

# Jonathan Wordsworth

1932 – 2006

Nick Roe

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JONATHAN WORDSWORTH was a distinguished scholar of the poet William Wordsworth and English Romanticism. From the 1960s he led a golden age of Wordsworth studies in the UK and America that saw the publication of major biographies, critical studies, and scholarly editions of the poet's works.

To recover the earliest versions of poems, Jonathan Wordsworth pioneered a form of editorial archaeology, whether published or in manuscript, that represented Wordsworth's 'original intentions'. This meant not just *Lyrical Ballads* as first published in 1798 or *The Prelude* completed in 1805, but the earliest attempts at those poems that the poet himself regarded as in some way 'complete'. His work gave an entirely fresh sense of Wordsworth's poetic achievement, and led to the widespread study of hitherto unknown poems such as 'The Ruined Cottage', 'The Pedlar', and the early *Two-Part Prelude* (1799-1800). He was one of three Advisory Editors of the Cornell Wordsworth series.

Alongside some poems that had hitherto existed only in manuscript, Jonathan Wordsworth edited well-known poems like 'Tintern Abbey', 'The Brothers', and 'Michael' for C.U.P. These recovered poems included *The Pedlar* and *The Ruined Cottage*, both of which were the focus of his critical study of Wordsworth's tragic vision, *The Music of Humanity* (1969). With Stephen Gill and M. H. Abrams, he was a co-editor of the Norton edition of *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850* (1979). More recently he edited four texts of the *Prelude* for Penguin (1994) and, with his wife Jessica, he co-edited *The New Penguin Book of Romantic Poetry* (2003). As all readers of *The Coleridge Bulletin* will be aware, the Woodstock Facsimile Series of nearly two hundred first and early editions from the Romantic period was among his finest achievements.

Jonathan Wordsworth's brilliance as a scholar-critic is best appreciated in his book *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (1982) which traces the first thirty-five years of the poet's career, and the development of the *Prelude*, in an age of revolutionary turmoil. The book explores Wordsworth's poetry of mind and his creative interactions with Coleridge, and concludes with an unrivalled account of how Wordsworth's poetry of 'something evermore about to be' responded to the millenarianism of dissenters Richard Price and Joseph Priestley. *The Borders of Vision* was published at a moment when Romantic studies in America and Britain were adopting New Historicist techniques, and, to some academics, the book's patient, perceptive attention to verbal texture appeared out of place in the newly 'problematized' scene. Twenty-five years on, *The Borders of Vision* endures as an authoritative critical study, one of the few standard works on Wordsworth that is an essential and, above all, rewarding source for scholars, students, and the general reader.

Jonathan Fletcher Wordsworth was born on 28 November 1932, a

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descendant of Christopher Wordsworth, the poet's younger brother. His childhood memories were of Dorset (his father taught classics at Bryanston) and included the untimely death of his mother; and the landscape around East Chaldon, he described as 'swarming with memories'. He studied at Westminster and Brasenose College, Oxford, where he graduated with First Class Honours. A Fellow in English at Exeter College and then at St Catherine's College, Oxford, he was also appointed to a University Lectureship in Romanticism and to a Professorship of English Literature. He was an influential and charismatic lecturer and teacher, who shaped the careers of many academics and writers, including the novelist Martin Amis and the 'Martian' poets Craig Raine and Christopher Reid. What one might call his constructive iconoclasm was perfectly illustrated at the Kilve Study Weekend in 2004, when he began a talk on 'Kubla Khan' with a recitation of 'The Owl and the Pussycat', entirely from memory, to illustrate the sense of nonsense.

To postgraduates and junior academics Jonathan Wordsworth could be unstintingly generous and supportive, at Oxford and also as an organiser of the annual Wordsworth Conference and Winter School at Grasmere. The Wordsworth Conference was the genius of his cousin Richard Wordsworth, the actor, who founded it in 1970 and welcomed generations of students and scholars. With Richard presiding as a genial host, Jonathan Wordsworth arranged the two-week academic programme of lectures and seminars. This was in the early 1980s, the heyday of the Wordsworth Summer Conference, when Jonathan Wordsworth's academic leadership had established it as the premier academic occasion of its kind. The spirit of those events has been sustained, I believe, in the Coleridge Summer Conferences organised by The Friends of Coleridge, of which Jonathan Wordsworth was an Honorary Scholar.