

Dove Cottage was the home to which, from 1799 to 1808, he returned from his walks, the nurturing cell in which many of his best poems were grown. His poetical career was long, lasting until 1850, and the muse gleamed only fitfully in the last decades. He had become a national poet, like Tennyson; the productivity was there, but not the light. By contrast, in Dove Cottage he wrote this:

My heart leaps up when I behold A rainbow in the sky: So was it when my life began; So is it now I am a man; So be it when I shall grow old, Or let me die!

And these lines, almost too well-known, on his sighting of wild daffodils in Ullswater:

Continuous as the stars that shine And twinkle on the milky way They stretched in never-ending line Along the margin of a bay; Ten thousand saw I at a glance, Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

And these, perhaps his greatest, from the “Immortality” ode:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: The Soul that rises with us, our life’s Star, Hath had elsewhere its setting, And cometh from afar; Not in entire forgetfulness, And not in utter nakedness, From God, who is our home.

The blaze of inspiration in these poems—the sense of each object “apparell’d in celestial light”—is all the more striking because Dove Cottage is a dark, poky place. The steep slopes of Rydal Fell and Nab Scar crowd in this tiny, limewashed house to north, south and east; only to the south-west does the view open up to Grasmere Lake and the facing mountains, chased by shifting colours and shadows of the clouds, as Dorothy, Wordsworth’s sister, often described them. The cottage was once a pub, the Dove and Olive Bough, on the road to Rydal; the word “snug” might have been coined for it. As Wordsworth entered, shrugging off his wet coat in the vestibule, he would have found a welcoming fire in a small, low room wainscotted in dark oak from floor to ceiling. The panelling hid walls deep-stained with drinkers’ tobacco smoke. The latticed window, one-third larger now than it was then, would have looked out mostly on the glistening slabs of slate used (illegally) by William and Dorothy to enclose a patch of garden in front of the house. A dry stone wall has long replaced them, now overgrown with ivy, herb robert and wild strawberries. It may not be authentic, but it seems right. In the rain, each thin stalk and green leaf is diamonded with drops.



To me the meanest flower that blows can give Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

The entrance room, called the “Houseplace”, contains a primitive painting of a mournful, cross-eyed dog. This is Pepper, a gift to the Wordsworths from Sir Walter Scott, and a reminder that there were children here, at least for a few years. In 1802 William married Mary Hutchinson; by the time they moved out there were three toddlers, who sometimes slept in a recess under the kitchen table, tucked in baskets, and sometimes in a minuscule unheated room upstairs, insulated by Dorothy with pages from the *Times*. (The pages have had to be replaced, which the Wordsworth Trust has done with great care and ingenuity, finding pages of just the right date, including one from 1800 with an advertisement for the second edition of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s revolutionary

democratisation of poetry, the “Lyrical Ballads”.)



The newspaper room, as it is called, sums up much of the character of this place. From remote Grasmere the Wordsworths kept up keenly with the news of the day, both through papers and a stream of visitors, but the real use of good rag newspaper was to keep infants warm. This was a house where nothing was wasted: where dogwood twigs from the garden, stripped and frayed, made toothbrushes, and where used tea-leaves were dried and sent to friends. The kitchen tells the same tale. Two objects, on the mantelpiece over the (later) range,

