

BEATTIE, WORDSWORTH AND COLERIDGE

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In October 1795, a month after Wordsworth had moved with Dorothy to Racedown in Dorset, he walked over the hills to Lyme. As he told William Mathews: 'I could hear the murmuring of the sea for three miles, of course I often stopped "listening with pleasing dread to the deep roar of the wide weltering waves"'. This from *The Minstrel*'. [1] So on that walk, the lines that immediately came into his mind were from James Beattie's *Minstrel*; indeed he asked Mathews in very urgent terms to send him a copy of the poem, his own having been borrowed by one of his brothers and not returned.

Two years earlier, Dorothy Wordsworth had written a long letter to Jane Pollard describing her brother William's character. [2] She quoted: 'In truth he was a strange and wayward wight', and said 'That verse of Beattie's *Minstrel* always reminds me of him, and indeed the whole character of Edwin [*The Minstrel* in the poem] resembles much what William was when I first knew him — after my leaving Halifax' [meaning when William was seventeen].

I think the brother who had borrowed and not returned William's copy of *The Minstrel* was probably Christopher. A notebook of jottings for poems by both William and Christopher Wordsworth, dating from the late 1780s, shows both brothers much influenced by *The Minstrel*. [3]

I have started with these two quotations, showing how important Beattie's poem was to William Wordsworth, and how Dorothy identified him with Edwin, because you may

have wondered why James Beattie had a place in this study weekend. The reason is that *The Minstrel* was hugely influential on the Romantics, and indeed on three generations of poets, before and after them.

I shall first tell you something about *The Minstrel*, and about Beattie himself. Then I shall give some of the evidence that it had such a powerful effect on other poets of Coleridge's period and I shall particularly emphasise the influence on Wordsworth. Finally, I shall see what we know about Coleridge's response to Beattie.

The Minstrel is about a boy brought up in mountainous country in Scotland, who feels called to be a poet, and about the influences on his development, particularly his response to nature. It was largely written in 1768, when Beattie was 32. Beattie was born in 1735 to a fairly humble Scottish farming family, in the strip of land south of Aberdeen, between the Grampian Mountains and the North Sea. As a boy, and especially as a young man, he loved solitary walks on the hills. He was what is known in Scotland as a lad o' pairts - a promising boy. Scottish society - families and schools - has always valued education, and even in the eighteenth century they provided it generously to boys like James. So from an excellent parish school he went at age 14 to Marischal College, the University of Aberdeen, and at the age of 25 after a period as a schoolmaster he became Professor of Moral Philosophy there. It was from that position that he wrote *The Minstrel*, but particularly in the first part of the poem, he was looking back to his youth in the country, and in the hills. When most of *The Minstrel* had been written, Beattie wrote this summary of it to his friend the poet Thomas Gray:

I suppose my hero born in a solitary and mountainous country; by trade a shepherd.

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His imagination is wild and romantick; but in the first part of his life he has hardly any opportunity of acquiring knowledge, except from that part of the book of nature which

is open before him. The first Canto is a kind of poetical or sentimental history of this period. In the second he meets with a hermit; who... instructs Edwin... in

history, philosophy, musick &c. The young man... shows a strong attachment to poetry, which the old hermit endeavours by all possible means to discourage. Edwin seems disposed to follow his advice, and abandon the muses, when an irruption of Danes or robbers (I have not as yet determined which) strips him of his little all, and obliges him through necessity to take his harp upon his shoulder and go abroad into the world in the character of a Minstrel. And here the poem is to end. The measure is the same with that of Spenser in the fairy queen. [\[4\]](#)

In Beattie's original plan there were a number of elements to the poem, including biographical and narrative, but because the slightly far—fetched sounding third book never got written, the emphasis shifted away from the narrative towards the biographical. The theme became Edwin's poetic development; in other words, like *The Prelude*, it is a poem about the growth of a poet's mind. Furthermore, this part of the poem was not just biographical but autobiographical. Beattie wrote: 'I have made [Edwin] take pleasure in the scenes in which I took pleasure [in my younger days] and entertain sentiments similar to those, of which, even in my early youth, I had repeated experience. The scenery of a mountainous country, the ocean, the sky, thoughtfulness and retirement, and sometimes melancholy objects and ideas, had charms in my eyes, even when I was a schoolboy, and at a

