

Wordsworth's Political Writings

W. J. B. Owen & J. W. Smyser

*“...have you so little
knowledge of the
nature of man as to be
ignorant, that a time
of revolution is not the
season of true Liberty?”*

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edited by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser

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Publisher's Preface

There has never, to my knowledge, been an edition of *Wordsworth's Political Writings*, to stand beside the eminently useful collection of Shelley's, or Coleridge's, or indeed W. J. B. Owen's collection of *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*. This edition is an attempt to fill that gap with an affordable, convenient and (in the case of the ebook) searchable text of *A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, Concerning the Convention of Cintra*, the *Two Addresses to the Freeholders of Westmorland*, and the 1835 *Postscript*. Arguably, perhaps, *The Guide to the Lakes*, as a work entailing both environmental consciousness and human geography, should also be included, but it is more easily available in recent editions.

The texts, introductions and notes in this collection, are taken from *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, as edited by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser and published by Clarendon Press in 1974. Readers needing the detailed textual notes and textual introductions in the Owen & Smyser *Prose Works* are referred to the 3-volume Clarendon edition or, in the case of the first two texts, to the Humanities-Ebooks edition of Volume 1 (2008). Almost all of their meticulous and still invaluable commentary has been retained for this edition but for convenience most of the commentary has been converted into page by page footnotes, where its value may be more easily recognized. Some cross-referencing by line numbers in the Clarendon edition has been omitted, though some remains (the presence of a line number indicates a cross-reference to the Clarendon text or commentary). Some longer notes, which would break up the page excessively, appear as hyperlinked 'excursus notes' after the text in question. One or two footnotes have been added, but the edition is essentially theirs, or more exactly, Professor Owen's in the case of the first three works, and Professor Smyser's in the case of the *Postscript*.

The purpose of the present volume is simple: it is to allow students of Wordsworth to follow, in a single volume, the struggle between Jacobinism, republicanism, nationalism, liberalism, conservatism and social democracy in Wordsworth's thought.

For a book containing just four works, by a single hand, the range is remarkable. In the first text, of 1793, Wordsworth is an unashamed apologist for terror, a regicide, whose thinking appears 'to the last degree' Paineite and French (I allude, of course to Lord Macaulay's astonished comment, on reviewing the 1850 *Prelude*, that its author had been, in his youth, 'to the last degree Jacobinical, indeed socialist'). In 1808, while scornful of the 'paradoxical reveries' of Enlightenment argument, Wordsworth remains an impassioned advocate of people's power and (inter-)national renewal, yet his passionate conviction that Napoleon is distinguished primarily for liberticide and immoralism, makes him see his own country increasingly as the natural home of 'true liberty'. By 1818, impelled towards Toryism by the vacillation of the Whigs in the later stages of his country's struggle with 'the intoxicated setter-up of Kings', as he called Napoleon, he advocates what true Whigs called 'old corruption' as a necessary constitutional lubricant, or at least as preferable to the shedding of blood. Yet in the independently minded and broadly liberal 1835 *Postscript*, he combines some very Coleridgean arguments for a responsible (Anglican) clerisy, with an advocacy of social welfare, and a vigorous assault on the Poor Law Amendment Act and other aspects of industrial capitalism. His strategy in this work is peculiarly illustrative of the difficulty one has in assessing his later political stance. He concludes it by citing, in an overtly anti-Chartist frame of mind, a passage reflecting on the kind of poetry much admired by the Chartists—poetry celebrating the dignity of the common man. To a poet who prided himself on consistency, the (overtly) Jacobin quotation on the cover of this book may well have appeared quite as apt to the last of these political texts, as to the first.

The Publisher and the Estate are grateful to The Wordsworth Trust for permission to reissue these invaluable texts in electronic and paperback formats.

Richard Gravil, Tirril, 2009

A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff

Introduction

DURING his second stay in Paris, in the late autumn and early winter of 1792, Wordsworth sometimes imagined himself taking an active, even a dramatic, role in the Revolution. Although conscious of being ‘An insignificant Stranger ... and little graced with power / Of eloquence even in my native speech’ (*Prel.* X. 131–3), he was eager to do whatever an obscure young Englishman could do who was ‘enflam’d with hope’ (*Prel.* X. 38) for the new French Republic. In *The Prelude*, as he describes his frame of mind during those final weeks in Paris, one senses genuine regret that his voice, speaking for the Revolution, should go unheard.

