

Simon Fraser University  
The Wordsworth Collection  
1971-2000

By Jared Curtis

*Imagining a Collection:*

Origins:

How did this all begin? When I came to Simon Fraser in 1971, I found one lifetime edition in the open stacks of Bennet Library, a copy of the two-volume Poems that Wordsworth published in 1815. Bound in a utilitarian library binding this "find" was both satisfying and dismaying, when I realized how far we had to go. I was working at the time on an edition of Wordsworth's poems that spanned the years 1800-1807 and included his previous collection, Poems, in Two Volumes, published in 1807. The Cornell Wordsworth, the editorial project I was working on with other editors, was eventually to include all of Wordsworth's poems in 20 volumes, in every case providing a full historical record of the authorial text both in manuscript and in print. What was the use, then, of "lifetime editions"?

Purpose:

The answer lies in Wordsworth's writing and publishing career, which spanned more than 60 years, from the time when he began filling notebooks with verse at age 15 to his death at age 80. The portion he offered to the public in printed form included over 60 separate publications. Each of these contained different, or at least new poems, and the collective volumes (with titles like *Poems* or *Poetical Works*), including those issued from stereotypes of previous editions, presented revised versions of already published poems as well as, always, a few new poems. Each new publication, then, offered a distinctly new text to be considered. To complete my own volumes in the series, and to assist fellow editors working on other volumes, I needed to have close at hand as full a run of lifetime editions as the Library could manage to gather, in order to produce a full and accurate history of the text.

Approach:

How to approach such a task? We established, first, that printed works by and about Wordsworth defined an area in which the Library needed to collect. It was easy to decide that we were not in a position to collect manuscripts, but we thought lifetime editions were within our range. We then set about finding copies of such editions that we could afford to buy (the Library was more flush in those days!). A bookseller who supplied us with some of our earliest acquisitions was Richard Dana (he sold us our copies of the 1798 and 1800 editions of *Lyrical Ballads*). I met Richard in his flat in Edinburgh in 1973, where he entertained me with music played from his collection of ancient rolls on his player piano. I recall with pleasure his playing a composition by Rachmaninov that was recorded by the composer. He then showed me his private Wordsworth collection of some 200 titles, which he wanted to sell as a whole to one institution. I told him we definitely wanted to have it at Simon Fraser.

Result:

Back in Vancouver I was able to persuade the Dean of Arts to make a special grant to the Library to purchase the entire Dana collection, which was broken down into "Writings of

Wordsworth in Book Form" (comprising 119 titles, including 17 lifetime editions), "Writings on or pertaining to Wordsworth" (68 scholarly and not-so-scholarly works mainly from the latter half of the 19th-century), and "Related Materials and Addenda" (34 titles, mainly editions 19th-century but not lifetime of Coleridge, Lamb, and Southey). The books arrived in the fall of 1973. We continued to buy significant items from Dana until he moved to Australia a few years later. By then, however, through him and through other dealers, we had also begun to collect Lake District materials as well.

#### *Developing the Collection:*

##### The Three Main Areas:

With the heart of the collection in place, the Collections Librarian Sharon Thomas (now retired), Humanities Librarian Heather-Ann Tingley (now in charge of the Wordsworth Collection within Special Collections), Former Special Collections Librarian Gene Bridwell, and I, developed a collections policy that placed priority on lifetime editions, where we could afford them or find external money to buy them. But recognizing the potential value of the Victorian editions of Wordsworth in the Dana purchase, we made that area a priority as well. Finally, taking the lead from Wordsworth's publication of his own Guide through the District of the Lakes in several forms, we decided to seek out materials related to the English Lake District. These became the three main areas of acquisition for the Wordsworth Collection.

##### Literary milieu:

We also began to spread out in the direction of Wordsworth's immediate predecessors, those particularly whose works he is known to have read and even owned, and the poet's contemporaries with whom he had some association through reading or acquaintance or both. We have been fortunate in acquiring a selection of early editions in this area, for example, James MacPherson's *The Poems of Ossian* (1773) and Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1775). But since each author from this period has more often than not become a collector's specialty, and therefore expensive to collect, we have made our Collection home to a valuable series of facsimile reprints of titles by British Romantic writers published by Woodstock Books (Oxford). In no other way could we hope to acquire such rare publications so central to the development of English Romanticism. Here will be found seminal works by Erasmus Darwin, the earliest publications by Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley, and important works by Charlotte Smith, Anna Letitia Barbauld, and Felicia Hemans.

##### Modern scholarship:

As part of the collections policy, we continue to acquire modern works that supplement the Wordsworth Collection, such as editions of letters, modern scholarly editions like The Cornell Wordsworth, and bibliographical works like Peter Bicknell's *The Picturesque Scenery of the Lake District, 1752-1855, A Bibliographical Study* (Winchester and Detroit, 1990).

