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Professor William Knight 1836–1916: 'Wordsworthian Discoverer, Enabler, and Publicist' A Centenary Celebration

(Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust 2016)

by Tony Reavell, Stephen Gill, Nicholas Roe & Jeff Cowton

THE NAME OF WILLIAM KNIGHT WILL BE FAMILIAR TO ANYONE with an interest in Wordsworth. His Herculean labours in editing the first truly scholarly edition of the poems, composing the first full and detailed biography, and editing Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journals* alone demand our attention and respect. And he did a great deal more than this, including, for example, ensuring the acquisition of Coleridge Cottage for the nation (not to speak of Dove Cottage). Tony Reavell is Knight's great-grandson and was the moving force in marking the centenary of his great-grandfather's death with the publication of this book. However, since all of Knight's scholarly work has inevitably been superseded, why, one asks, is this publication of interest to anyone but the most fervent of contemporary Wordsworthians? The answer is that it provides a fascinating case-study in literary and cultural history. Furthermore, the fact that each of the contributing writers has some personal link with Knight as well as Wordsworth, gives the book a special flavour. It is full of unexpected pleasures.

William Knight was a typical Victorian Wordsworthian in that he found in Wordsworth a teacher and moral guide who answered his philosophical and theological needs while remaining outside the controversies of Victorian Christianity. However, Knight's roots are firmly in the Church of Scotland, from which he moves steadily away. One might compare him with Leslie Stephen, also a Victorian Wordsworthian. Neither man is interested in Wordsworth as pure poetry, but rather in how he addresses fundamental philosophical and religious questions in verse. Both take Wordsworth's thinking seriously.

Knight was also a typical Victorian in his commitment to societies, committees, and causes. He not only carried out most of the 'heavy lifting' of early Wordsworthian scholarship, but also served as a key figure in the Wordsworth Society. A detailed account of his role is given in a separate chapter by Tony Reavell. Jeff Cowton explains that Knight's gift in 1898, which included a complete run of the lifetime editions of Wordsworth, was the foundation of the Wordsworth Trust's present collection of more than 65,000 manuscripts, books, and works of art now housed in the Jerwood Centre in Grasmere.[2]

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[1] Justin Shepherd is the Chair of the Friends of Coleridge and author of articles on Coleridge. In 2016 he published *In Xanadu…*, in celebration of the centenary of the first publication of "Kubla Khan".

[2] Cowton helpfully lists details of the contribution, which included numerous pictures, manuscripts, and memorabilia, as well as Wordsworth first editions and other books.

Reavell's biographical account of his great-grandfather presents a very full picture of the man. His vivid retelling of the split in the Church of Scotland, in which Knight's father and more than 800 other people, including 400 ministers, rose up from the annual Assembly and made their way to the door of St Andrew's, Edinburgh, and processed down to the Tanfield Hall in Canonmils, brilliantly evokes the time of the foundation of the Free Church. In joining this procession, Knight was giving up his living, his house, and his pulpit. It is a salutary reminder of the sacrifices people then made for what they believed in.

William Knight was himself a powerful preacher, and Nicholas Roe reveals how Knight's 'fearless' preaching caused such controversy that it led to his departure from St John's in Dundee. Such was his charisma that some of his devoted parishioners raised the money for a new church, where he was soon installed. However, dubbed 'the Reverend heretic', Knight's increasingly liberal views and outspoken expression of them eventually led to his resignation from the ministry and departure from the Church of Scotland in 1873. He then took up the position of Professor of Moral Philosophy at St Andrew's University in 1876, the position from which he carried out most of his Wordsworthian scholarship and much else besides over the next thirty years.

Reavell lists many of Knight's numerous works of philosophy, biography, and literary scholarship. His Wordsworth titles alone account for more than thirty separate volumes. His literary work rate was prodigious, but he was also heavily involved with all kinds of enlightened causes from the humane treatment of animals to women's education. He continued until the end. For example it was he who organised the Browning Centenary in 1912, not with some small gathering of enthusiasts, but with a national celebration including a service at Westminster Abbey. His *Coleridge and Wordsworth in the West Country* appeared as late as 1913, and his last published work, an anthology of poetry, was published the year before he died.