In January 1793 Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, unknowingly furnished Wordsworth, who was now living in London, with an occasion for speaking out in defence of republicanism. Announcements of the execution of Louis had appeared in the London papers on 24 January 1793; fuller news of the execution began appearing in the papers the following day. Thoroughly shocked at the course of events in France, Watson hurriedly composed an indignant protest, larded with fervent praise of the British Constitution. Dating his composition 25 January, Watson attached it as an Appendix to a Sermon he had preached some years before;¹ on 30 January the Sermon with its Appendix was advertised in *The Morning Herald* as ‘This day ... published’; it was similarly advertised in *The Times* a week later (7 February).

Although Watson’s Appendix does not strike a modern reader as especially challenging, it is understandable why to Wordsworth Watson would have appeared a formidable and worthy opponent.² For

1 For bibliography of the sermon see Excursus Note, page 57 below.

2 For some years Watson’s reputation would have been well known to Wordsworth. A native of Heversham, Westmorland, and a fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, Watson had been Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge until 1787. He then retired to Calgarth Park, his estate on Windermere (*Anecdotes of the Life of Richard Watson, Bishop of Landaff; Written by Himself* (London, 1817), pp.

many years Watson had spoken for liberal causes: besides numerous publications on Church questions, all in a liberal vein,¹ he had also written in favour of the American Revolution,² and even in favour of the French Revolution.³ Though he had, in his political sermons, deplored all forms of ‘Republican Tyranny’, his reputation for liberalism was a wide one, and others besides Wordsworth were surprised by what they found in the Appendix. *The Critical Review* (vii [February 1793], 212–15), with its Tory bias, understandably made much of the fact that Watson had come at last to recognize the excellence of the British Constitution. Later that year the reviewer in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* (lxiii [July 1793], 633–6) was so impressed with Watson’s new arguments that he felt it his ‘duty’ to give the Appendix ‘in its fullest extent’—a duty which he fulfilled by quoting all but the introductory paragraph. But it is a measure of the fearfulness and general anti-Jacobinism of the day that the liberal reviews also found much to praise in the Appendix and voiced only the mildest of reservations.⁴ Like Wordsworth (*Llandaff*, 42–8), the reviewer in *The European Magazine* recognized the Watson’s arguments would ‘probably have more weight with a certain class of men, than if they had come from a more avowed friend of the present Governing Powers’, but, unlike Wordsworth, this reviewer went on to praise Watson’s ‘moderate’ sentiments. If the reviews we have cited are typical of the general

3 and 183–7). Here his extensive tree planting attracted the attention of the young Christopher Wordsworth (*The Early Wordsworthian Milieu*, ed. Zera Fink (Oxford, 1958), pp. 11–12, 78, 123–4). For Wordsworth’s later acquaintance with Watson see *M.Y.* i. 206, 229; ii. 172, 208, 330; and *Moorman* ii. 231.

- 1 e.g. *A Sermon Preached before the University of Cambridge, on October 25, 1776* (Cambridge, 1776), pp. 12–13; *A Letter to His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury*, 2nd edn. (London, 1783); *A Charge Delivered to the Clergy of the Archdeaconry of Ely on Thursday, June 12, 1788* (Cambridge, 1788).
- 2 *The Principles of the Revolution vindicated in a Sermon preached before the University of Cambridge, on Wednesday, May 29, 1776* (Cambridge, 1776); *A Sermon Preached before the Lords Spiritual and Temporal in the Abbey-Church, Westminster* (London, 1784). In his autobiography (*Anecdotes*, p. 59), Watson says that for the former sermon he was ‘much abused by ministerial writers, as a man of republican principles’.
- 3 *A Charge Delivered to the Clergy of the Diocese of Landaff, June, 1791* (London, 1792).
- 4 e.g. *European Magazine and London Review*, xxiii (Feb. 1793), 111–13; *Analytical Review*, xv (Mar. 1793), 310–12; *Monthly Review*, x (Apr. 1793), 476–8.

response to the Appendix, Wordsworth must have felt quite alone as he set out to refute the redoubtable Bishop of Llandaff.