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time that I was so far from being able to express, that I did not understand my own feelings.' [\[5\]](#)

We can already see why the poem was likely to appeal to Wordsworth, and some extracts will illustrate this further. First about Edwin and his gentle, strange, rather solitary character:

Deep thought oft seem'd to fix his infant eye...

Silent when glad; affectionate, though shy;

And now his look was most demurely sad;

And now he laugh'd aloud, yet none knew why.

The neighbours stared and sigh'd, yet bless'd the lad:
Some deem'd him wondrous wise, and some believed him mad.

[He]roam'd at large the lonely mountain's head;
Or, where the maze of some bewilder'd stream
To deep untrodden groves his footsteps led,
There would he wander wild. [\[6\]](#)

He had a gentle disposition to all parts of nature, and he hated cruelty:

His heart, from cruel sport estranged, would bleed
To work the wo of any living thing,
By trap, or net; by arrow, or by sling;...
He wished to be the guardian, not the king
Tyrant far less, or traitor of the field. (1.18)

Mary Moorman believed those lines dissuaded Wordsworth from blood sports in adolescence, and John Thelwall in *The Peripatetic* lamented that as a boy he had not been more like the gentle Edwin in this respect. [\[7\]](#)

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Instead, Edwin prefers to savour the mountain scene:

Lo! where the stripling, wrapt in wonder, roves

Beneath the precipice o'erhung with pine;
And sees, on high, amidst th'encircling groves,
From cliff to cliff the foaming torrents shine:
While waters, woods, and winds, in concert join,
And Echo swells the chorus to the skies.
Would Edwin this majestic scene resign
For aught the huntsman's puny craft supplies?
Ah! no: he better knows great Nature's charms to prize. (1.19)

Like Wordsworth in *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*, Edwin is moved by sunrises and sunsets:

And oft he traced the uplands, to survey
When o'er the sky advanced the kindling dawn,
The crimson cloud, blue main, and mountain grey,
And lake, dim-gleaming on the smoky lawn;
Far to the west the long long vale withdrawn,
Where twilight loves to linger for a while;
And now he faintly kens the bounding fawn,
And villager abroad at early toil.
But, lo! the sun appears! and heaven, earth, ocean, smile. (1.20)

The next stanza, as Jonathan Wordsworth has shown, [\[8\]](#) was substantially borrowed by Wordsworth for the description of the sea of mist in the Climbing of Snowdon episode of *The Prelude*.

And oft the craggy cliff he loved to climb,
When all in mist the world below was lost.
What dreadful pleasure! there to stand sublime,
Like shipwrecked mariner on desert coast,

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And view th'enormous waste of vapour, tost
In billows, lengthening to th'horizon round,
Now scooped in gulfs, with mountains now embossed! (1.21)

Then the stanza which Dorothy Wordsworth told Jane Pollard exactly described William as she remembered him aged 17:

In truth he was a strange and wayward wight,
Fond of each gentle, and each dreadful scene.
In darkness, and in storm, he found delight;
Nor less, than when on ocean-wave serene
The southern sun diffused his dazzling shene. (1.22)

Edwin also enjoys the sounds of morning:

But who the melodies of morn can tell?

The wild brook babbling down the mountain side;
The lowing herd; the sheepfold's simple bell;
The pipe of early shepherd dim descried
In the lone valley; echoing far and wide
The clamorous horn along the cliffs above;
The hollow murmur of the ocean-tide;
The hum of bees, and linnet's lay of love,
And the full choir that wakes the universal grove.

