

ONE

MANY
DOROTHIES

RECOVERING DOROTHY

Dorothy Wordsworth was born in Cockermouth, a small town on the fringes of the North-Western Lake District, on Christmas Day, 1771. She is the only daughter of John Wordsworth, law-agent to Sir James Lowther, and Ann Cookson. She already has two older brothers, Richard, born in 1768, and William, born in April 1770. Two more – John and Christopher – would follow, in 1772 and 1774. When her mother Ann dies in March 1778, aged only thirty, Dorothy is sent away. There is no place for an only girl in a motherless household. So, at six years old, Dorothy is sent to live 150 miles away in Halifax with her mother's cousin Elizabeth Threlkeld. Her life in Halifax seems busy and mostly happy, full of books and other children, including her best friend Jane Pollard and Jane's many sisters. She is brought up alongside the five daughters of Elizabeth's sister, who too had died and left them motherless. Aged fifteen, Dorothy is sent away again, this time to her grandparents in Penrith – her mother's parents – where she spends an unhappy, lonely year, punctuated by meeting her brothers for the first time in nine years. They are all orphans now. Their father had died at the very end of December 1783, five days after Dorothy's twelfth birthday. Dorothy was unable to travel back to Cockermouth for the funeral. Later, she will say that after her father's death, she and her siblings were 'squandered abroad'. Lost to each other, and their home. This meeting with them in the summer of 1787 will change Dorothy's hopes and plans for her life. They begin to plot a home together. That autumn she befriends two orphaned sisters, Peggy and Mary Hutchinson. They are drawn together by, amongst other things, their shared losses. That December 1787, Dorothy's grandfather dies, and her life in Penrith is further destabilised. The following autumn her uncle, William Cookson, marries and moves to Norfolk. Sixteen-year-old Dorothy moves with them. In the Cookson's active household she regains some

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freedom. She reads. She writes many letters, to the Hutchinsons, to Jane Pollard, to her brothers, especially William. By 1789 she is running a Sunday school for younger girls, passing on her education. She later describes herself at this time as 'mad with joy'. William is by now in his third year of studies at Cambridge. During his long winter holiday, he stays at the Cooksons with Dorothy, and their bond deepens. A vision of a shared home glows brightly in their minds. In 1791 William graduates from Cambridge, and travels to France to see the revolution unfolding first hand. He falls in love. He has begun to be certain that he could not make a career in the church, as had been hoped for him. For Dorothy, this threatens the dream she had formed of a little rectory they could live in together. In 1793 she writes to Jane, imagining the three of them in a fantasy home:

I could almost fancy that I see you both near me. I hear you point out a spot, where, if we could erect a little cottage and call it our own, we should be the happiest of human beings. I see my brother fired with the idea of leading his sister to such a retreat. Our parlour is in a moment furnished; our garden is adorned by magic; the roses and honeysuckles spring at our command; the wood behind the house lifts its head, and furnishes us with a winter's shelter and a summer's noonday shade. (DW to JP, July 10, 1793).

Dorothy does not imagine a future for herself of marriage and children: she wants a stable home in a beautiful place, with her two best friends by her.

Whilst Dorothy was writing this letter, William was on a walking holiday with a university friend, Raisley Calvert, who would through twist of fate become the benefactor of that

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home. Raisley had always supported William in his ambitions to become a writer. He himself was a sculptor, one of a family of artists, and he understood the need William had to ‘make work that might live’. Unlike William though, Raisley was a young man of means. By the time he was twenty-one, Raisley was also a young man with Tuberculosis. William, directionless, and increasingly depressed about his hopeless future, nurses Raisley through his last sickness. When Raisley dies in January 1795 he leaves a £900 legacy to William, so that William might be free to live and work as he chooses. He specifies that some of the legacy must be made of use and benefit to Dorothy. For the Wordsworth siblings, this money was life-changing. Their own inheritance had been tangled up in a legal battle with Lord Lowther since their father’s death in 1783. There was no telling if and when it would ever be resolved, and what money might be left by the time it was. Raisley’s legacy allowed them to set up an independent home together, and enabled everything that followed. In the autumn of 1795 Dorothy and William move together to Racedown Lodge in Dorset. Two years later they move a few miles to Alfoxden House, a vast, echoing manor in the centre of a deer park that they occupied only a few rooms of. It is here that Dorothy begins her famous journal, writing regularly from January to May 1798, which she would continue once they settle in Grasmere at the close of 1799.

The next few years of Dorothy’s life – until she ends her *Grasmere Journal* in January 1803 – must be some of the most read, most written about and most over-written in history. Poetry enthusiasts, scholars, walkers and nature-lovers have pored over her words since they were first extracted by her nephew in his memoir of William in 1851, and when they were published alone, edited heavily by William Knight in 1897. In his book about how William’s Victorian readers received and

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bent his words to fit their own purposes, Stephen Gill writes that there are ‘many Wordsworths’. He looks into some of the many different people ‘involved in constructing and diffusing “Wordsworth”’, where ‘Wordsworth’ is not simply the man or the poet, or a combination of both, but a kind of collaborative Frankenstein’s Monster of different cultural requirements.¹⁵ He means William, as most people do when they say Wordsworth. But so, too, are there many Dorothies.

Dorothy the orphan.

Dorothy the devoted sister.

Dorothy the oppressed sister.

Dorothy the wild-eyed.

Dorothy the sensitive.

Dorothy the walker.

Dorothy the diarist.

Dorothy only more than half a poet.

Dorothy the devoted aunt.

Dorothy the spinster.

Dorothy the put-upon.

Dorothy the stifled.

Dorothy the creative partner.

These versions of Dorothy spin out from readings of her famous journals, and from letters and biographical speculations. They mean different things to different people. Dorothy the walker is a vital facet of a hidden history of women walking. Dorothy only more than half a poet, the oppressed sister, is an emblem of female creativity squashed by male needs and domestic tyranny. The one this book is about is the one you won’t hear about – the one I didn’t hear about for years.

Dorothy the invalid. Dorothy housebound, bedbound.

Dorothy unable to walk. Dorothy in pain.

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Dorothy unable to write, to pick up a pen.

Dorothy limited not by her family but by her own body.

But to try to understand this other Dorothy, and why she has been forgotten, erased, written over, written out, we might have to go back to the beginning. The beginning of her own story, and of stories about her.