As a result of Knight's vision, energy, and tireless work, St Andrew's became the first university in Britain to grant university degrees to women, as Nicholas Roe explains based on careful archival work at St Andrew's. Since Roe has himself been Professor of English at St Andrew's for many years, his contribution shares a collegiate sensibility with Knight. At the time, remember, no women were admitted to degrees anywhere in Britain. In order to enable the teaching and examination of non-resident women students at degree level, he came up with the idea of a university extension scheme not unlike the modern Open University. In the 25 years Knight was leading this project, he set up more than 70 devolved 'centres of examination', not only in Scotland, but in Great Britain, the Continent, and the Colonies. In 1896 the residential University Hall for women students was finally opened at St Andrew's. Roe gives a full account of all this in scholarly detail and unconcealed admiration.

Stephen Gill is, I suppose, the nearest thing we have to a modern version of William Knight, although he would probably dispute this. For a start, he comes from Scotland, but he has also been at the centre of Wordsworth studies,

particularly Wordsworthian textual studies, for fifty years. He also shares with his predecessor the fact that he has written the standard biography for a generation or more of students and readers. As such, Gill is uniquely qualified to appreciate Knight's strengths and weaknesses. Gill explains the achievement, especially in view of the conditions under which he was working: no photocopying, so all transcription of manuscripts had to be done by hand; no bibliography; no online material or access to world libraries; no archive of all the printed texts. As Gill writes, 'Not only had Knight to be an explorer, he had, so to speak, to be his own load bearer'. Although Gill does not say so here, this also helps to explain why so much of Knight's own published work about Wordsworth is made up of the quotation of whole passages of letters, poems, and prose. He could not depend on his readers having access to these texts, so he saw one of his first duties as making the texts readily available. One may think of Knight as a deep-sea trawler in an ocean of letters, scooping up any possible Wordsworthian morsel in his scholarly net for the benefit of others.

Knight re-used material frequently (and readers of Gill's brilliantly detailed and entertaining *Wordsworth and the Victorians* will recognize some of his previous assessments in these pages). However, Gill is the most trusted and David Attenborough-like of commentators in the sometimes shark-filled waters of Victorian Wordsworth editors, and his sympathetic account here of Knight's editorial labours and skilful dealings with rivals and family members in the context of copyright law and market forces is fuller and less restrained than in the earlier book, and even more entertaining. He highlights Knight's success in establishing the chronological order of poetic composition and his three-volume *Life of William Wordsworth* (1889) as Knight's most influential achievements. Gill successfully rescues Knight from what E. P. Thompson termed 'the enormous condescension of posterity', and he ends with an unapologetic assertion that Knight towered above his rivals and was 'incontestably the greater' of the two leading Victorian editors of Wordsworth (Dowden was the other).

I would like to finish by mentioning briefly Knight's concern with place, which is where he began and ended his work on Wordsworth. His first published work on Wordsworth was *The English Lake District as Interpreted in the Poems of Wordsworth* (1878). This is what set Knight on his path. His final work, *Coleridge and Wordsworth in the West Country* (1913), once more returns to topography. The reason why this topic meant so much to him was not because of sentimental literary tourism, but because, in the words of another great Victorian Wordsworthian, Leslie Stephen, the great aim of moral philosophy was 'to end the divorce between reason and experience'.[3] To trace in detail the connections between poems and their places—as Knight was the first, if not the last, to attempt—was in order to understand better the workings of the mind of Wordsworth as moral philosopher as well as poet. T.

[3] Leslie Stephen, 'Wordsworth's Ethics', in *Hours in a Library: Third Series* (London: John Murray, 1876), 190.

E. Hulme may have caustically characterised Romanticism as 'spilt religion',[4] but this volume is an illuminating case-study and portrait of a man for whom, as for many of his generation, Wordsworth's poetry not only presented some of the basic questions of human existence, but also provided some of the answers.

[4] In the essay 'Romanticism and Classicism' in *Speculations* (London: Routledge, 1924).