

### Dorothy and William in the Scottish Highlands (1803)

*Above all, do not lose your desire to walk: every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness; I have walked myself into my best thoughts and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it.*

Although those words were written by the great Danish theologian, Kierkegaard, they could just as easily have been written by William Wordsworth. Walking was an integral part of the poet's creativity. His friend, Thomas de Quincey estimated that in his lifetime, Wordsworth's long, thin legs had walked some 180,000 miles. William himself stated that nine out of every ten of his poems had been *poured out in the open air*. In her wonderful journals, Dorothy gives a vivid description of her brother at work on a poem:

*At present he is walking, and has been out of doors these two hours though it has rained heavily all the morning. In wet weather he takes out an umbrella, chooses the most sheltered spot, and there walks backwards and forwards, and though the length of his walk may be sometimes a quarter or half a mile, he is as fast bound within the chosen limits as if by prison walls. He generally composes his verses out of doors, and while he is so engaged he seldom knows how the time slips away, or hardly whether it is rain or fair.*

Wordsworth walked himself into a trance-like state, he lost his outer self in his walking and writing in order to discover the deep,

mysterious self within. He states this most clearly in the following lines:

*In many a walk  
At evening or by moonlight, or reclined  
At midday upon beds of forest moss,  
Have we to Nature and her impulses  
Of our whole being made free gift, and when  
Our trance had left us, oft have we, by aid  
Of the impressions which it left behind  
Looked inward on ourselves, and learned, perhaps,  
Something of what we are.*

Wordsworth believed that walking through nature at its wildest and grandest would stimulate a grandeur of thought and feeling. It was this reason that he chose to return to live in the Lake District where he was born and why he chose to walk through the Alps. In the summer of 1803, he set out with his sister to journey through the wildest and grandest scenery in Britain, the west Highlands of Scotland. Even by the usual standards of the west Highlands, the summer of 1803 was a remarkably wet one and day after day, Dorothy and William arrived at their often primitive destination soaked to the skin.

#### Loch Achray



Sometimes they would travel on an un sprung cart over rough tracks being jolted over boulders. Although it was quite rare for men to travel in the Highlands at that time, it was even rarer for women. In many remote parts, English was

very little spoken, the predominant language being Gaelic. Dorothy and her brother trudged and bumped along 660 miles staying in crofter's cottages and in often dirty and uncomfortable inns. From Glasgow, they travelled to Inverary to Glencoe and the Trossachs, surviving largely on barley cakes and butter. At the famous Kings House hotel in the Pass of Glencoe which provides accommodation to walkers and climbers to this day, Dorothy described the conditions she found:

*Never did I see such a miserable, such wretched place, – long rooms with ranges of beds, no other furniture except benches, or perhaps one or two crazy chairs, the floors far dirtier than an ordinary house could be if it were never washed. With length of time the fire was kindled and after another hour of waiting, supper came, a shoulder of mutton so hard that it was impossible to chew the little flesh that might have been scraped off the bones*

She and her brother were handed sheets that were so damp that they had to sit up most of the night trying to dry them in front of a smoking peat fire. Perhaps the most surprising fact was that the sheets had been washed at all.

However, despite all the rain and discomforts, she and her brother experienced moments of transcendent beauty which was to live with them for the rest of their lives. For both, the purpose of living was to grasp those fleeting moments before they were lost forever. It's possible to endure for seventy and eighty years and yet experience only a few minutes of being truly alive. On a hill above Loch Lomond, Dorothy describes such a moment.

*We had not climbed far before we were stopped by a sudden burst of prospect, so singular and beautiful that it was like a flash of images from another world. We stood with our backs to the hill of the island, which we were ascending, and which shut out Ben Lomond entirely, and all the upper part of the lake, and we looked towards the foot of the lake, scattered over with islands without beginning and without end . . . it was an outlandish scene we might have believed ourselves in North America. The islands were of every possible variety of shape and surface hilly and level, large and small, bare, rocky, pastoral, or covered with wood.*

The unforgettable nature of some of the images perceived in this walking tour is captured in William's poem which was inspired by watching a young woman scything in a field in the Trossachs. She sang in Gaelic and not understanding a word of what she sang allows Wordsworth's imagination free reign. The rhythm of scything is close to the rhythm of walking, the rhythm of song and the rhythm of poetry and it can lead to a trance-like condition in the repetition of motion.

In their Highland journey, the Wordsworths discovered that there was no need to travel abroad to discover the exotic, it was much closer to home if only you had the eyes to perceive it. Now joined by Coleridge, Dorothy describes a boat trip on Loch Katrine:

### *The Solitary Reaper*

*Behold her, single in the field,  
Yon solitary Highland Lass!  
Reaping and singing by herself;  
Stop here, or gently pass!  
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,  
And sings a melancholy strain;  
O listen! for the vale profound  
Is overflowing with the sound.*

*No Nightingale did ever chant  
More welcome notes to weary bands  
Of travellers in some shady haunt,  
Among Arabian sands:  
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard  
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,  
Breaking the silence of the seas  
Among the farthest Hebrides.  
Will no one tell me what she sings? –  
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow  
For old, unhappy, far-off things,  
And battles long ago:  
Or is it some more humble lay,  
Familiar matter of today?  
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,  
That has been, and may be again?  
Whate'er the theme, the maiden sang  
As if her song could have no ending;  
I saw her singing at her work,  
And o'er the sickle bending; –  
I listened, motionless and still;  
And, as I mounted up the hill,  
The music in my heart I bore,  
Long after it was heard no more.*

*It was an entire solitude and all that we beheld was the perfection of loveliness and beauty.*

Wordsworth retained those moments of beauty and relived them in the power of his poetry. In one of his finest poems written after a long walk to Tintern Abbey, he describes how the remembered beauty of the natural world enables him to explore the deepest aspects of existence. The hypnotic rhythm of walking mile after mile through wild and beautiful landscape helped his mind and imagination to break free and see the world at its most familiar and at its most astonishing.

*Is lightened:—that serene  
and blessed mood  
In which the affections  
gently lead us on,—  
Until, the breath of this  
corporeal frame  
And even the motion of our  
human blood  
Almost suspended, we are  
laid asleep  
In body, and become a living  
soul:  
While with an eye made  
quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep  
power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.*