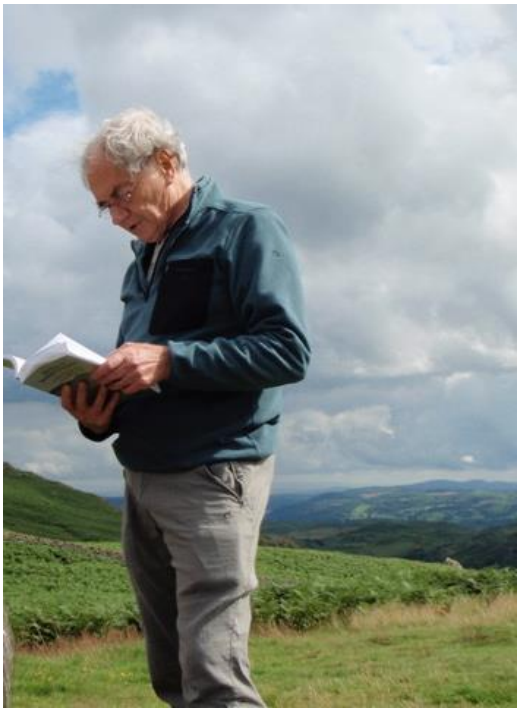
Richard Gravil

Graham Davidson and Bruce Graver

RICHARD GRAVIL, THE CHAIR AND FOUNDER of the Wordsworth Conference Foundation, died suddenly on a mountainside in Majorca last May. Some years ago, when the Wordsworth Trust decided it could no longer afford to sponsor the Wordsworth Summer Conference, it was Richard, working together with Nick Roe, who formed the Conference Foundation, wrote its bylaws, and restructured the summer conference so that it could continue and be economically viable. After a few years at the Forest Side in Grasmere, he was able to move the conference to Rydal Hall.



Richard's links to the Friends of Coleridge were few but firm. As the guiding spirit of the Wordsworth Summer Conference and the Winter School, he welcomed Coleridgeans to both events, but particularly to the Winter School, many of whose delegates attend the Coleridge Study Weekend. He has also published in the *Bulletin* over the years, and in this issue he is both reviewer and reviewed. His first paper for the Friends was given in 2005, by Kilve's delightful shore, at the Study Weekend, aptly entitled 'Somerset Sound; or, The Darling Child of Speech'. And Richard did the Somerset sounds, in different voices, very precisely, thus enriching his closely-argued paper with a great deal of entertainment. One doesn't remember many papers after nearly fifteen years, even one's own, but that paper was an event that has stuck with many of us. It was, in essence, a tribute to John Thelwall and his influence on Coleridge. This is Richard's summary of his paper:

> Having Tom Paine's gift for plain English, he writes without those affectation of inversions, double negatives, chiasmus, showy parallelisms, and even a ghostly presence of Augustan end-stopping—that tendency to think in couplets, if not to rhyme them—vices that linger (if I dare say so) in Coleridge's poems until Frost at Midnight, in February 1798. That, basically, is my simple thesis: Thelwall may not have set his country free, but he did liberate Coleridge's 'numbers'. He became his 'voice coach'. He co-created 'The Somerset Sound'. For twelve months or more, between May 1796 and February 1797, and again between July and

> December 1797, Thelwall pruned Coleridge's redundancies, while Coleridge wrestled for Thelwall's soul. (*CB* 26, p.4)

It is divided into two parts, the first of which is devoted to prosody. And it is written with a depth of knowledge that those who think prosody something of a dark art will find illuminating, though perhaps not quite with that brilliance which Richard's reading then gave to his words. The second part discusses Coleridge and Thelwall's correspondence, and their different poems on comparable themes, both writing poems on the future of their sons, Frost at Midnight and To the Infant Hamden. It is a great paper which deserves revival.

Richard also reviewed Lucy Newlyn's *All in each other* in the Winter Bulletin 2014 (*CB* 44), and as I think typical of his thoroughness, disclosed the essence of the book and expressed his reservations with justice and precision. Those same qualities he brought to a reconsideration of what he called Wordsworth's 'most notorious poem', lambasted by 'Hazlitt, Shelley, Byron, and eventually … Ruskin', the intention of which is evident in the title, 'A "hideous rout": Wordsworth's "Thanksgiving Ode" in Context'. The 'hideous rout' is Waterloo, but also echoes the poem's reception, a phrase from one of Wordsworth's sonnets in the Thanksgiving volume. This is the task that Richard set himself:

> The paradox of the divinely ordained yet humanly insupportable, is comprehensible only to those conversant with 'holy fear' and 'trained to judgments righteously severe', who read history as a record of 'Almighty sway'. Learning to do so, is, I will try to show, the burden of Wordsworth's 'Ode. (*CB* 44, p.2)

The context is provided by five thanksgiving sermons for the same event by a variety of clerics. Despite his religious scepticism, Richard reads the poem in the spirit in which Wordsworth wrote, and thus reveals the conflicting impulses in the poet, and the complexity of his response to that conflict. An example is Wordworth's doubt about physical monuments: 'What offering, what transcendent monument / Shall our sincerity to Thee present? /—Not work of hands; but trophies that may reach /To highest Heaven—the labour of the Soul'—that is, the work of contemplation, of the transcendent, not the mere work of unthinking hands. Thus we come to the lines that Shelley mocked in Peter Bell the Third:

