

AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award

Wordsworth, Creativity, and Cumbrian Communities

Further Details

Please note that the successful candidate will be able to shape the focus and methodology of the project, with the proviso that it is designed to be critical rather than biographical in its approach.

Aims and Objectives

A great deal of scholarly attention has been paid to Wordsworth's connections to other Romantic-period writers, particularly those who also resided in the Lake District, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas De Quincey, Charles Lloyd, and Robert Southey. Important work has also been done on the ideas of community that are so central to his poetry. This project, however, looks at Wordsworth's creativity from a different angle, through an analysis of how he interacted with non-literary communities within Cumbria, his impact on these communities, and their impact on his work.

The primary aims of the project are:

- (1) To enhance our understanding of the relationship between Wordsworth's poetry and the local communities of which he was a member.
- (2) To develop recent scholarly work on the social aspects of creativity through an extended case study of a significant author.
- (3) To offer a new way of understanding the reception of Wordsworth in the Romantic period by examining the extent to which it was an active, two-way process.
- (4) To ensure that the research findings are disseminated as widely as possible, and that the research process itself is appropriately interactive and publically engaged.
- (5) To contribute to the Wordsworth Trust's educational and outreach work within the local community and beyond.

Research Questions

The central question of this project is: how was Wordsworth's creativity developed, fostered, and/or challenged by his interactions with communities within Cumbria? The idea of interaction is crucial: the focus will be on the extent to which Wordsworth's creativity can be understood as a communal process. A key follow-up question will involve the much-analysed role of place in Wordsworth's poetry. How does our understanding of the relationship between Wordsworth's writing and his environment change if we understand that environment to include local communities as well as the landscapes that are so vividly depicted in his poems?

More specific questions will focus on interactions between Wordsworth and the various Cumbrian communities of which he was a member, and the impact of those interactions on his writing. Although the demarcation and identification of these communities will depend on the findings made during the period of doctoral study, key areas of focus may include:

- (1) Wordsworth's neighbours in Grasmere and Rydal, such as the Fishers, the Richardsons, and the Simpsons.
- (2) Local periodicals, such as the *Westmorland Advertiser and Kendal Chronicle* and the *Westmorland Gazette*.
- (3) Political groups and associations, particularly those linked to Wordsworth's patron, Sir William Lowther, Earl of Lonsdale.
- (4) Clubs and societies: for example, the book clubs at Ambleside, Grasmere, and Kendal, and charitable associations, such as the one set up to support the Green family in 1808.

Proposed Methodology

The research will draw on Wordsworth's poetry (particularly *Lyrical Ballads*, *The Prelude*, and *The Excursion*), in both published and draft forms, and other published sources, such as the Wordsworths' letters and Dorothy's journals. These texts contain many depictions of local people and communities. It will also draw on a wide range of archival material (much of which is unpublished) held in the Wordsworth Trust's Jerwood Centre, such as the many letters written to Wordsworth. In all, the Trust's collection numbers 67,000 individually catalogued items and includes manuscripts, book and fine art. In understanding the current community's interest in and response to Wordsworth, and how this has developed over time, the researcher will benefit from the recent acquisition of scrapbooks covering the twentieth century. S/he will also benefit from the guidance and support of the Trust's curatorial team in how best to utilise its collections.

Initial work on these primary sources will identify the key Cumbrian communities in Wordsworth's life. The approach, however, will be critical rather than biographical, seeking not simply to describe Wordsworth's interactions with these communities, but to *analyse* their impact on his poetry. The project will therefore draw on recent work on Wordsworth's creative processes in conjunction with scholarship on Romantic-period communities and sociability. It will also engage with relevant contemporary theoretical work on networks and communities.

We envisage that the student's approach to the project will benefit from his/her traineeship at the Trust. Through participation in the Trust's ongoing outreach activities (such as public events, family activities, reading groups, exhibitions, and projects with local schools) and developing new ones, the student will gain experience of working with the local community and an understanding of that community's relationship with Wordsworth and the Trust in the present day. This will provide an important frame through which to view the historical subject matter of the thesis and could potentially provide a basis for some concluding reflections on Wordsworth's status within contemporary Cumbria.

Outcomes

In addition to a doctoral thesis of 80-100,000 words, the project is expected to produce the following outcomes:

- (1) A scholarly article to be submitted to a high-quality peer-reviewed journal.
- (2) Seminar/conference papers.
- (3) Public Lecture. During or shortly after the completion of their thesis, the candidate will deliver a public lecture about their research at Grasmere. The lecture will be repeated in Leeds.
- (4) Exhibition. Working with colleagues in the Trust and with the local community, the candidate will co-curate an exhibition about Wordsworth and his communities that will showcase the doctoral project and the Trust's collections. An adapted version of this exhibition will be presented at the University's Stanley and Audrey Burton Gallery.
- (5) Reading Group. During his/her period working at the Trust, the candidate will run a Wordsworth reading group for local people. It will focus on texts of most relevance to the candidate's thesis and will allow for the candidate and participants to learn from each other.
- (6) Website. In close consultation with the Trust, the candidate will develop a section of the Trust's website in order to showcase the research project and to allow users to comment on it.

The student will receive supervisory guidance and support in achieving these outcomes, and the range of activities will be carefully managed in order to ensure that the thesis is completed to a high standard and within the permitted period. This will always be the priority.