involved with Cintra both to please Wordsworth and to have their friendship publicly recognised; by the time it was concluded, he had begun to lose his worshipful attitude toward the older poet. A similar pattern of devotion turned sour is evident with Benjamin Haydon, who began his acquaintance with Wordsworth inclined ‘to worship [him] as a purified being’: Wordsworth responded with a poem celebrating their shared creative vocations, ‘High is our calling, Friend!’ But Haydon became disillusioned, thanks partly to his own artistic disappointments, and to Wordsworth’s refusal of a loan: ‘Depend upon it, Wordsworth has no heart,’ he complained to Mary Russell Mitford (Gill, Life, 313–14).

While we might sympathise with Wordsworth’s reluctance to lend money to Haydon, these two examples hint at larger, recurrent problems in Wordsworth’s friendships: the way in which he could prompt devotion could also become problematic. De Quincey and Haydon, to a lesser extent, echo Coleridge’s grievance over Wordsworth’s ‘living wholly among Devotees’ (CL, ii. 1013). Readers, too, could be repulsed by Wordsworthian self-involvement and what Newlyn terms his damaging reliance on ‘coterie audiences’: W. J. Fox, for example, commented that some of the power of his
poetry was lost on him, since he was not ‘initiated or fraternized’. Wordsworth’s anxiety over the reception of his poetry could make him touchy, selfish and harsh, even to ‘initiates’ or friends. Lamb’s thoughtful, sympathetic response to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), for instance, perceived by Wordsworth as overly critical, prompted a ‘long letter of four sweating pages’ wishing ‘that my range of Sensibility was more extended’. ‘Four long pages, equally sweaty, and more tedious,’ arrived from Coleridge, suggesting that the fault must ‘lie “in me & not in them”’ (Lamb, *Letters*, I. 273). ‘My Arse,’ commented an unrepentant Lamb to his friend Thomas Manning, ‘tickles red from the northern castigation’ (Lamb, *Letters*, I. 276). Lamb did not learn, however: his critical response to *The White Doe of Rylstone* prompted more Wordsworthian censure, ‘Let Lamb learn to be ashamed of himself,’ he told Coleridge, ‘in not taking some pleasure in the contemplation of this picture’ (*MY*, I. 222). This was the difficult side of Wordsworth the literary friend, his insecurity too rampant to appreciate the value of alternative readings which his own poetry tacitly encourages. An equally unattractive social insecurity could occasionally surface, too, as when the Wordsworths joined ranks to object to De Quincey’s marriage to Margaret Simpson.

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Yet this is not to gainsay the power of Wordsworth’s poetry, and its ability to arouse deep, lasting feelings of sympathy in a wide range of readers. This became particularly pronounced as the nineteenth century wore on and Victorian audiences sought spiritual nourishment from Wordsworth’s work, often expressing their feelings in terms of friendship or love: George Eliot, whose brother brought her rose-leaves from the Rydal Mount garden in 1841, commented to her friend Charlotte Carmichael over thirty years later that ‘we are agreed in loving our incomparable Wordsworth’. Like De Quincey, such readers often cast themselves as ‘true & sincere worshippers’, Lake District pilgrims attuned to the Wordworthian connection between landscape, reading, and friendship.27 The Reverend Stopford Brooke draws on this sense of literary friendship in his appeal to set up Dove Cottage as a museum, as he imagines the house alive with the presence of the ‘dearest friend’ Dorothy and demonstrates his love both of Wordsworth’s poetry and place in ways sanctioned by ‘Tintern Abbey’ and The Prelude.28 Visitors to Dove Cottage today are, similarly, invited both to appreciate Wordworthian landscape, domestic and natural, and also to demonstrate their affection by making ‘your


own personal contribution’ to the preservation of Dove Cottage. ‘Become a Friend!’ urges the website, before quoting Wordsworth’s exclamation to Coleridge: ‘O Friend! O Poet! Brother of my soul’.29 The construct of literary friendship imagined in The Prelude—in which love, nature, and books are bound together—continues to exert power over present-day readers of Wordsworth.

Select Bibliography


