

A Newly-Found Quaker Friend of Wordsworth: William Bennett (1804-73)

IT has long been known that William Wordsworth had a number of Quaker friends, but it is only in the last few years that it has become known that when he was a schoolboy at Hawkshead Grammar School, he used "on a very hot or a very wet Sunday" to attend the Meeting House at Colthouse, as being nearer to Ann Tyson's cottage, where he lodged, than the parish church across the valley. The "traditional" Ann Tyson cottage is in the village of Hawkshead, but we know that the Tysons moved from there to Colthouse after William Wordsworth had been lodging with them for probably two years.

Considerable research has been done by Mrs. Mary Moorman who found the statement quoted above among the Dove Cottage MSS., and the present writer, to discover at which cottage in Colthouse he lived. From the descriptions in "The Prelude" of both cottage and the views from it, there can be little doubt that it was Greenend Cottage within a very few minutes' walk of the Meeting House.

The fact of his living in Colthouse for the greater and most formative part of his schooldays, has lately been confirmed by statements in a MS. recently acquired by the Dove Cottage Trustees, which records conversations between the poet and William Bennett, a Quaker, at Rydal Mount, in September and November, 1846, four years before his death. The manuscript is entitled "Three Reminiscences of the Poet and Dorothy Wordsworth, during the last three months' visit to Dove Cottage, in 1846, of Mr. William Bennett and Family. They were accustomed to do this each Spring or Autumn for a series of years to be near the Poet." The records are dated "9th mo. 18th 1846," "11/11/1846" and "11 month, 24, 1846."

They were written on the same day as the visit was made. The first one describes how, after repeated invitations to visit Rydal Mount, William Bennett and his family went there with a friend who was sketching the house and garden and the view from them. They were shown round the garden

by James Dixon who had been with the Wordsworths for 27 years, and "reflected in some degree the character and influence of his master." Soon they met Wordsworth himself, and later his wife, Mary, of whom William Bennett wrote: "There is a peculiar calm and stillness about this lady, that cannot be conveyed; and her salutation is all benignity."

While Mrs. Wordsworth prepared to go out for a drive, the poet took the Bennetts round the garden, pointing out specially beautiful views of lake and mountain and tree.

"This is the man who has been represented by some as austere and unapproachable, the cold and haughty aristocrat; and keeping his own distance far above them, having abandoned the sympathies his writings appeal to. With us he remains enshrined as the poet of calm life, of duty and of our best affections."

"One of the brightest jewels of Wordsworth's life and character," Bennett adds, "is his care of an aged sister, Dorothy Wordsworth . . . who has always resided with him . . . and was an effectual assistant to him in the preparation of his literary labours." Dorothy had for "long been a deplorable sufferer" and was not only broken in body but in mind also. Sometimes she was calm and collected, but at other times she had paroxysms of waywardness and imbecility. Wordsworth, however, would never allow her to be removed from their home, and he of all the household could calm her most effectively. In fine weather she was wheeled about in the garden by a servant, and when the Bennetts were there she talked with them and quoted some of her own verses.

The second conversation to be recorded occurred about two months later when Wordsworth came to have tea with William Bennett and his family at Dove Cottage. Although he was 76 years old, he had walked from Rydal Mount to Grasmere, and alone, as his wife did not like to leave a servant who was ill. Nearly the whole evening was spent in the discussion of the art of poetry and the merits or demerits of poets both contemporary and of the past. "Wordsworth's idea of poetry is that of its being a perfect art to be mastered only by a regular course of diligent study, like any other branch of learning or science, with the adaptation of genius of course, only much more rare and difficult of attainment on account of its dealing with the whole of our being and relationships, the

appearances as well as the realities of nature, with all our powers, feelings and faculties. . . .”

Later Wordsworth said that “his writings must stand by their own character. It was not likely he should have written any ‘nonsense’ as some said, with his education, for no man in England had been more regularly educated. Nine years, from 9 to 18, had been spent at Hawkshead, then a celebrated school; during a great part of which time he lodged at Colthouse.”

As William Bennett and his young sons walked back to Rydal Mount with Wordsworth, on this November evening, they talked of the Society of Friends. “He inquired if they were increasing or diminishing in number. I could not but reply the latter, which he was sorry to hear, for he generally admired them, and did not wish to see their character and influence lost to society. They were a fact; and the theory of what they had always held forth, was certainly of an unworldly character. But he thought it behoved the Society to look to the causes of their young people leaving; whether there was not something in drawing the cord too tight, and denying some things which were innocent or useful in themselves, and therefore violating nature, which was certain to occasion a re-action. Or as Mrs. Barbauld used to say of Dissenters, that she never knew a family keep their carriage and remain so for three generations.”

A few days later another visit was paid to the Wordsworths to obtain the poet’s signature on some sketches of the house made by the Bennett children, to be sold at a bazaar in Belfast to alleviate the distress in Ireland due to the potato famine. Wordsworth disapproved of bazaars for religious purposes, and always refused his signature for sale, but he signed these sketches.

The Bennetts had brought the *Life of Thomas Ellwood* for him to read and they noticed that the *Life of William Allen* was open on the table in the parlour “which W.W. spoke of in highest terms and said the perusal of his active zeal and unwearied exertions in the cause of philanthropy made him ashamed of his own life and opportunities.”

Of William Bennett and his family, not much is recorded. Born in 1804, he died a member of Westminster Meeting in 1873. He married Elizabeth Trusted (1798 to 1891) and they had two sons, Alfred who became lecturer in Botany, Univer-

sity College, London, and Edward who became an artist, and one daughter Mary Elizabeth who lived as her mother did to the age of 93. Their father retired from business in early middle age to educate his children himself. His daughter was a good Greek scholar—she was the only Friend at the Summer School of 1897 who could read her Greek Testament at sight, as recorded by John William Graham in *The Friend* after her death. She remembered that as a child she sat on a hassock at Yearly Meeting and listened to Elizabeth Fry.

The Bennetts were close friends and neighbours of William and Mary Howitt in Park Village, Regents Park; later they lived at Betchworth, near Reigate, where the Howitts stayed with them and praised their delightful house and garden—“lovely objects and plants, a new fern-house and a ‘wilder-ness.’ ”

Both parents wrote pamphlets and he wrote two booklets, on a variety of subjects, chiefly Quaker and philanthropic. One of these described a journey in Ireland in 1847 when William Bennett took personally collections of small seeds to some of the remoter districts in Connaught in the hope of improving the social conditions there.

The manuscript recording the visits to and of William Wordsworth, was left to the daughter Mary Elizabeth, and on her death to her cousin Mrs. Ethel Lean Jones who then was living a widow near Banbury. She and her husband had founded the Downs School, Colwall, near Malvern. She sold the MS. in 1934 to one of the Professors at St. John's Cambridge (Wordsworth's college). Hence in 1957 it was sold at Sotheby's and afterwards presented to the Dove Cottage Trustees, and so was returned to the very place where it was originally written.

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