##### Association copies:

An interesting side-light on the process of acquisition was my discovery in the open stacks of a book of poems by Thomas Parnell, published in 1786, which Wordsworth had read as a young man and later owned and signed. The late Charles Watts, the library assistant in Special Collections for many years, was particularly fond of this method of acquisition and made many forays into the stacks often with interesting results. Several other 18th- and 19th-century works have joined the Collection by this route. A recent addition is Alexander

Chalmers's 10-volume *Works of the English Poets from Chaucer to Cowper* (1810), a copy of which Wordsworth owned, only one of many titles fetched from the open stacks or the Lam Collection in the basement. [If you find any such titles in the stacks or the Lam Collection that seem to deserve relocation to Special Collections, let the Special Collections Librarian know.]

A further curiosity among association copies, and one of the oldest books in the Wordsworth Collection is William Turner's *A compleat history of the most remarkable providences* . . . (London 1697), which Wordsworth bought and signed at Barnard Castle, Yorkshire, in 1807. This we acquired from a local dealer with the aid of a grant from SSHRC.

The most unusual association copy and also among the many Victorian editions in the Collection, though strictly speaking materials toward an edition, stems indirectly from Wordsworth himself, who died in 1850, after Queen Victoria came to the throne. In 1843 the poet dictated to his friend Isabella Fenwick a set of notes to his poems that he intended as a reference guide for his family and heirs. After his death a competition developed between his nephew Christopher Wordsworth, Jr., and his son-in-law Edward Quillinan over the right to publish a memoir of the poet's life and work. Quillinan lost out to the nephew but kept possession of the manuscript notes dictated to Isabella Fenwick and passed on his intention to publish them with Wordsworth's poems to Wordsworth secretary and executor John Carter. In 1857 Carter prepared such an edition for Edward Moxon, Wordsworth's publisher, conveniently placing the relevant note at the head of each poem, creating the effect on each page of the now-deceased poet introducing his own poem. Simon Fraser has a bound set of proof sheets of this edition, with Carter's autograph annotations and directions to the printer. The set reached our collection through another of my forays in Edinburgh, where they were being offered for sale by a descendant of a friend of Carter's, to whom he had given the manuscript (keeping it, you see, out of the hands of that uppity nephew). (1)

A Victorian edition that had even greater influence than Carter's on readers' perception of Wordsworth is one edited by Matthew Arnold and published by Macmillan in 1879. Arnold shaped Wordsworth's poetry to his own taste, both by selection and by editorial intervention, in ways that still colour our reading. (2)

#### Grants and Donations:

Through the efforts of Special Collections and Library personnel, the Wordsworth Collection received several grants from SSHRC to pay for purchases that would develop the collection. While this federal program of grants-to-libraries lasted, Special Collections, and especially the Wordsworth Collection, benefited greatly. By this means we were able to acquire most of the lifetime editions that were not in the original purchase. There have been a few donations of books to the Wordsworth Collection over the years. We would like there to be more!

#### *Independent Assessment:*

##### Where do we fit in?

When Mark L. Reed, Professor of English at the University of North Carolina, reviewed Simon Fraser's Wordsworth Collection eleven years ago, he pointed out that no collection could rival the "few library collections containing extensive holdings both of Wordsworthian manuscript materials and of lifetime editions." The libraries in this class, Dove Cottage, The

British Library, Cornell, and Yale, "already contain most of the important manuscripts that exist, while almost all the remainder are scattered piecemeal in yet other major libraries (like Wellesley, the Huntington, Swarthmore, Harvard, NYPL)." He might have added Victoria University of The University of Toronto, which has an extensive Coleridge Collection that contains as well a number of Wordsworth manuscripts.

#### Basis for Comparison:

He thought it fair, however, to compare the Simon Fraser Collection with those in libraries that hold major collections of the works as printed, such as Indiana, Wisconsin, Princeton, Harvard, Texas, and those libraries with major manuscript materials that also hold extensive printed materials (Dove Cottage, The British Library, Cornell, and Yale). "By that standard," he wrote, "the Simon Fraser collection is already significant, and . . . [has arrived] at a point where steady commitment and good funding through the end of the century would enable it to become the best-balanced research collection of primary printed materials west of Cornell."

#### *Strengths of the Collection:*

##### Assessor's View:

The strengths of the Collection in 1989, according to Professor Reed, were "(1) its holdings of lifetime editions of Wordsworth; (2) its holdings in principal late 19th-century editions, especially Moxon imprints and popular editions; and (3) in the associated area of late 18th- and 19th-century guides, tours, and histories concerning the Lake District."

##### Lifetime Editions:

This area is an obvious strength, and we have managed to add a few important items to the holdings in the last ten years. The difficulty is their huge cost. And, as Reed points out, "the quantity and variety of forms of the poet's publication throughout his life" make it impossible that any collection anywhere achieve completeness, even of authorized and first lifetime editions, much less of all lifetime editions.

