

## A Testimonial from Wordsworth

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Early in 1851 the Senate of the newly-founded University of Sydney began the search for a suitable scholar-administrator to serve as the University's first Principal. The successful candidate was Rev. Dr John Woolley, whose application was accompanied by a printed volume containing 121 testimonials. Under the heading "Testimonials Given November 10th, 1847" appears the following:

From William Wordsworth, Esq., D.C.L., Poet Laureate, Rydal Mount,  
Rydal, Nov. 8th, 1847.

Dear Sir,

You have my cordial wishes for your success as candidate for the Head Mastership of King Edward's School, Birmingham, though I cannot but regret that your election must deprive the newborn establishment at Rossall of your most valuable superintendence and management.

I am concerned to hear that the presentation of my volume of poems has caused your upper class of boys the embarrassment to which you allude. No formal acknowledgment was expected on my part.

The holidays are approaching, and I shall be anxious to learn by my own examination what progress my grandsons have made in their studies, in which, from unfortunate circumstances occurring before the boys were under your care at Rossall, they have been unable to advance as far as might have been looked for from their respective ages.

I remain, my dear Sir,  
Faithfully your much obliged,  
W. Wordsworth.

The newborn establishment at Rossall began in unusual circumstances. A Corsican named Vantini, who had been courier to his compatriot Napoleon, instead of accompanying the emperor to St Helena took the more prudent course of migrating to England. There he prospered as a result of his enterprise and imagination, which were obvious in the many proposals he put forward. Noting the lack of good boarding-schools in the north of England, for instance, he suggested the founding of two schools in the neighbourhood of Fleetwood in north-west Lancashire, on opposite banks of the River Wyre, one for 500 boys, the other for 500 girls. He called a public meeting in one of the two hotels which he owned in London, and obtained the services of Rev. St Vincent Beechey, vicar of Thornton-with-Fleetwood, as chairman. Beechey discarded the idea of a girls' school ("dropping the 500 girls into the Wyre"), reduced the 500 boys to 200, and secured resolutions that a boarding-school was required in the north of England, and that the Fleetwood area was a fit place for its establishment. He obtained some sizeable donations and appointed a Council. It happened that Sir Peter Hesketh Fleetwood, one of the subscribers, was in some financial distress, and could not afford to live on his property at Rossall Hall (about four miles south-west of Fleetwood railway station, and about seven miles north of Blackpool), and the new Council was able to lease (and in 1852 to buy) the Rossall estate.

A slightly earlier proposal of Vantini was for a universal insurance scheme to finance the education of the young. He had noticed the appalling statistics of child mortality in Britain: that, for example, half the boys died before reaching the age of twelve. If, therefore, one were to take out a life insurance policy on each child entering a school, a sufficient number would die before completing their school career for the proceeds of policies thus unhappily claimed to finance the education of the survivors. The scheme was apparently referred to Professor Augustus De Morgan (1806-71), the famous mathematician, logician and pioneer actuary, who pronounced it sound. Nobody seems to have taken up the suggestion. An earlier statement that Beechey adopted the proposal to finance the establishment at Rossall<sup>1</sup> was discounted in the most recent history of the school.<sup>2</sup> It does not therefore seem possible for the cynic to suppose that when three boys were carried off by scarlet fever during an epidemic that struck the school during the first year of its operation, the general sorrow might have been somewhat relieved by hope of financial recompense. On another occasion some boys were swept away and drowned by one of the not infrequent inundations of the flat and low-lying school grounds by the sea, when high tides coincided with fierce storms, but there can be no suggestion that the dismay at seeing the four small bodies disappearing into the Irish Sea might have been a little assuaged by the anticipation of monetary returns. The school, however, triumphed over its early difficulties after being officially founded on 22 August 1844 as "The Northern Church of England School", with seventy boys, and with Dr Woolley, who came to it after two years as headmaster of King Edward the Sixth's Grammar School at Hereford, as its headmaster.<sup>3</sup>

The grandsons mentioned in the testimonial were the second and third of the six children of Wordsworth's eldest son John (1803-75), rector of Brigham (near Cocker mouth), and of his wife Isabella (Curwen). They were entered into the school in 1845.<sup>4</sup> The elder, John's eldest son, Henry Curwen Wordsworth, was born in 1834; after he completed his schooling he emigrated to Australia and died here in 1868. His brother, William Hutchinson Wordsworth, the poet's god-son and namesake, was born in 1836, entered Balliol College, Oxford, and followed a calling as a priest in the Church of England. The unfortunate circumstances which, as the testimonial says, delayed the boys' educational progress, were brought about by the serious and puzzling illness of their mother. Wordsworth had celebrated the birth of her first child (Jane) with his poem "To — Upon the Birth of her First-Born Child, March, 1833", and his deep concern for John's family never wavered. In 1843 John took his sick wife to Madeira, and, when she made no progress towards recovery there, to Italy, before being obliged to return to Brigham to attend to his parish. The six children had a very unsettled life in the homes of their various relatives. For the three boys, then staying with their grandparents at Rydal Mount, Wordsworth wrote the poem "The Westmoreland Girl. To my Grandchildren", 6 June 1845 (with two more stanzas added in July). Later in June, in response to a request from Isabella to have her children with her, John Wordsworth took them to Italy, leaving Henry and William in the care of an English clergyman who "took pupils" in Lucca and Pisa, and going on to Rome with the other four children, before returning

