

This part of the book concerns the trips that the poet William Wordsworth made in the Highlands, in the company of his sister Dorothy and their friend, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

William and Dorothy Wordsworth in the Highlands

Wordsworth visited the Hermitage in the company of his sister Dorothy and their friend, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. William did the driving on their trip, sitting at the front of a horse-driven vehicle known as a “jaunting car”, while Dorothy and Samuel sat behind him, their backs to the centre of the road, their luggage stored beneath them. It was something of a difficult trip: when they had called on the widow of Robbie Burns in Ayrshire they found she was out, and the trio were distressed by the wretched condition of the poor in Glasgow. They found the scenery of the lowlands to be disappointing, and Loch Lomond, the Wordsworths decided, was not as pretty as Ullswater. But walking its shores during a storm the trio underwent a strange and cathartic experience as they took shelter in a ferryman’s hovel. Smoke from the peat fire had rendered the



dwelling pitch-black inside. However once they were settled, according to Coleridge, the trio nonetheless found themselves “laughing like children at the strange atmosphere... we laughed and laughed again, in spite of the smarting of our eyes.”

Like all Romantic poets Wordsworth was intrigued by ancient myth and fable – hence his visit to Ossian’s Hall and his interest in the legend of Ossian and Fingal, as told by James MacPherson. But

in his description of landscape – of the Alps, of the Highlands and of course of the Lake District – Wordsworth also embraced the “sublime” in his poetry. In fact Wordsworth pays tribute to Edmund Burke, the chronicler of the sublime, in his posthumously published verse autobiography *The Prelude*; and in his collection *Memorials of a Tour in Scotland*, published shortly after that first trip in 1803, Wordsworth’s poetry takes on a familiar Romantic hue. In one poem, *The Solitary Reaper*, a young woman working alone in the fields was immortalized as “Yon solitary Highland lass,/ Reaping and Singing by herself... Alone she cuts and binds the grain/And sings a melancholy strain/ O listen! For the vale profound/Is overflowing with her sound.” An invitation to supper by the ferryman’s daughter at Inversnaid on Loch Lomond also proved inspirational. “Sweet Highland Girl,/a very shower of beauty is thy earthly dower!” Wordsworth proclaims in *To a Highland Girl*. “In truth together do ye seem/Like something fashioned in a dream;/Such forms as from their covert peep/when earthly cares are laid asleep.”

Wordsworth’s sister Dorothy also fell in love with the Highlands. The journal in which she had recorded her visit to Scotland with William was originally intended for private circulation; but it was eventually published in 1874, seventy years after the journey with Wordsworth and Coleridge

was undertaken, when the Victorian mania for all things Scottish was at its height. In the journal Dorothy described Loch Lomond as “an entire solitude, and all that we beheld was a perfection of loveliness and beauty,” and in her entry for August 27th 1803 she goes on to remark that “nothing was to be seen but water, wood, rocks and heather, and bare mountains above.” But she did not accompany her brother on his later trip to the Highlands, made in 1831 when he was sixty years old. Instead Wordsworth travelled with his daughter Dora on a trip of several weeks, and walked for twenty miles each day behind their carriage as it trundled along the Highland turnpikes. That year Wordsworth reached the Isle of Mull – much further than he had in the earlier trip of 1803 – and wrote poems such as the *Address to Kilchurn Castle*, inspired by one of the most dramatically-situated ruined fortresses in Scotland, whose walls crumble into the shores of Loch Awe. “The hour of rest/is come, and thou art silent in thy age,” he wrote in that poem. “The memorial majesty of time/Impersonated in thy calm decay.” The same castle also inspired the artist J.M.W. Turner, who in 1802 painted it as a tiny ruin dwarfed by the surrounding mountains, overlooked by a rainbow curling through a storm-lashed sky.