> But thy most dreaded instrument
> In working out a pure intent
> Is Man—arrayed for mutual slaughter,—
> Yea, carnage is thy daughter. (277–82)

And Richard's comment: 'Presumably Shelley objects to Wordsworth revelling in carnage. If so, he grossly mistook Wordsworth's tone.' And this is his defence of Wordsworth when it would have been so easy to join in the chorus of condemnation:

> That the lines were designed to shock seems certain: they bring the reader and indeed the poet face to face with something every church-goer was familiar with from infancy. Somehow, the God who numbers the fall of the sparrow has to be comprehended also as the God who slaughters Israel's enemies in their tens of thousands. 'Yea, carnage is thy daughter' *may* be read as an enthusiastic expression of bloodlust; it can also be read as shocked realization—wondering, fearful, and appalled—of the implications of all those old testament records of Israelite Jihad.
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> (CB 44, p.15)

As Bruce Graver points out below, Richard had an enigmatic sense of humour, and sometimes, I thought, an unwillingness to be drawn into debate. However, when it mattered, he sat down and thought things out. I had a spat with him about something he'd said of the *Ode*, and received a humorous but daunting note. I stood my ground, and he eventually conceded that what he felt I had misread could be read as I had read it, and sent me a modified text. I respected his great depth of Wordsworthian knowledge, so when it came to a paper on the Cambridge Platonists, I sent it to him, and got an extremely useful set of notes in return. I felt our conversation was just beginning, and will miss the richness and clarity of mind with which he wrote and thought.

Graham Davidson

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I met Richard at my first Wordsworth Conference, back in 1986, when we were based at the Red Lion Hotel in Grasmere. It was my first summer in the UK, and I hadn't had fish for breakfast since I was a little boy in Minnesota, so I was delighted to try smoked haddock the first morning, and the next day, I confidently ordered kippers. Richard sat down across the table from me, and watched, with an ironic bemused smile, as I struggled with what had to be the boniest fish on the planet. When his plate of kippers arrived, he took his knife and fork, said "This is how most of us do it," and with two deft strokes, completely deboned his fish.

That's how we met. I could have kicked him.

But I didn't, and as I came to appreciate his peculiar sense of humor, I also came to appreciate how deeply he loved these mountains and the poets who lived here. In his teaching positions, Richard did not have the pressure to publish that most of us feel; so he was able to distill his thoughts and arguments over time, and when *Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation* appeared, it had the solidity and depth of understanding that only comes from living with a poet for many years. His last completed project, *The Oxford Handbook of Wordsworth*, which he co-edited with Daniel Robinson, is effectively a festschrift to our conference, since so many of us are its contributors, and that work has been justly praised as an "overwhelmingly wondrous experience." Daniel is fond of

saying that, on the handbook, he played Robin to Richard's Batman, and was proud to do it. But Richard was not just a Wordsworthian; he was also a pioneer in what we have come, under his influence, to call Transatlantic Romanticism. Joel Pace remembers walking the fells with Richard in 1996, here at the conference, and discussing with him a vision of an organization and a new journal that would bridge the artificial divide between English and American literary studies. That vision took bodily form, just a year later, as the Symbiosis conference and the *Symbiosis* journal, which Richard co-founded and co-edited with Phillip Gair. Richard's *Romantic Dialogues*, based largely on lectures and papers that he delivered at this conference, is still recognized as a seminal work in Transatlantic studies, and what used to be "an oddly neglected academic field" has now become mainstream.

But I think most of us will remember Richard, with his cap and his wooden stick, as the leader of our walks, whether the early-morning strolls up to Rydal Cave and the Upper Falls, or the vigorous Wainwrights that fill up our afternoons and make the Wordsworth conference like none other in the world. Richard knew and loved every contour of these hills, their spectacular views, and their bogs and damps, and he shared that knowledge and love with each of us, year after year, until his body could no longer manage it. I asked my son Nick, now a botanist with our National Park Service living in the mountains of California, to write a few words about walking with Richard—Nick attended this conference three times and in 2014 took Richard's place as leader of our A-walks:

> In my life in the mountains I have known a great many people with a love of the outdoors, but none with as profound a sense of place as Richard Gravil. Richard's fell walks were far more than recreational; they were wanderings with old friends, alight with poems and stories. Richard spoke more through walking than through talking, preferring to show rather than tell us what the poetry of the Wordsworths was about.
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> I remember an alternative A-walk Richard led us on when the rain was too harsh to make summiting worthwhile. Despite the adverse conditions, Richard showed us how to enjoy the fells even in their dampness, and somehow this was the hike that stuck with me. I remember losing in the mud the rubber tip on the end of a hiking pole, and Richard taking the opportunity to introduce us to the word "ferrule." Richard's was a language of fells and meres and gills, words which tie him uniquely to the Lake District more than any other place in the world. The lakes and fells will miss him as much as we do.

After writing these words, Nick climbed Red Cinder, the highest peak in the Caribou Wilderness in northern California. There in the summiting box he left a note—for Richard Gravil.

Bruce Graver