##### Late 19th-Century Editions:

This area might seem less obvious, since none of the editions has any authority greater than lifetime editions and usually less, none is academically up-to-date, and libraries with major collections have largely ignored them. But, as Reed remarks, "such editions in fact constitute essential evidence of the actual as opposed to ideal record of transmission of the poet's texts, and they define the character of the writings' physical presence (as bound, as illustrated, as printed) in the eyes of the reading public across several generations."

##### Lake District Materials:

This branch of the collection has several uses. The materials here, quoting Reed again, are "frequently needed for explaining the content of Wordsworth's writings, are sometimes important as sources for him (e.g., the 2nd edition of James Clarke's *A Survey of the Lakes of Cumberland, Westmorland, and Lancashire*, 1789), and are often important as indications of the popular attitudes toward the Lake District, and toward external nature, that the poet consciously shaped and influenced." Not mentioned by Reed is their sometimes-intrinsic interest as expressions of artistic vision (e.g., the Farrington *Views of the Lakes*, 1789). Here, too, we have been lucky in continuing to add materials to this area at a fairly good rate.

### *Present and Future:*

#### Current State:

The Library remains committed to the Wordsworth Collection, as it does to its primary archive, the Contemporary Literature Collection. The Wordsworth Collection has continued to grow, if not at the rate forecast by Professor Reed, then with a certain steadiness. The number of titles in the collection now comes to 525, about a third of these published before 1850; the total number of volumes approaches 900.

#### Reputation and future growth:

Not infrequently the Special Collections Librarian fields questions from distant places about our Wordsworth holdings, which have become widely known through scholarly publications based upon them. Through the collection's unique status in Canada, and its peculiar strengths when compared to other North American collections, scholars from home and abroad have come to consult it, and will no doubt continue to do so. Since 1989 we have continued to add late 19th-century editions to the collection. Reed himself has visited Simon Fraser twice in the last decade to carry out research on his work-in-progress, a descriptive bibliography of editions of Wordsworth from the poet's earliest publication through 1900.<sup>(3)</sup> Your own program, focused as it is on "print culture," is conducted in the same spirit, for example, as Stephen Gill's *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (1998). Gill's study of Victorian perceptions of Wordsworth was based in good part on editions of Wordsworth that appeared in the last half of the 19th-century. Ronald Tetreault from Dalhousie University made extensive use of our lifetime editions in preparing his and Bruce Graver's CD-Rom edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Several volumes in *The Cornell Wordsworth*, already mentioned, have depended on the collation of textual variants from the lifetime editions that have been done at Simon Fraser. Three of these volumes I edited or co-edited, and for two others I directed the collation of lifetime editions. More than one volume or set of volumes in the Wordsworth Collection has needed professional restoration at least partly as a consequence of this use.

As for future growth, I would like to see us add the important lifetime editions that we now lack, like the early and very scarce *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* (both 1793). I also believe we should more vigorously collect lifetime editions of works by Wordsworth's Romantic contemporaries with whom he had some connection, writers like Anna Letitia Barbauld, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Felicia Hemans, Charlotte Smith, Robert Southey, and Francis Wrangham. Adding to our collection of literary annuals, would supply numbers of authors in the public eye during the same period.

#### Final thoughts:

Helping to build such a collection has given me pleasure and taught me much, particularly about both the fragility and the necessity of primary sources in the kind of scholarly work I have chosen to do. The work you do in this course may well lead you to discoveries that will delight and inform us all about particular aspects of the collection and help us to enhance its richness and usefulness.

#### Notes:

(1) "The Making of a Reputation: John Carter's Corrections to the Proofs of Wordsworth's Poetical Works (1857)," *Texte*, 7 (1988): 61-80.

(2) "Matthew Arnold's Wordsworth: The Tinker Tinkered," in *The Mind in Creation: Essays on English Romantic Literature in Honor of Ross G. Woodman*, ed. J. Douglas Kneale, Ottawa: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992, pp. 44-57, 148-153.

(3) See Mark L. Reed, "Wordsworth's Surprisingly Pictured Page: Select Pieces," *The Book Collector*, 46 (1997): 69-90, for the fruits of some of his research, including that conducted in SFU's Wordsworth Collection.

## Appendix

### *Suggestions for Research:*

#### How to survey the Wordsworth Collection:

From a monitor and keyboard, a useful way to proceed is first to search the Library holdings under the "word(s)" option by entering "Wordsworth Collection." This will give you a listing of the 525 titles in the Collection. Then, choose the option "limit this search" and click the box that will sort the list by date of publication. At that point you can begin at the end, where the undated works appear and proceed backwards through the earliest publications to the latest. Note, too, that not all eligible works are necessarily in the Wordsworth Collection. Some are shelved among the general run of rare books in Special Collections (like Percy's Reliques, mentioned above). And there are still numerous copies of 18th- and 19th-century works in the open stacks, in the Lam Collection, and in storage.

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