1 J. F. Rowbotham, *The History of Rossall School* [1894].

2 W. Furness, *The Centenary History of Rossall School* (1945), pp. 4-5.

3 For Dr Woolley's career, see *DNB*, *ADB* and C. Turney (ed.), *Pioneers of Australian Education* (1969).

4 *Rossall School Register 1844-1923*, ed. L. R. Furneaux [?1924], p. 45.

to England. In Rome, however, three of the children became ill of a fever, and the youngest, Edward, died. John went off to Italy yet again to bring back the surviving children, and Henry and William, becoming pupils at Rossall, spent their holidays at Rydal Mount. (Isabella eventually died in Italy at the end of the summer of 1848.) Wordsworth's distress at these events led to the composition of two sonnets, "Why should we weep or mourn, Angelic boy" and "Where lies the truth? has Man, in wisdom's creed"; and his concern for his grandsons' progress is evident. Writing to Isabella Fenwick on 6 December 1847, he says: "We expect Henry and Wm from School on Thursday—I shall carefully examine them."<sup>5</sup> One cannot doubt that this examination, mentioned also in the testimonial, was carried out.

By the end of the second year of the school's existence, Dr Woolley considered that Rossall was ready for its first public examination. Three examiners were appointed: in Classics, Rev. G. Hext, Fellow and Tutor of Corpus Christi College, Oxford; in Mathematics, Professor John Couch Adams (1819-92), Senior Wrangler and Fellow of St John's, Cambridge, who had recently deduced the existence and exact position of the planet Neptune; "The other [in Literature] was the Poet Wordsworth, no less eminent in his line, who had two grandsons in the school".<sup>6</sup> The examination (August 1846) was followed by the prize-day: "Wordsworth enjoyed the prize-giving as much as his little grandson" [*sic*].<sup>7</sup> The first captain of the school, Rev. Thomas Wetherhead Sharpe, recalled the occasion:

One more visit I remember well was that of Wordsworth, who gave away the prizes one summer. I was bold enough to ask him to write his autograph in my prize; which lately I sent to Rossall to be placed in the Sumner Library. As I looked today at the shaky letters of the old man's signature, I was sorry to see that a blot which he made has been erased by some too-pious hand.<sup>8</sup>

This book, and the copy of his poems mentioned in Wordsworth's testimonial, were lost from the school library when the buildings were taken over for government use at the beginning of the Second World War, and the school moved to Naworth Castle, the junior school to Kirklington Hall.

After the prize-giving, Rev. St V. Beechey relates,

The Poet Wordsworth invited Professor Adams, Mr Hext, and the Rev Edward Spencer, Mathematical Master, and myself, to visit him at Rydal Mount. We all went over together in the steamer to Ulverston, and accompanied him to Rydal. He was full of anecdote, and entertained us most hospitably . . .<sup>9</sup>

Elsewhere, after repeating this account, Beechey enlarges upon it:

Wordsworth told us of a nobleman, a friend of his, who had two sons and said, 'I do not know what to do with the younger.' 'Not know, my Lord?' said Wordsworth, 'I will tell you. *Make him agent to his elder brother.* He will soon be the richer of the two!' We arrived safely at Rydal Mount, and slept there two nights. It was a time of much domestic affliction for Wordsworth, the cause of which it would be painful to relate. But he took us some beautiful walks, and especially to the lovely spot on Rydal Water, where there was the old tree on a rock which I believe is still called Wordsworth's Chair, and where he is said to have written several poems.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth—The Later Years. III 1841-50*, ed. E. de Selincourt (1939), p. 1315.

<sup>6</sup> St V. Beechey, *The Rise and Progress of Rossall School* (1894), p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Rowbotham, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> *Memorial of the Jubilee of Rossall School* (1894), p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> St V. Beechey, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> *The Rossallian*, 24 May 1890; quoted by Rowbotham, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

The domestic affliction to which Beechey refers was of many kinds.<sup>11</sup> The plight of John Wordsworth's family was still a matter for anxiety. Wordsworth's last surviving brother, Christopher, late Master of Trinity, Cambridge, died on 2 February 1846. His nephew John, son of Wordsworth's eldest brother, Richard, died in the same year. Perhaps the most harrowing loss was the death of his much-loved daughter Dorothy ("Dora", Mrs Quillinan) after a long illness, on 9 July 1847, four months before the testimonial for Woolley was written. The evidence of affliction most evident to Wordsworth's visitors, however, was probably the sad condition of his sister Dorothy, who for about eleven years had been an invalid in body and mind. The poet's hospitality was typical, for Rydal Mount seemed even in these troubled years to be almost continually full of visitors.

