The Garden that Connects: A Community of Wordsworth and his Readers

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A garden connects humans and nature, family and friends, different times, different classes and different climates. Coleridge's garden at Nether Stowey was a space for cultivating friendship, and John Thelwall dreamt of a similarly sociable life digging a garden plot. At Greta Hall in Keswick, a stranger could walk into the garden and become acquainted with the occupier Southey. John Claudius Loudon, editor of the Gardener's Magazine and advocate of public gardens, claimed that such spaces could "[bring] the rich more into contact with the poor" ("Summary View" 710). David Lester Richardson, a professor at Calcutta, hoped that the taste for horticulture would be shared between his "brother exiles" and "native friends" in Calcutta.

Karen Sayer in Country Cottages: A Cultural History argues that "where the large-scale formal garden had once been the site of controlled Nature and public display, . . . by the Victorian period the garden had become that much more homely, private and vernacular" (40). William Wordsworth's gardens at Dove Cottage and Rydal Mount were such "homely, private" spaces, but they were also sociable gardens, as were the gardens at Nether Stowey and Greta Hall. They mediated between private and public life, which is one important feature of Romantic gardens. Over the years, Wordsworth's gardens connected a wide range of people, making an actual and imaginary literary community. His gardens served to disseminate his ideas and sensibility among visitors and cultivated the taste for appreciating his poetry. Starting from a network of family and friends based in Dove Cottage garden, this essay will trace how the Wordsworthian literary community was developed at Rydal Mount and then circled back to Dove Cottage, where it now draws in numerous non-English-speaking visitors. I will consider how Wordsworth's gardens mediated between the poet and his readers through time and space, across social and cultural differences, and fostered the poet's world-wide reputation.

1. Dove Cottage, 1799-1808

On Christmas Eve of 1799, only four days after moving into Dove Cottage, Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy Wordsworth had already begun to plan a garden at the back of the house (William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Letters, Early Years 274). Making a garden was for them a way to retrieve and strengthen family ties, which had been precarious since the early death of their parents. As Dorothy's Grasmere Journals record in detail, the garden was the product of co-operation between William and Dorothy, which is celebrated in William's poem, "To a Butterfly" ("I've watch'd you now a full half hour"): 

This plot of Orchard-ground is ours;  
My trees they are, my Sister's flowers; (10-11)

The garden brought back to Wordsworth childhood
memories of "[his] Father's House" at Cockermouth ("The Sparrow's Nest" 8), and memories of "[his] Father's family" ("To a Butterfly" ["Stay near me—do not take thy flight"] 9). Coming to stay a while, his brother John exclaimed to find that "his Father's Children had once again a home together" (William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Letters, Early Years 649). And then, as the poem "Farewell" tells us, Mary Hutchinson, his future wife, was welcomed by the garden as a new family member: "She'll come to you [the garden] ; to you herself will wed; / And love the blessed life which we lead here" (31-32).

The garden also fostered literary friendships. Here came Coleridge, Southey, Charles Lloyd, Clarkson, Humphrey Davy, Walter Scott, and De Quincey (Gill, William Wordsworth 183-84, 244-45, 272-73). In retrospect we can see that a literary circle was being formed there, although at that time it was perhaps little more than an extended family circle. Dove Cottage garden, then, was basically a private, personal space; while a wider, more inclusive social space was eventually to be realized in Rydal Mount.

2. Rydal Mount, 1813-1870s6

Immediately after the Wordsworths moved in in May 1813, Rydal Mount became a hub of intellectual community. It attracted writers and artists both male and female, from home and abroad. John Keats arrived unannounced in the summer of 1818 (Gill, William Wordsworth 329). John Wilson described his own visit of the same year in an article for Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine:

> During the calm summer evening we sat in a sort of hanging garden, beneath the shadow of some old pine-trees; . . . now was I charmed by the goodness of his heart; for young and old were alike the objects of his affections, that wandered carelessly among them all, and seemed, in that quiet garden of Eden, at once shadow and sunshine, breeze and calm. (744)

Here Wordsworth is represented as if he were a genius of

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6 This and the following sections are partly built upon, and developed from, what is discussed in chapters 4 and 8 of my own book, William Wordsworth and the Invention of Tourism, 1820-1900.

the garden, whose affections are likened to shadow and sunshine, breeze and calm, harmonizing the garden and people gathered there.