Precisely when the 'Letter' was written is not known. There is no authoritative date on the single surviving manuscript, nor have we found any contemporary reference to the date of composition. But, after a careful study of the topical allusions in the 'Letter' itself, we believe that it was most probably composed in February or March, for *all* the allusions are to events antecedent to the execution of Louis, or the to the 'present convulsions' (54) immediately attendant upon that event.¹ The 'modish lamentation' (49–50) which Watson is rebuked for having joined can hardly have lasted much beyond the formal mourning of the Court, 27 January till 7 February. And had the 'Letter' been written much later than the middle of March, one would expect it to reflect the rapidly changing situation in France. For example, *The Morning Herald*, of 23 March, in reporting the crucial defection of Dumouriez, observed that he had 'now committed exactly the same offence against the French Convention as La Fayette offered to the last National Assembly'; as the details of Dumouriez's treason figured more and more prominently in the London papers, any reference to Lafayette's desertion in August 1792—such as the one in Wordsworth's final paragraph—would become wholly outmoded.

1 Cf. also *Llandaff*, 654, where Watson, whose *Appendix* is dated 25 Jan., is said to be giving his 'opinions upon the present turbulent crisis'. Charles W. Roberts, who sees a Godwinian influence on Wordsworth's 'Letter', was the first to argue that *Llandaff* 'could not have been written before the June of 1793' ('The Influence of Godwin on Wordsworth's "Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff"', *Studies in Philology*, xxix (1932), 591). Pointing to Wordsworth's having referred to the attack on Priestley's house in 1791 as though it were a recent event, Roberts endeavours to persuade us that Wordsworth is inaccurate in his use of such terms as *present crisis*, *lately*, *at the moment*, etc.; but as our note to 234–7 indicates, references to the attack on Priestley were entirely topical during the winter of 1792–3. Roberts's later dating depends chiefly, however, on Wordsworth's reference to parliamentary reform (*Llandaff*, 587–8). According to Roberts, this reference could not have been made until after Grey's motion for reform on 6 May 1793. Again, our note to 587–8 shows that this argument is by no means valid. Unfortunately, Roberts's dating of *Llandaff* has been accepted implicitly by F. M. Todd, *Politics and the Poet* (London, 1957), pp. 58–62, and explicitly by Mark L. Reed, *Wordsworth: the Chronology of the Early Years* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 142. Mary Moorman (i. 255) and G. W. Meyer (*Wordsworth's Formative Years* [Ann Arbor, 1943], pp. 95, 117) think that the 'spring' of 1793 is the probable date, but neither argues the matter.

Effectively to counteract Watson's pamphlet, and the favourable reception given it in at least two February journals, Wordsworth needed to be prompt. His own outward circumstances would have permitted him to go to work at once. *Descriptive Sketches* had been published on 29 January;¹ he was unoccupied and in touch with his publisher Joseph Johnson, at whose shop he met other young radicals who would presumably have encouraged a rebuttal of Watson;² living at Staple Inn with his brother Richard, he had access to all the London newspapers and journals.³ But if outward circumstances were favourable to work, the inner turmoil was not. To appreciate the passionate sincerity of Wordsworth's 'Letter to Llandaff', one should read it in conjunction with Book X of *The Prelude*. There brilliantly described is Wordsworth's state of mind following the outbreak of war between England and France. The war had torn 'By violence at one decisive rent / From the best Youth in England, their dear pride, / Their joy, in England' (X. 277–9).

I felt

The ravage of this most unnatural strife
 In my own heart; there lay it like a weight
 At enmity with all the tenderest springs
 Of all my enjoyments. I, who with the breeze
 Had play'd, a green leaf on the blessed tree
 Of my beloved country; nor had wish'd
 For happier fortune than to wither there,
 Now from my pleasant station was cut off,
 And toss'd about in whirlwinds. (X. 250–9)

Such a mood might nourish passionate bursts of oratory, but it

1 So announced that day in *The Morning Herald*. Cf. Mark L. Reed, op. cit., p. 140.

2 Moorman, i. 218–19; Herschel Baker, *William Hazlitt* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), pp. 56–7; Andrew Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake*, ed. W. G. Robertson (New York, 1906), pp. 93–7.

3 For Wordsworth's residence at Staple Inn see Moorman i. 211, and Chester L. Shaver, *Review of English Studies*, N.S. xii (1961), 55–7. If the 'Letter' was, as we think, composed at Staple Inn, then Richard was perhaps remembering it when in May 1794 he wrote to William, urging him to 'be cautious in writing or expressing your political opinions. By the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Acts the Ministers have great powers' (E. Y. 121).