It appears from Wordsworth's testimonial that Dr Woolley hoped to move from Rossall to the headmastership of King Edward's School, Birmingham. In the event, however, he resigned from Rossall in 1849 to be headmaster of Norwich Grammar School. Thence he moved to Sydney in 1852 to take up his posts as Principal and Professor of Classics in the new University. He went to England in 1865 on furlough, and set off to rejoin his wife and children in Sydney in the *S.S. London*. The ship ran into a terrible storm in the Bay of Biscay on 11 January 1866. Dr Woolley was seen helping the sailors at the pumps almost to the last minute; with most of those on board he was lost with the ship.

## John Woolley and the Cranbrook Wordsworth

GEOFFREY LITTLE

The "volume of poems" mentioned in Wordsworth's testimonial for Woolley, thought to be missing from Rossall School's Sumner Library at the beginning of the Second World War, was not lost but had gone some time before. It was brought by Woolley to Australia, and has ended up in the library of Cranbrook School, Sydney.

The "volume" is a set of the six-volume edition of 1836-7: *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth. A New Edition. In Six Volumes. Vol. I [II . . . VI]* London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street. MDCCCXXXVI. The printer was Evans, of Bradbury and Evans.

This edition is of interest for several reasons. It was the first stereotype edition, and contained engravings which had been chosen with particular care. Moxon was Wordsworth's new publisher, replacing Longman, and was concerned to please Wordsworth.

Wordsworth revised his work repeatedly, with an attention to detail which in recent years has supported a specialized editorial industry. For 1836-7 he corrected minutely, assisted by Mary Wordsworth and others and taking into account the commentaries of friends and acquaintances (including, importantly,

<sup>11</sup> These are detailed and documented in Frederika Beatty's account of the last decade of the poet's life, *William Wordsworth of Rydal Mount* (London 1939), chapter 2.

that of the first Chief Justice of New South Wales).<sup>1</sup> As the letters show, he was careful about proofs and revises before the plates for the stereotypes were made. Wordsworth wrote to Moxon, "The labour I have bestowed in correcting the style of these now revised for the last time according to my best judgement no one can ever thank me for, as no one can estimate it. The annoyance of this sort of work is, that progress bears no proportion to pains, and that hours of labour are often entirely thrown away . . ." Again, ". . . the value of this Ed. in the eyes of the judicious, as hereafter will be universally admitted, lies in the pains which has [*sic*] been taken in the revisal of so many of the old Poems, to the re-modelling, and often re-writing whole Paragraphs which you know have cost me great labour and I do not repent of it. In the Poems lately written [i.e. the new poems in 1836-7] I have had comparatively little trouble."<sup>2</sup>

The present set has written on the fly-leaf of the first volume: William Wordsworth / Rossall Hall—17th June written at the / request of Dr Woolley. The hand is a little shaky—in 1847 the poet was seventy-seven, and his eyesight extremely poor—but it is unmistakably Wordsworth's. The only word he appears to have had some difficulty with is "Woolley".

Each volume bears (or did bear: the front board is missing from the sixth volume) the signature on the board paper: John Woolley. Univ. Coll. Oxon. (Woolley had been elected a Fellow of University College in 1840.)

The first volume also bears the signatures of later owners and a series of notes. From these, and from other scattered notes on a diary sheet, one may reconstruct the history of the set. It was first bought by Samuel Hodgson Smyth, a marine insurer in George Street who died in Edgecliff, at the sale of Woolley's books on 25 July 1867. The set was then acquired by Dr G. H. Abbott, who recorded in it the comments of Judge Alfred Backhouse, a leading senator of the university, and of Walter Matheson. At the disposal of Abbott's library the set passed to Frank Morris Little, who added his bookplate. Little, a chartered accountant and member of the Cranbrook Council, who died in 1975, donated it to Cranbrook.

1 See Geoffrey Little, "A Lesson in the Art of Poetry: Barron Field and Wordsworth's Later Revisions", *AUMLA*, 46 (1976), 189-205.

2 Letters of late December 1836 and 28 January 1837. *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years, II, 1831-40*, ed. E. de Selincourt (Oxford 1939), 826, 831. (Despite "for the last time", further changes were made for later issues of the stereotype and for edd. 1845 and 1849. A set of 1836-7 used for correction and re-drafting is in the Royal Library at Windsor.)