Wilson subsequently took up his residence at Windermere to enjoy the company of Wordsworth and his literary circle; and many followed him. De Quincey lived in Grasmere; the Arnold family made their summer home at Fox How under Loughrigg; Edward Quillinan who lived at Loughrigg Holme became the husband of Dora Wordsworth, the poet’s daughter. Harriet Martineau built her house, the Knoll, at Ambleside (Lindop 31, 35-36, 49-50). In this way a large literary circle gradually formed, centred on Rydal Mount and attracting all kinds of other literati and literary tourists. Shared sensibilities were cultivated, such that the old label of "the Lake School" seriously underestimated the scale of literary community in the area. This literary circle would continue to flourish after Wordsworth’s death, and survived until the turn of the century.7

When the author Charles Mackay arrived at Rydal in 1846 he found "the Bard of the Excursion walking in his garden" (41). He spent two hours with Wordsworth, talking about "poets, poetry, criticism, hill-climbing, autograph-hunting, and various other matters" (42). Mackay also mentions another "young enthusiast in literature, who, like [himself], had come to pay his respects to the bard" (44). These two literary tourists met in Wordsworth’s garden and became companion travellers for three days among the Lakes. Mackay offers an image of Rydal Mount garden as a kind of open-air salon where literary men and women might gather and talk about literature, politics, and current affairs.

Female writers also played a crucial role in publicizing the garden at Rydal Mount. It was visited by such popular writers as Maria Jane Jewsbury, Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, Lydia Sigourney and Harriet Martineau; all of them wrote down their impressions of the house and garden for popular magazines.8 Among them Jewsbury’s

7 An obituary for Miss Frances Arnold, youngest child of Thomas Arnold at Fox How remarks that "she shared to the full the interests of the wide literary circle that flourished in the Lake Country for fifty years after Wordsworth died" ("Death of Miss Arnold").

8 See Barker 577-78, 622, 759-60; William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Letters, Later Years 125-26. See also Yoshikawa 56-57, 65, 76, 83, 102.
poem "A Poet’s Home" was particularly influential:

Low, and white, yet scarcely seen
Are its walls, for mantling green;
Not a window lets in light,
But through flowers clustering bright;

Winding walk, and sheltered nook,
For student grave, and graver book;
Or a bird-like bower, perchance,
Fit for maiden and romance. (15-18, 23-26)

The poet’s home and garden is portrayed here as displaying a symbiotic relationship “mantling” together man and nature. Landon’s poem “Rydal Water and Grasmere Lake, the Residence of Wordsworth” (1838) conveyed a similar image, in which the garden nesting in the hillside was a metonymy of Wordsworth, whose poetry mingled with “the voices from the mountain stream” (57) and “the wood” (58). In the poem Landon called Rydal Mount “our English poet’s home” (19), assuming an imaginative community of “English” people, whose representative was Wordsworth. These two poems were quoted in David Richardson’s Flowers and Flower Gardens, published in Calcutta in 1855, to represent Rydal Mount as a typical “English” home and garden. For Richardson, a British exile in India, England itself was a garden,9 and the image of the poet’s garden at Rydal served as a reminder of a spiritual connection with his home country.10

The “Englishness” evoked by Rydal Mount connected with Americans, too. Around 1820 it began to welcome a series of American visitors such as George Ticknor, John Griscom, N.H. Carter and Emerson,11 all of whom had praise for the poet’s garden, and through their writings Wordsworth would gain a wider readership in the United States. One American, Benjamin Thatcher (1809-1840), author, editor and admirer of Wordsworth, recounts how the poet showed him around when he visited in October 1837:

The little yard of rocky mountain-side, which he had given him off his own, was covered with every variety of beautiful English plants. The rocks themselves bloomed with lichens and mosses; the fences and the little swinging wicket had their share; and the doorway and windows of the small snug cottage in the corner, under the trees, which finished the feast of the picture, were wreathed over with matted masses of vines. Wasn’t that Paradise, he asked? And wasn’t it English? (303; original emphasis)

Just back from a five-month tour of the continent, Wordsworth at this moment was particularly pleased by the “Englishness” of his garden; he also boasted about the loveliness of his English lawns. Guidebooks, travel articles, poems, and drawings of Rydal Mount replicated the image of Wordsworth’s home as a cottage embowered with green plants (Yoshikawa 29, 57, 104), and for the later Victorians the house and garden came to represent an ideal image of English rural domesticity, “accommodat[ing] the poet in the developing cult of hearth and home,” as Stephen Gill argues (Wordsworth and the Victorians 208).

This homely, “domestic” garden at Rydal Mount, however, was never an exclusively “private,” retired space for a reclusive life. Rather, it was almost like a public garden; Wordsworth invited perfect strangers to walk around, and frequently accompanied them (Gibson 41). Later visitors included crowds of foreign and working-class tourists. Edward Quilliman reported in 1848 that he had seen "no less than 50 or 60 . . . cheap-trainers invad[ing]."

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9 Richardson remarks: “To a foreign visitor the whole country seems a garden—in the words of Shakespeare—“a sea-walled garden” (17).

10 Wordsworth was also aware of the garden’s role in connecting English emigrants to their home country. He published in 1845 a poem titled “To a Lady, in Answer to a Request that I would write her a Poem upon Some Drawings that she had made of Flowers in the Island of Madeira,” where he muses that some familiar names of English flowers such as heart’s-ease, speedwell, and forget-me-not would cheer “the drooping frame / Of English Emigrant” (31-32).

11 George Ticknor (1791-1871) visited Rydal Mount in March 1819; John Griscom (1774-1852), in April in the same year. Nathaniel Hazeltine Carter (1787-1830) visited in 1825 and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), in summer 1833 during his European tour. For American visitors to Rydal Mount, see Alan G. Hill, which contains a comprehensive check-list of Wordsworth’s American visitors.
the poet’s premises at once. They walked about all over the terraces and garden, without leave asked.” Quillinan was generous about them: “[he] was rather pleased at so many humble men & women and lasses having minds high enough to feel interest in Wordsworth.” 12 Mary Wordsworth also reports that on one morning she saw a group of young tourists standing before the window, and when the poet lifted up his head from a newspaper they greeted him with profound bows (300). The garden space reduced the distance between the “venerable” poet and “humble” and “young” readers. Wordsworth famously disapproved of “railway mania,” but the crowds’ invasions of Rydal Mount indicate how his poetry was now reaching new generations and new communities of readers. The garden may even have reconciled “cheap-trainer” tourists to the poet. On seeing numerous woman visitors sauntering in the front green, a newspaper reporter remarked that “this visit is a strong expression of female forgiveness for his verses in dispraise of railways, of which ladies have ever been the patrons” (Preston Guardian 12 August 1848).

It could be said that Wordsworth’s garden had a kind of “levelling” inclusivity, which can be observed also in the following description. More than 400 neighbours, including children, were invited there to celebrate the poet’s 74th birthday in April, 1844:

It would have delighted you to see the assemblage in front of our House, some dancing upon the gravel platform, old and young, as described in Goldsmith’s travels, and others, children I mean, chasing each other upon the little plot of Lawn to which you descend by steps from the platform. We had music of our own preparing, and two sets of casual Itinerants, Italians, and Germans, came in successively, and enlivened the festivity. There were present upward of 300 children, and about 150 adults of both sexes and all ages—the children in their best attire. . . . (William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Letters, Later Years 560)

12 Edward Quillinan to H. C. Robinson, 12 August 1848 (Robinson 2: 677). Reporting on a similar scene, a correspondent for the Preston Chronicle expressed anger at the impudence of those who had no respect for the privacy of the “venerable poet Wordsworth” (“Cheap Trips to the Lakes”).

