

THE LAKE POETS

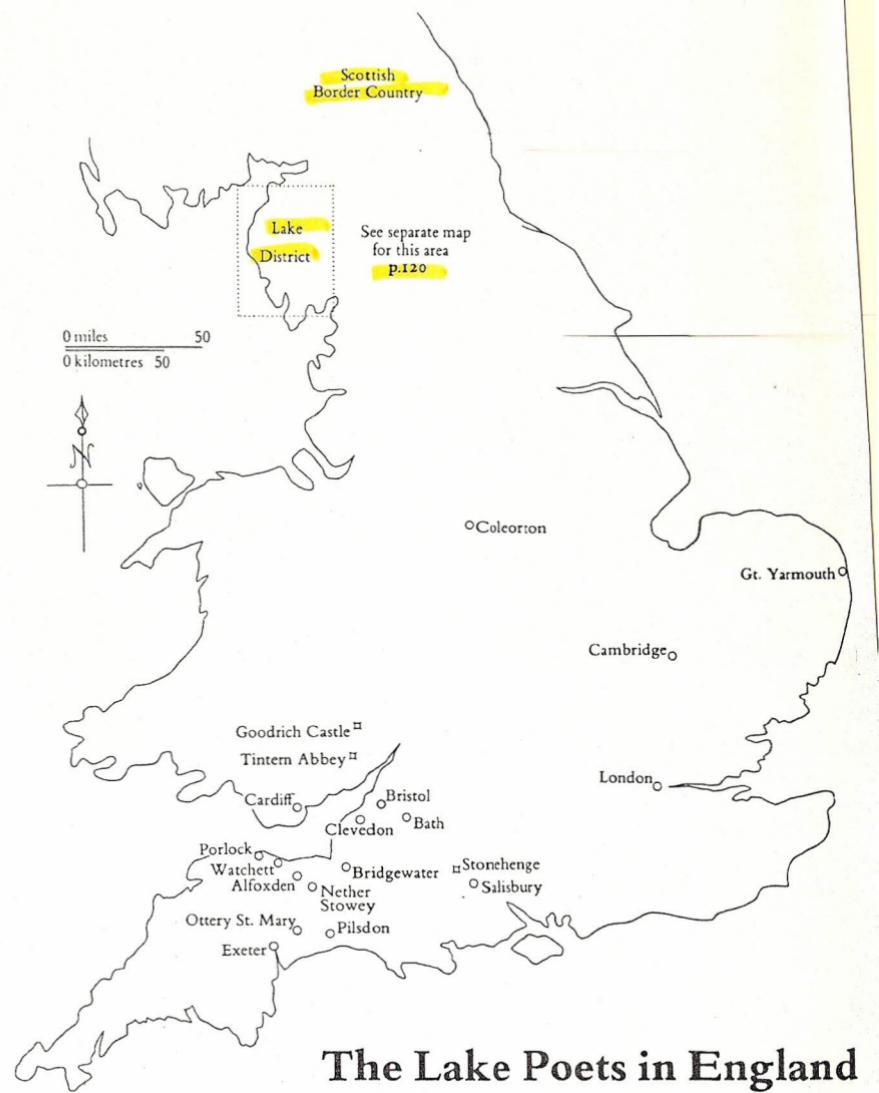
THE "LAKE SCHOOL" of poets was first so named in the *Edinburgh Review*, August 1817: they were Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey. But though Southey lived at Keswick from 1803 until his death in 1843 and Coleridge lived in Keswick from 1800 to 1803, the real Lake Poet is Wordsworth, who was born at Cockermouth, Cumberland, in 1770. To a greater degree than any other major English poet, Wordsworth was a poet of *place*. The experiences out of which he created his finest poetry involved what he called "spots of time", each identified with a particular locality, and his poems are studded with precise topographical references. This was partly because the special view which he developed of man's relation to Nature arose out of his own experiences of natural objects, especially in the Lake District, but also because of his highly developed sense of locality with respect to experience in general. In his great autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, we can trace vividly what might be called the topography of his life, and the same places are mentioned often in other poems.