A
Letter
to the
Bishop of Landaff
on the extraordinary avowal of his
Political Principles
contained in the
Appendix to his late Sermon
by a
Republican

A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff

My Lord,

Reputation may not improperly be termed the moral life of man. Alluding to our natural existence, Addison, in a sublime allegory¹ well known to your Lordship, has represented us as crossing an immense bridge, from whose surface from a variety of causes we disappear one after another, and are seen no more. Every one, who enters upon public life, has such a bridge to pass, some slip through at the very commencement of their career from thoughtlessness, others pursue their course a little longer till, misled by the phantoms of avarice and ambition, they fall victims to their delusion. Your Lordship was either seen, or supposed to be seen, continuing your way for a long time, unsexed and undismayed; but those, who now look for you, will look in vain, and it is feared you have at last fallen, through one of the numerous trap-doors, into the tide of contempt to be swept down to the ocean of oblivion.²

It is not my intention to be illiberal; these latter expressions have been forced from me by indignation. Your Lordship has given a proof

1 'The first Vision of Mizrah' (*The Spectator*, ed. D. F. Bond (Oxford, 1965), No. 159, ii. 121–6). At Cambridge Wordsworth had 'translated the Vision of Mizra, and two or three other papers of the *Spectator*, into Italian' (*Autobiog.* 106–7). Cf. also *Miscellaneous Sonnets*, VIII (P.W. iii. 5).

2 Addison's allegory continues to supply the metaphorical figures: 'As I looked more attentively, I saw several of the Passengers dropping thro' the Bridge, into the great Tide that flowed underneath it; and upon further Examination, perceived there were innumerable Trap-doors that lay concealed in the Bridge, which the Passengers no sooner trod upon, but they fell through them into the Tide and immediately disappeared' (*The Spectator*, ii. 123). The 'tide of contempt' and 'the ocean of oblivion' are Wordsworth's own terms; Addison had identified the water as 'Part of the great Tide of Eternity', or 'that Portion of Eternity which is called Time'.

that even religious controversy may be conducted without asperity;¹ I hope I shall profit by your example. At the same time with a spirit which you may not approve, for it is a republican spirit, I shall not preclude myself from any truths, however severe, which I may think beneficial to the cause which I have undertaken to defend. You will not then be surprized when I inform you that it is only the name of its author which has induced me to notice an Appendix to a sermon, which you have lately given to the world, with a hope that it may have some effect in calming a perturbation which you say has been *excited* in the minds of the lower orders of the community.² While, with a servility which has prejudiced many people against religion itself, the ministers of the church of England have appeared as writers upon public measures only to be the advocates of slavery civil and religious,³ your Lordship stood almost alone as the defender of truth and political charity. The names of levelling prelate, bishop of the dissenters,⁴ which were intended as a dishonour to your char-

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- 1 Before 1793 Watson's most notable religious controversy was one with Edward Gibbon. Attempting to refute Gibbon's fifteenth chapter, Watson published *An Apology for Christianity, in a Series of Letters, Addressed to Edward Gibbon* (Cambridge, 1776). This volume went through many editions; in *A Vindication of Some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of the History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1779) Gibbon praised the 'liberal and philosophic cast' of Watson's thought and the 'politeness and moderation' of his expression (p. 93).
 - 2 *Appendix*, p. [17]: 'If it [the Sermon] shall have any effect in calming the perturbation which has been lately excited, and which still subsists in the minds of the lower classes of the community, I shall not be ashamed of having given to the world a composition in every other light uninteresting.' This sentence is from the opening paragraph of the Appendix, the one paragraph not quoted in the review of Watson in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, lxiii (July 1793), 633.
 - 3 Evidence supporting this charge may be found in W. T. Laprade, *England and the French Revolution* (Baltimore, Md., 1909), pp. 70–1 and 84. For reviews and summaries of typical sermons see, for example, *Gentleman's Magazine*, lxiii (Feb. 1793), 155–7; *ibid.* lxiii (Mar. 1793), 249; *European Magazine*, xxiii (Feb. 1783), 129 and 136.
 - 4 Cf. Parliamentary Proceedings of 9 May 1792, reported in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, lxii (Nov. 1792), 1014: 'The Right Reverend Prelate ... being perhaps what his brother of Landaff is, a *Dissenting Bishop*'; *Analytical Review*, xv (Mar. 1793), 311: 'The bishop of Landaff has long been misrepresented as a dissenter and a republican.' Watson had urged toleration towards Dissenters in *A Sermon Preached before the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1776), pp. 12–13, and in *A Charge Delivered to the Clergy of the Diocese of Landaff* (London,