The cottage-curs at early pilgrim bark;
Crown'd with her pail the tripping milkmaid sings;
The whistling plowman stalks afield; and, hark!
Down the rough slope the ponderous waggon rings;
Through rustling corn the hare astonish'd springs;
Slow tolls the village-clock the drowsy hour;
The partridge bursts away on whirring wings; (1.38,39)

The ponderous waggon and the astonished hare in the corn made their way into
Wordsworth's *An Evening Walk*.

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Edwin listens to stories from the Beldame 'when against the winter's drenching
rain,/ And driving snow, the cottage shut the door'.(1.43) He's particularly moved
by the story of *The Children in the Wood*, and there is an important Coleridge link

there to which I shall return. But Edwin loves being out among the elements at all seasons:

Oft, when the winter-storm had ceased to rave,
He roam'd the snowy waste at even, to view
The cloud stupendous, from th'Atlantic wave
High-towering, sail along th'horizon blue:
Where 'midst the changeful scenery ever new
Fancy a thousand wondrous forms describes
More wildly great than ever pencil drew,
Rocks, torrents, gulfs, and shapes of giant size,
And glittering cliffs on cliffs, and fiery ramparts rise.

Thence musing onward to the sounding shore
The lone enthusiast oft would take his way,
Listening with pleasing dread to the deep roar
Of the wide-weltering waves. (1.53-54)

which brings us back to the lines Wordsworth recalled on the hills near Lyme.

A summary of Edwin's poetic growth makes him sound just like one of the Romantics:

Meanwhile, whate'er of beautiful, or new,
Sublime, or dreadful, in earth, sea, or sky,

By chance, or search, was offer'd to his view,
He scan'd with curious and romantic eye. (1.58)

The second book of *The Minstrel*, which was published three years after the first, is more philosophical and didactic, and tells us about Edwin's instruction in history and philosophy

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by the Hermit. We see Edwin achieving a balance between the world of imagination which had moved him as a child, and the world of reason presented by the Hermit, but he remains devoted to poetry:

But She, who set on fire his infant heart,
And all his dreams, and all his wanderings shared
And bless'd, the Muse, and her celestial art,
Still claim th'Enthusiast's fond and first regard. (2.58)

I don't have any great regrets that the third more narrative book about Edwin's later adventures was never written, and that what Beattie gave us was just the childhood and development of a gentle, introspective poet of nature and the imagination.

It's easy to see what so touched Wordsworth and the Romantics about this poem. There are fresh and real descriptions of natural scenery and its sounds and weather and light. There's also a hint of Wordsworth's idea of the moral power of Nature, especially in the two stanzas, which Thomas Gray liked the most [\[9\]](#) and which Hazlitt quoted in his *Lectures on the English Poets* (on Thomson and Cowper):

O how canst thou renounce the boundless store
Of charms which Nature to her votary yields!
The warbling woodland, the resounding shore,
The pomp of groves, and garniture of fields;
All that the genial ray of morning gilds,
And all that echoes to the song of even,
All that the mountain's sheltering bosom shields,
And all the dread magnificence of heaven,
O how canst thou renounce, and hope to be forgiven!

These charms shall work thy soul's eternal health
And love, and gentleness, and joy, impart. (1.9,10)

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But the greatest appeal of the poem was in the portrait of Edwin. Edwin was the young natural poet in the making, and other poets were moved by his communion with nature and his freedom of imagination. They were also moved by the exploration of Edwin's childhood: by the growth of a poet's mind.

Individual ingredients of this mix were not new in eighteenth century poetry. Forty years before *The Minstrel*, Thomson in *The Seasons* had described landscape and rural life, and then Akenside in *The Pleasures of Imagination* had explored imaginative processes, and in some respects both had done it better and more fully than Beattie. Thomas Gray, who as a maker of what he called 'thoughts that breathe and words that burn' was a greater poet than any of these, had written about childhood, though in a rather pessimistic way, in the *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*. But none of them had brought all these themes together, and shown the development of the imagination in response to nature in a poet's childhood.

