

Wordsworth's Quaker Servant:

Mary Dawson, afterwards Fisher, d.1854.

WORDSWORTH, in a letter to Sir George Beaumont, September 1806, refers to his domestic servants, and mentions, that one is "by birth and breeding a Quaker". He writes:

The picture of the Thorn¹ has been ten days under our roof. It has pleased us greatly; and the more it is looked at, the more it pleases. Yet we have two objections to it; one, that the upright bough in the thorn is, we think, too tall for a tree in so exposed a situation; and the other,—which I remember you mentioned as having been made by somebody in town,—that the woman appears too old. I did not feel this much myself, but both my wife and sister have felt it. The picture is, I think, beautifully coloured; and assuredly if it be the best praise of a picture that it should be often looked at, that praise yours has in abundant measure, and is likely to have. Our servant (observe, she is a Quaker by birth and breeding) thought that the colours were too grave. Our old Molly, of whom you have heard, did not venture to give her opinion in our presence; but as we learned afterwards, she laid her head close to a neighbour's of ours, whispering, "What do ye think of it?" "To be sure, the frame's varra bonny, but, for my part, I can mak nowt on't" (meaning "nothing of it"); to which her neighbour replied that she thought it was very natural.²

The servant's name is not mentioned in this letter, neither is the surname of Old Molly. It is known that Old Molly was Mary Fisher, who lived with her brother and sister-in-law, John and Agnes Fisher, at Sykeside, the house across the road from Dove Cottage. Her surname is never given in Dorothy Wordsworth's Journals or Letters. The other servant's name it will be shown was Mary (Molly) Dawson, the Quaker. It is difficult to distinguish the two since both are often referred to as Molly.

Much more is known of Mary (Molly) Fisher than of Mary (Molly) Dawson. Old Molly as Mary Fisher is called, was a quaint character; she amused the Wordsworths, and Coleridge by her drollery and amusing sayings. The first we

¹ This picture by Sir George Beaumont, *The Thorn*, was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1806.

² *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: the middle years.* Ed. E. de Selincourt, vol. 1: 1806 to June 1811 (1937), Letter 275, p. 64.

learn of her is in a letter from Wordsworth to Coleridge, Christmas Eve, Grasmere (1799). He writes:

We do not think it will be necessary for us to keep a servant. We have agreed to give a woman, who lives in one of the adjoining cottages two shillings a week for attending two or three hours a day to light the fires, wash dishes, etc., etc.¹

In 1804, Old Molly has left the service of the Wordsworths. Dorothy Wordsworth in a letter to Catherine Clarkson, 3rd May, 1804 writes:

Aggy Fisher is dead and Molly is promoted to the high office of her Brother's Housekeeper and attendant upon his single cow for he has sold the rest of the stock and lett the land. It is a great comfort to us that Molly has been taken from us in so quiet and natural a way, for we were afraid of breaking her heart by telling her that she was not fit for her place which indeed has been the truth for the last six months at least. At present Sally Ashburner is with us— We are too late I fear to get a good Servant, for they are all hired in this neighbourhood.²

A letter from Charles Lamb to Mr. Wordsworth (undated), but presumably about the same time as the previous letter to Catherine Clarkson, since in the letter Lamb mentions the cow, says:

Poor Old Molly! to have lost her pride, that "last infirmity of noble minds", and her cow. Fate need not have set her wits to such an Old Molly. I am heartily sorry for her. Remember us lovingly to her; and in particular remember us to Mrs. Clarkson in the most kind manner.³

Wordsworth in *The Excursion*, tells of Aggie Fisher's bitterness upon her death-bed, as she thinks of Old Molly, her sister-in-law, taking her place in her home after she has gone.

'And must she rule',

This was the death-doomed Woman heard to say
In bitterness, 'and must she rule and reign,
Sole Mistress of this house, when I am gone?
Tend what I tended, calling it her own!'⁴

It is probable that Old Molly helped the Wordsworths occasionally in their home after she had left their service. At any rate she visited them from time to time. Dorothy

¹ *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth (1787-1805)*. Ed. E. de Selincourt (1935), Letter 105, p. 236.

² *Ibid.*, Letter 170, p. 387.

³ Thomas Noon Talfourd: *Final Memorials of Charles Lamb*, (1848), Vol. 1, p. 149.

⁴ Wordsworth: *Poetical Works*, Ed. by T. Hutchinson, (1936). *The Excursion*, Book VI, lines 752-756.