Wordsworth's earliest years were spent by "the fairest of all rivers", the Derwent, which flows through Cockermouth on its way to the sea at Workington. He recalls in *The Prelude* how he was soothed by the sound of the Derwent "winding among grassy holms" making

ceaseless music that composed my thoughts
To more than infant softness, giving me
Amid the fretful dwellings of mankind
A foretaste, a dim earnest, of the calm
That Nature breathes among the hills and groves.

He remembers, too, bathing in a mill stream that flowed into the Derwent:

Oh, many a time have I, a five years' child,
In a small mill-race severed from his stream,
Made one long bathing of a summer's day;
Basked in the sun, and plunged and basked again
Alternate, all a summer's day, or scoured
The sandy fields, leaping through flowery groves
Of yellow ragwort; or when rock and hill,
The woods, and distant Skiddaw's lofty height,
Were bronzed with deepest radiance, stood alone
Beneath the sky, . . .



The Lake Poets in England

the Wordsworths were spending the winter of 1806-7. Sara Hutchinson, Wordsworth's sister-in-law, was also there, and Coleridge fell deeply in love with her. Coleridge was with the Wordsworths and Sara Hutchinson again in Grasmere in 1808-10 before returning to London. It was then that the estrangement between the two poets began, lasting until 1812. Coleridge was now living in London: in 1816 he took up residence with Dr. James Gillman at Highgate in North London, and spent the rest of his life there in Gillman's care.

It is Wordsworth who is thus the true Lake Poet, but though he had his home in the Lake District for nearly all of his life he made several important trips to other parts of the country, as well as abroad, which are reflected

in his poetry. The most important of these were tours in Scotland in 1803, 1814 and 1831. He made a final tour in Scotland in 1833. Each of these tours produced topographical poems: *Memorials of a Tour in Scotland, 1803* included seventeen such poems, among them "At the Grave of Burns" (in Dumfries), "To a Highland Girl, at Inversnaid, upon Loch Lomond", "The Solitary Reaper" (place not specified, but in the Argyllshire highlands), "Sonnet in the Pass of Killicranky", and "Yarrow Unvisited". The poems in *Memorials of a Tour in Scotland, 1814* include "The Brownie's Cell" ("suggested by a beautiful ruin upon one of the islands of Loch Lomond") and "Yarrow Visited". The 1831 tour produced the twenty-six poems of "Yarrow Re-visited and Other Poems". He visited Scott at Abbotsford, just before the novelist left for Italy on a last journey in a vain pursuit of health, and addressed two poems to him. The 1833 tour produced forty-eight poems, addressed to particular rivers, towns, mountains, castles, and historical characters associated with particular places. But the most famous series of topographical poems written by Wordsworth was *The River Duddon, a Series of Sonnets*, thirty-four sonnets composed between 1806 and 1820, of which the last is the best known. This poem is significant as showing the mature Wordsworth introducing the dimension of time in counterpoint with the dimension of space in the service of a deeper moral understanding:

I Thought of Thee, my partner and my guide,
 As being past away.—Vain sympathies!
 For, backward, Duddon! as I cast my eyes,
 I see what was, and is, and will abide;
 Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide;
 The Form remains, the Function never dies;
 While we, the brave, the mighty, and the wise,
 We Men, who in our morn of youth defied
 The elements, must vanish;—be it so!
 Enough, if something from our hands have power
 To live, and act, and serve the future hour;
 And if, as toward the silent tomb we go,
 Through love, through hope, and faith's transcendent dower,
 We feel that we are greater than we know.

"The same. The richest young man in Ba-ath at this moment. Young Lord Mutanhed."

But although Bath lost its splendour and exclusiveness as the metropolis of the world of fashion with the passing of the age of Beau Nash, its architectural splendours remained. It is still visually one of the great cities of Britain, its Palladian architecture of the mid-eighteenth century and its buildings in the freer style of Robert Adam in the last quarter of the century making it a rival of Edinburgh's New Town in neo-classical elegance. It is perhaps significant that when George Saintsbury retired from the Chair of Rhetoric and English Literature at Edinburgh in 1915 he chose to spend the years from then until his death in 1933 in Bath.