evoke the importance of frugality—and of light. One is a candle-mould, into which melted mutton fat and beeswax were poured and cooled. The other is a rush-light holder, in which the rush may be adjusted diagonally for one person reading or writing, or horizontally, burning at both ends, for two. There were usually two people working here in the evenings: William dictating, from his favourite “cutlass” chair or cane-seated couch (both still here), and Dorothy or Mary inscribing. The mere light of rush or candle did not go very far; it illuminated, perhaps, the table top. When several were reading and sewing, their heads were bent companionably together. From out on the benighted fells, the window would have shone like a star. The Wordsworth household at Grasmere was a triangle of poet, sister and wife. Both women waited on the great man, cooking his mutton chops and mending his thick grey socks, watching anxiously how he ate and how he slept, for poetry-making wore out his nerves. Both loved him, and he loved them. His relationship with Dorothy and hers with him seem to have been perfectly correct, sealed by brotherly-sisterly tenderness and mutual inspiration. Nonetheless there is often a frisson in this house, of feelings suppressed. It touches you especially in William’s bedroom, which became Dorothy’s in 1802, and from which she watched swallows building and rebuilding in the eaves over the window. It now contains William’s and Mary’s nuptial bed, very small and cosy under a patterned quilt; Dorothy nailed up the valances and hessian hangings on this bed to make it even cosier, a love nest. The mirror on the washstand, which was Dorothy’s, now reflects the bed in its dim, spotted glass. On it lies William’s tiny suitcase, which she probably packed for him: for four weeks in France in 1802, when he was revisiting his first French lover, one day-shirt, one night-shirt, a notebook and a pen. Not many objects are kept in the cottage now. They have gone to the Wordsworth Museum up the road, or to the splendid modern library and archive at the Jerwood Centre next door to it. But in glass-fronted cupboards upstairs lie Wordsworth’s wooden skates, which he nailed onto his shoes (“All shod with steel/We hissed along the polished ice in games/...and every icy crag/Tinkled like iron”). There are delicate teacups, whose worn rims still seem to hold the murmur of conversation, and lurking nearby a small, dark phial of Kendal Black Drop laudanum, the cure for most aches and pains in this house. But perhaps most moving is a small piece of bright blue stone that was found,



after his death, in Wordsworth's dressing-case. "Mr W's eyes have been cured by one of our visitors, Mr Reynolds, who prescribed touching them with the Blue Stone which acted like magic on them," wrote Sara Hutchinson, Mary's sister, in 1826. A pair of spectacles on the same shelf, with small dark lenses, confirm that those eyes, which saw "into the life of things", were physically weak, and often hurt him. On all the back windows of the cottage the garden presses in, lushly green and shining with rain. Roses, heavy with their soaking, lean against the glass, and sprays of fern fall down like water. The lawn is slippery and steep, rising to the woods and the fell. William and Dorothy laboured on this "little Nook of mountain ground", and Dorothy recorded it all in her journal: stringing up the scarlet beans, cutting the pea sticks, transplanting "raddishes", and William's digging of the shallow, muddy well. They grew most of the vegetables they ate with their almost sempiternal porridge. But this was also a place where Nature and her moving, affecting power might be brought in from outside, corralled with the ferns and columbines and marsh-marigolds which the Wordsworths had purloined from the lakeside. In this "Dear Spot" William built a terrace, where he could pace back and forth as he did along the roads, gazing over the lake and the favourite mountains, Helm Crag and Silver How, to find inspiration. "We walked backwards & forwards", wrote Dorothy on March 17th 1802, until "William kindled, and began to write the poem." Another time, at the end of April, "Walked backwards & forwards with William—he repeated his poem to me—then he got to work again & would not give over" [a lovely northern note] "—he had not finished his dinner till 5 o'clock." Thanks to Dorothy, we know he was writing his lines "To the Small Celandine".

Ere a leaf is on a bush, In the time before the thrush Has a thought about her nest, Thou wilt come with half a call, Spreading out thy glossy breast Like a careless Prodigal; Telling tales about the sun When we've little warmth, or none.

An "Indian shed", now speculatively reconstructed, was built at the top of the garden, and beneath it a "sodded wall" from which they watched tourists in landaus going past. One wonders what the tourists made of them: the lanky, aquiline poet and the thin, dreamy women, their hands still red from chores, lying on their cloaks on the orchard grass to look at blossom falling and listen to the birds. In mid-afternoon sunlight falls on Dove Cottage, unexpectedly, like a grace. The Japanese tourists are astonished. They come out of the back door blinking, lowering their umbrellas. As Wordsworth did, they watch "the dancing of shadows amid a press of sunshine", washed by the last gleams of the rain. It is easy to lose confidence in Lake District weather. But in the end—as in the dingiest corners of this unassuming house—the light that he evoked with such power is always palpably there.



The stars pre-eminent in magnitude, And they that from the zenith dart their beams (Visible though they be to half the earth, Though half a sphere be conscious of their brightness) Are yet of no diviner origin, No purer essence, than the one that burns, Like an untended watch-fire, on the ridge Of some dark mountain; or than those which seem Humbly to hang, like twinkling winter lamps, Among the branches of the leafless trees; All are the undying offspring of one Sire: Then, to the measure of the light vouchsafed, Shine, Poet! in thy place, and be content.