Wordsworth writes to Catherine Clarkson, Grasmere, Christmas Day, 1805:

Old Molly and John Fisher are in the kitchen, but when dinner is ready they are to come upstairs and partake with us, and "*Johnny and all.*" The evening before the shortest day Molly came in in her brisk way and shook hands with me at six o'clock, the time when we arrived here 6 years ago. "Aye", says the poor creature, "I mun never forget t'laal striped gown and t'laal straw Bonnet as ye stood here" (by the parlour fire). It was a miserable dark chimney with an handful of reddish cinders in it, for you must know that Molly had kept fires in the houses for a fortnight with *two buckets of coals* that it might be dry and comfortable to receive us.¹

In 1807, we hear of Molly Dawson for the first time. Again Dorothy Wordsworth writes to Catherine Clarkson, Coleorton, 20th January, (1807).

Peggy Ashburner and Old Molly and all neighbours are as well as usual, thinking much of us. Our old servant, Molly Dawson, lives with Mrs. Lloyd. We wish we could have her again at our return as we intend to keep two women servants, our family with Coleridge and the Boys will be so large. Molly would gladly have come with us hither, but we thought ourselves bound in honour to another.²

It will be observed that in this letter Molly Dawson is described as "Our old servant". In a letter from D.W. to W.W., *Grasmere, Wednesday, 23rd March (1808)*, we are told of Old Molly's approaching death.

Old Molly's legs are much swoln and she grows daily weaker. I hope her sufferings will soon be at an end. She talks with cheerfulness of dying except when she turns to poor John's desolate condition. I really think I have nothing more to say for I have not heart to talk of our own little concerns, all being well with us.³

A few months later Dorothy Wordsworth writes to Catherine Clarkson, telling her of Old Molly's death.

*Grasmere, Sunday, July 3rd or 4th
(I believe) 1808.*

Poor old Molly Fisher is at rest in the quiet grave. She had long and earnestly prayed for Death, therefore we were pleased

¹ *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, Letter 239, p. 558.

² *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, 1806-1811, Letter 291, pp. 109-110. Mrs. Lloyd was the daughter of Samuel Pemberton of Birmingham. She married Charles Lloyd (1775-1839), eldest son of Charles Lloyd the Quaker banker and philanthropist. Charles Lloyd Jun. was the friend of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Lamb; see my articles in *Notes and Queries*, December 1956, and October 1957.

³ *Ibid.*, Letter 322, p. 179.

and thankful when she died—but many a pensive thought have I in my walks to and from Town-End, of her and her chearful happy ways. The house where she lived is almost as desolate as our own, for her Brother "John Fisher", lives there alone. It goes through my heart to see her empty chair, and a hundred little things that she prized, remaining just as she left them, only dull and dusty.¹

The Parish Register records her death:

Mary F. of Town End, spinster buried Jun 3. 1808.

The preceding account of Old Molly has been necessary in order to discover which of the two servants was the Quaker.

The letter in which Wordsworth mentions this, it will be remembered, was written to Sir George Beaumont, September, 1806. Old Molly left the employment of the Wordsworths in 1804, and died in 1808. In a letter already given, Dorothy Wordsworth writes to Catherine Clarkson, 20th January, (1807) "Our old servant, Molly Dawson, lives with Mrs. Lloyd". Again she writes to Catherine Clarkson, 22nd April, (1808).

Thomas is very well; and Dorothy has been at Brathay since the third day after her Father's arrival. We are afraid that she disgraces herself by her waywardness, though Mrs. Lloyd will hear nothing of it. She is in high spirits, enchanted with all the novelties that are about her and declares that she will never come home again, yet she takes no delight in any company but that of the Gardener and our old Servant Mary Dawson who is Mrs. Lloyd's Cook—She calls her *my* Mary Dawson and to her and the Gardener she clings from morning to night.²

A letter from Dorothy Wordsworth to Thomas De Quincey, gives information that Mary Dawson is about to leave the Lloyds, and is going to work for De Quincey.

D.W. to Thomas De Quincey,
Wednesday, 5th April [1809]

We have engaged an excellent servant for you, to come at Martinmas, Mr. Lloyd's cook, formerly our servant; but we must hire another to serve you till that time. Might not your brother have arrived before this time.³

In November, Mary Dawson is with De Quincey.

D.W. to Catherine Clarkson,
Grasmere, November 18th [1809]

Mr. De Quincey has been at Grasmere five weeks, and has taken possession of his cottage as a lodging-place, and our little orphan maiden Sally Green has prepared his breakfast, but

¹ *Ibid.*, Letter 341, pp. 232-233.

² *Ibid.*, Letter 331, pp. 202-203.