It is remarkable that some “casual” tourists from abroad were also welcomed into the company, which was evidently far from a “private” party. This description of Rydal garden resembles Loudon’s when he visited the principal public garden of Rouen; he was pleased to see a gathering of all manners of persons: “well-dressed people, servants and children, boys and girls, old men and women, and beggars and their children” (Loudon, Notes and Reflection 498). Having observed several such public gardens, he became convinced that gardens and gardening would help different classes of people mingle together (“Summary View” 710). Likewise, at the sight of people gathered in his garden, Wordsworth expressed his conviction that “if such meetings could oftener take place between people of different condition, a much more friendly feeling would be created than now exists in this country between the rich and poor” (Christopher Wordsworth 2: 447). Rydal Mount garden was, in a way, an egalitarian or “pantisocratic” space.

For obvious reasons Wordsworth wanted this garden community to endure, as is expressed in the following poem:

The massy Ways, carried across these Heights
By Roman Perseverance, are destroyed,
Or hidden under ground, like sleeping worms.
How venture then to hope that Time will spare
This humble Walk? Yet on the mountain’s side
A Poet’s hand first shaped it; and the steps
Of that same Bard, repeated to and fro
At morn, at noon, and under moonlight skies,
Through the vicissitudes of many a year,
Forbade the weeds to creep o’er its grey line.
(“The massy Ways, carried across these Heights,” 1-10)

“This humble Walk” refers to the terrace walk the poet

13 Wordsworth also remarks as follows: “I must own my wish that little commemorations of this kind were more common among us. It is melancholy to think how little [the wealthy classes] . . . have to do in a social way with the humbler classes. They purchase commodities of them, or they employ them as labourers, or they visit them in charity for the sake of supplying the most urgent wants by alms-giving. But this alas is far from enough — One would wish to see the rich mingle with the poor as much as may be upon a footing of fraternal equality” (William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Letters, Later Years 561).
The English Society of Japan

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built along the highest boundary of his garden, where he habitually walked, composed poems, and enjoyed “earnest converse with beloved friends,” gathering “stores of ready bliss” there (14-15). While the “massy” Roman ways had faded from disuse, the poet’s sociable terrace walk was being kept clear by his own and his friends’ frequent footsteps. So Wordsworth decided to entrust the maintenance of the garden walk to the future readers’ continual visits after his death:

the Exile would consign
This Walk, his loved possession, to the care
Of those pure Minds that reverence the Muse.

(20-22)

Preservation of his garden depended on whether his poetry could be kept alive by continual returns of his readers.

As it turned out, after Wordsworth’s death in April 1850, the garden attracted individuals who tried to connect with the late poet in moments of private, spiritual communing. As Wordsworth had wished, visitors kept on coming to Rydal Mount to walk in the paths the poet had formerly trodden (Yoshikawa 107-10). Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, visited in 1855:

It is good to think of Wordsworth in quiet, past days, walking in his home-shadow of trees which he knew, and training flowers, and trimming shrubs, and chanting in an undertone his own verses, up and down the winding walks. (Hawthorne 16-17)

Hawthorne was so impressed that he decided to take back some plants as mementos — and there were many other visitors who thought likewise (Martineau 54; Hall 274). By carrying back plants from Wordsworth’s garden, they felt a kind of organic-spiritual connection with the deceased poet — much as, years before, some of them had read of Margaret’s garden in “The Ruined Cottage” as a scene of blessing. As the Pedlar feels “Sympathies” in her garden “That steal upon the meditative mind / And grow with thought” (MS.D 79, 81-82), those organic mementos from Rydal Mount grew in the visitors’ mind deeper sympathies towards the poet.