This is what Beattie had done, and I don't think anyone else had until Wordsworth did it so much more richly in *The Prelude*. And Beattie did it in the extraordinarily appealing form of Edwin. That was why young writers of the Romantic period identified themselves with Edwin. None of them expressed this more plainly and movingly than John Thelwall, who has had a special place in both Kilve Court Study Weekends.

The Peripatetic, which Thelwall wrote in 1793, was a sort of foretaste of Wordsworth's never completed *Recluse*. Its subtitle was 'Sketches of the heart, of Nature and Society, in a series of politico—sentimental journeys in verse and prose'. It's a discursive mixture of journeys, stories, meditations in verse, philosophising and autobiography. The title page of *The Peripatetic* had exactly the same motto from Virgil's *Georgics* as the first book of *The Minstrel* and there are two whole

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chapters in *The Peripatetic* about *The Minstrel* and Edwin (1.95-103). Thelwall described how, starting on one of his journeys with a friend, he took a favourite book, Beattie's Poems, because 'a few passages from *The Minstrel* would be no bad motto for our excursion... It is impossible for me ever to recall, without a sense of gratitude, the delightful sensations with which I have pursued this sublimest moralist that ever culled among the charms of nature "the sweets that work the soul's eternal health, and Love and Gentleness and Joy impart!"' (quoting from *The Minstrel*). 'It was one of those books, which in my early and unfortunate years, I snatched a trifle from...the common necessities of life to procure. And I was richly repaid'. He went on to describe how struggling with a keen taste for poetry in the face of neglect, obscurity and misfortune 'my anxious heart could not but receive some consolation, when... I traced in the youthful manners and dispositions of Edwin the faithful delineation of my own boyish years; and beheld, as in a mirror, the reflection of those features that so evidently marked my own eccentric mind. I could not indeed (on account of my insulated residence) apply to myself the awful stanzas that paint the infant minstrel, roving among the rough magnificence... of the rocky shores of Scotland...' but in imagination he could share Edwin's experiences. A long poem followed, which is a meditation on being like Edwin amid the Bowers of Enfield, beginning:

Still as the young enthusiast I pursue
And eager trace his lonely wanderings wild.

In the next chapter of *The Peripatetic* he regretted his one dissimilarity as a boy from Edwin — that he had not taken Edwin's protective attitude to all living things.

These passages from *The Peripatetic* show that the appeal of *The Minstrel* was not just in natural descriptions —

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The Seasons would have done as well or better for that - but in the character of Edwin and his relationship to nature. They also give a very different portrait of Thelwall from that of 'the agitator', but one which is entirely in keeping with Nick Roe's fascinating talk at this meeting last year. [\[10\]](#)

I could give many other examples of poets who were moved by *The Minstrel*, or who imitated it. William Cowper of *The Task* told William Unwin that Beattie was 'the most agreeable and amiable writer I have ever met with.... If you have not his poem called "*The Minstrel*", and cannot borrow it I must beg you to buy it for me for though I cannot afford to deal largely in so expensive a commodity as books, I must afford to purchase at least the poetical works of Beattie.' [\[11\]](#) (Don't we warm to and sympathise with Cowper about the books!) Burns admired and imitated Beattie, as we know from his letters, and for instance from *The Cotter's Saturday Night*. Samuel Rogers was first moved by and to poetry when as a young boy he took *The Minstrel* down from his father's shelf one fine summer evening, and he too identified himself with Edwin. [\[12\]](#) The 18 year old Thomas De Quincey, listing his eleven favourite poets of all time included Beattie. (You'll remember that list ends with S T Coleridge, and then William Wordsworth followed by three exclamation marks.) [\[13\]](#) Others who came under Beattie's spell were Bowles, Scott, Shelley, Keats, John Clare in *The Village Minstrel*, and even Tennyson. [\[14\]](#) But that's taking us beyond the eighteenth century and our topic, and I want to come back to Wordsworth. Of all the poets affected by *The Minstrel*, Wordsworth was the most important and the most deeply influenced.