³ *Ibid.*, Letter 364, p. 283.

wanting a housekeeper he grew tired of that plan and lately has been wholly with us. To-night, however, his housekeeper is arrived, and a proud and happy woman she is as any within twenty miles. You remember our old servant, Mary Dawson, she will suit the place exactly, and the place exalts her to the very tip-top of exaltation.¹

Further letters referring to Mary Dawson, are as follows:

D.W. to Jane Marshall,
Grasmere, November 19th, 1809

Our Friend, Mr. de Quincey, is come to the cottage, rather I should say to Grasmere, though we have already spent several comfortable evenings at the cottage—but he is with us at present, his servant arrived only the day before yesterday, and she is now busied in preparing the cottage for his permanent Residence.²

M.W. to Thomas De Quincey,
Grasmere, Aug. 20th, [1810]

I find upon enquiring into the state of Mary Dawson's purse that she is very near the bottom of it, and that she has had Miss Crosthwaite's bill with the receipt, presented to her for payment.³

D.W. to W.W.,
Thursday 23rd April, 1812

Mary Dawson has been very kind to us in taking the Children, but she is very poorly, and being so could not amuse them so well as the society they found at the carriers, therefore she could hardly keep them within the garden gate.⁴

D.W. to Thomas De Quincey
June 5, 1812

You will be pleased to hear that Mary Dawson has been very kind in her attentions to us.⁵

D.W. to Mary Hutchinson (*née* Monkhouse)
Feby, 1st, 1813

Mary Dawson talks in private to us of leaving Mr. de Quincey—What a prize she would be to your Brother John as house-keeper! She is tired of Mr. De Q's meanness and greediness.⁶

The last published letter which mentions Mary Dawson so far as can be discovered, was in the year 1814, when she had left De Quincey to return to the Wordsworths. How long she remained with them must be a matter of conjecture.

¹ *Ibid.*, Letter 393, p. 344.

² *Ibid.*, Letter 394, p. 346.

³ *Ibid.*, Letter 419, p. 393.

⁴ *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: the middle years.* Ed. E. de Selincourt, vol. 2: August 1811-1820 (1937), Letter 445, pp. 490-491 (written across a letter of De Quincey's to W.W. which D.W. is forwarding to London).

⁵ *Ibid.*, Letter 450, p. 503.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Letter 475, p. 551.

D.W. to Catherine Clarkson,
Keswick, Sunday, April 24th [1814]

Unfortunately we happen for the last half-year to have had the worst cook in England—but Mary Dawson is coming to live with us at Whitsuntide (whom you remember our servant at the Town End) and Sara and I intend to give *her* an unlimited commission to cook all sorts of nice things for Mary, to which Mary will not object; for (strange it is) Mary in these things would be far more easily ruled by a servant than by us.¹

It is a pity that not more is known of Mary Dawson, but we do know that on 8th November, 1817, she was married to John Fisher Junior, who had lived a wild life in his youth and afterwards settled down as a cobbler in his father's house at Sykeside. Probably Mary Dawson remained in service with the Wordsworths until her marriage. In *The Excursion* Wordsworth refers to John Fisher, and his mother in the following lines:

Two passions, both degenerate, for they both
 Began in honour, gradually obtained
 Rule over her, and vexed her daily life;
 An unremitting, avaricious thrift;
 And a strange thralldom of maternal love,
 That held her spirit, in its own despite,
 Bound—by vexation, and regret, and scorn,
 Constrained forgiveness, and relenting vows,
 And tears, in pride suppressed, in shame concealed—
 To a poor dissolute Son, her only child.²

Perhaps John Fisher was not entirely responsible for his actions, for it will be remembered that Aggie Fisher, his mother, was an embittered woman, and strongly resented the thought that Old Molly, her sister-in-law, would take her place in the home at her death.

“And must she rule and reign,
 Sole mistress of this house, when I am gone?”

Whether the marriage was a happy one we do not know. John Fisher died at Sykeside on 23rd April, 1827. “Mary Fisher resided there till her death in 1854, at the age of 76, and as a last remaining link with the Old Town End days her house and conversation formed a strong attraction to W. in his old age.”³ There is no mention of either of their deaths in

¹ *Ibid.*, Letter 498, p. 590.

² *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, Ed. by T. Hutchinson (1936), *The Excursion*, Book VI, lines 706-715.

³ See Dorothy Wordsworth: *Journals*. Ed. by E. de Selincourt, (1941), Vol. 1, appendix p. 434-5. Notes on some of the persons mentioned in the *Grasmere Journal*. By the late Gordon Graham Wordsworth.