While Rydal Mount underwent refurbishment in the early 1870s (“Wordsworth’s Home”), the garden remained almost the same, contriving a continuity “through the vicissitudes of many a year.” Moncure Conway, an American writer, saw it that way when he visited during his Lake tour in 1879; his account of the garden echoes Hawthorne’s sentiments from 24 years before:

The affluence of flowers and foliage, which made it seem to Hawthorne as if Wordsworth’s poetry had manifested itself in flowers, shrubbery, and ivy, still makes the better part of Rydal Mount. . . . The old walk along the grounds, where the poet had chanted every line of his works. . . . is still here. We moved beneath the same archway of trees, and sat in the bower at its end. . . . He must have sat here gazing upon Rydal Water with its islets. (175; my italics)

As the repetitive use of such words as “still,” “here” and “same” indicates, Conway is moved how the garden apparently remains much as it was during the poet’s lifetime. Conway discovers continuity rather than change. It is remarkable that, almost thirty years after the poet’s death, and following the drastic alterations to the house, tourists still sought for reminiscences of the poet in his garden. As David Cooper argues, though, if the garden makes us feel that “where [we] stand, others stood centuries before” (80), it may not be so surprising that a garden created by the poet of “The Ruined Cottage” continued to inspire in visitors a sense of “connectedness” with the poet who—like Margaret—had worked and mused there:

[1] traced with milder interest
That secret spirit of humanity
Which, ’mid the calm oblivious tendencies
Of nature, ’mid her plants, her weeds, and flowers,
And silent overgrowings, still survived.

(“The Ruined Cottage,” MS.D 502-506)

As the poem’s narrator found the traces of Margaret in her garden, visitors to Rydal Mount tried to feel the poet’s spirit “still” lingering among his “plants, weeds, and flowers.”

This sentiment intensified towards the turn of the century. The poet-reader network nurtured by the garden extended to include tourists from North America, New Zealand, and city-dwelling working-classes from En-
gland's midlands.\textsuperscript{14} There was an evident public demand for Wordsworthian sites and associations, such that when Rydal Mount closed its gates in the mid-1860s (Dennis 449), the poet's former garden at Dove Cottage took over the role as a horticultural mediator.

3. Dove Cottage, 1860s-1920s

When Dove Cottage began to be visited by tourists,\textsuperscript{15} it had seen several tenants after the poet left more than a half century before; although its garden had been neglected, early visitors nevertheless regarded it as a hallowed space (Knight 26). Thrilled to have stepped into a scene of poetic inspiration once inhabited by Wordsworth, the writer Susanna Trubshaw read aloud the following poem:

Farewell, thou little Nook of mountain ground,  
Thou rocky corner in the lower stair  
Of Fairfield's mighty Temple that doth bound  
One side of our whole vale with grandeur rare,  
Sweet Garden-orchard! of all spots that are  
The loveliest surely man hath ever found!  
('Farewell," 1-6)

While Rydal Mount was admired for its well-tended "English" garden, at Dove Cottage the garden was loved for its topographical features as described here. Its "corner" space embraced by the mountain—described fondly here with such words as "thou little Nook," "sweet" and "loveliest"—had once strengthened the Wordsworth family bonds; now it seemed to infuse visitors with a feeling of intimacy with the poet.\textsuperscript{16} In reciting Wordsworth's poems in that small garden, tourists could feel themselves closer to the poet who had also murmured those lines in the same space. So, imaginative connections with the poet were extended across time and beyond the grave, just as the poet's garden was itself brought to life once again by their visits. Some even tried to reproduce the poet's garden at their own homes by bringing back seeds from Dove Cottage ("Dove Cottage").

Eventually Dove Cottage was purchased by subscription and opened as a memorial museum in 1891, for "English-speaking men and women all over the world," as Stopford Brooke put it (21). In the twentieth century, its garden attracted a far wider public, and Japanese names began to appear in the Visitors Book from 1908.\textsuperscript{17} Among such early tourists from Japan was Ichinosuke Takagi, a scholar in Japanese Classics and admirer of Wordsworth. Coming into Dove Cottage garden in 1925, he was struck by a feeling of "déjà vu; the simple, small and seemingly artless garden reminded him of some of those he knew in Japan:

Eventually we were led to the back garden by the coachman. Stepping stones were winding through the grass, which reminded me of a Japanese garden. It was so familiar a sight that I was almost convinced that I had seen this garden somewhere before. There I saw an utterly ordinary garden that could be found anywhere back in Japan—we could see such grassy plots at Ginkakuji-temple, Katsura Imperial Villa, Shisendo, or at someone's villa. What a surprise to find another under the alien sky, with sundry tourists from different countries. (50; my translation)

The garden harmoniously blended with the surrounding scenery evoked in Takagi a feeling of nostalgia for the gardens back in his homeland, which are composed on the same stylistic principle; even the grass or lawn—which was to Wordsworth and American tourists something very "English"—reminded Takagi of a Japanese garden. He felt the "pleasant workings of the two poetic spirits corresponding with each other across national boundaries" (50). Takagi's response indicates how Wordsworth's topographical imagination, as expressed in this garden as well as in his poetry, holds a universal appeal.

When a Chinese traveller Chiang Yee visited Grasmere in August 1936, the drizzling summer rain, which had been regarded as typical Lakeland weather, reminded

\textsuperscript{14} See, for instance, \textit{Manchester Times} 22 May 1852; Dennis 449; \textit{Otago Witness} 6 March 1890; \textit{New York Times} 28 May 1898.

\textsuperscript{15} Dove Cottage garden had attracted some attention in the 1840s, because of such poems as "Farewell" and "To a Butterfly," quoted in guidebooks, but it was after the closure of Rydal Mount in the mid-1860s that it began to attract many more tourists. See Yoshihata 65-66, 85-86, 113-19.

\textsuperscript{16} See, for instance, Haven 486; Trubshaw 31-34, Gage 5-6.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Dove Cottage Visitors Book}, 2011. R2.6 WLMSC / Dove Cottage 16.
him of the autumnal rain in China (65). Coming to
Dove Cottage, he was impressed—like Takagi—by the
garden and surrounding scenery that had inspired Word-
sworth; at the same time he realized "how similar Nature
is everywhere" (44). In the preface to the book Henry
Reed remarks: "What Mr Chiang shows, no less clearly
than Wordsworth, is the universality of all true modes of
feeling and thinking. The relationship of man to his
environment is the relationship of two constants—earth
the same and man the same, eternally" (Chiang xxvi).
Now, tourists did not necessarily have to feel the "En-
lishness" of Wordsworth's garden; they found that they
could appreciate its natural beauties with their own sen-
sibilities, fostered in their own culture and climates.

Embraced by and open to the mountain landscape,
Dove Cottage garden reminded Takagi and Chiang Yee
of the universality of man's relationship with nature, and
the global appeal of Wordsworth's poetry. They show us
how, just a few decades after his death, Wordsworth's ge-
nius as poet and gardener had cooperated with revolu-
tions in public transport and connected with the Far
East—above and beyond the differences of nationality,
language and culture—crossing borders to reach a far
wider readership than he could ever have expected.

Although Wordsworth was sometimes regarded as a
recluse, living secluded from the world in a remote place,
the gardens he made at Grasmere and Rydal were thus
open to a wide range of people, cultivating a literary
community, both actual and imaginary, and across social,
cultural and national differences. We tend to see the his-
tory of the reception of literary works in terms of critics,
reviews and translations and thus overlook how a writer
like Wordsworth connected with readers through the
bureaucracy of the nineteenth-century culture of tourism and
cult of cottage garden. If, as Hawthorne and others re-
marked, Wordsworth's poetry and his vision of man's
ideal relationship with nature were also manifested in his
gardens, it could be said that this appeal transcended lin-
guistic differences. So it was that the poet's gardens
played an important role in connecting Wordsworth and
his readers, embodying and securing his world-wide rep-
utation as a nature poet.

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