Wordsworth was first introduced to *The Minstrel*, probably about the age of 14 or 15, by his schoolmaster Thomas Bowman at Hawkshead. [\[15\]](#) Certainly by the age of 17, when he wrote his juvenile poem *The Vale of Esthwaite*,

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The Minstrel had got deep into his poetic make-up. He used a quotation from *The Minstrel* as a motto, and there are important borrowings in the poem. So are there in Wordsworth's first published long poem *An Evening Walk*, some of which I've already mentioned, and Wordsworth acknowledged this debt. There are many other verbal echoes of *The Minstrel* in Wordsworth, and I have been particularly struck by the many that occur in *The Excursion*. Perhaps the most important borrowing is the one I have already mentioned for the sea of mist in the famous Climbing of Snowdon episode of *The Prelude*. But I believe Beattie's influence on Wordsworth went far beyond these quotations and borrowings, and the clue to it is the boyhood of the Wanderer or Pedlar in *The Excursion*. It's an extraordinary experience to read that with *The Minstrel* fresh in mind, or vice versa, because one has an intense feeling that one is reading about the same person. The young Pedlar, like Edwin, comes from a humble farming family in Scotland, he wanders in the hills, sees sunrises from hilltops, and his imagination is fired by his experiences of nature. The young Pedlar is clearly modelled on Edwin, as John Wilson was the first to point out. [\[16\]](#) But the part of *The Ruined Cottage* or *The Excursion* which describes the boyhood of the Pedlar is also Wordsworth's first poetic autobiography. [\[17\]](#) So in the young Pedlar we have a blend of the young Edwin and the young Wordsworth. Clearly he identifies himself with Edwin, a point made by Mary Moorman, and also, as we've already heard, by the best of all authorities on William Wordsworth—Dorothy. My own belief is that Wordsworth did more than just identify with Edwin—that he even modelled himself on Edwin, and that this was an important part of his poetic development.

I could spend far longer elaborating on Beattie's influence on Wordsworth, which has been recognized by critics since John Wilson 150 years ago, and by several biographers since Legouis at the turn of the century. And I

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could say a lot more about Beattie's influence on other poets. But what about Coleridge, who is our real concern this weekend? There are two things I could say which would be easy ways out. The first is 'if Wordsworth, then surely Coleridge'. If Beattie so profoundly influenced Wordsworth, and if in the early spring of 1798, the time of the most fruitful interaction of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Wordsworth was still so deeply under the spell of Edwin in writing, for example, the boyhood of the Pedlar, then surely some of this will have rubbed off on Coleridge. Secondly, we know Coleridge called himself a library cormorant, who devoured everything around to read, and one of the books most conspicuously around in his formative years was *The Minstrel*. I have located 43 editions of Beattie's poems in his lifetime, not including the many versions in periodicals. His first biographer, Alexander Bower, said 'that if he was not at the time of his death [in 1803] the first literary character in the United Kingdom, he was second or third on the list'. [\[18\]](#) (It would be an intriguing game to guess who were Bower's first or second. I'm afraid we can be sure they weren't the two greatest writers of 1803—Wordsworth and Coleridge.)

So, it's highly probable that Coleridge would have been influenced by Beattie, but can I persuade you that he actually was? Certainly he knew *The Minstrel*, and he used it and quoted from it.

Coleridge's third Lecture on Revealed Religion, given in 1795, was part of a reply to the philosophy of Godwin, and it includes an attack on atheism. He used a stanza from *The Minstrel* (1.51), partly quotation and partly adaptation:

The dark cold-hearted Sceptics creeping pore
Through microscope of Metaphysic Lore;
And much they grope for Truth but never hit
Their heavy powers, inadequate before.

Their earthly lusts make more and more unfit

Yet deem they Darkness Light, and their vain Blunders Wit. [\[19\]](#)

This clearly shows that he knew *The Minstrel* well —well enough to do a bit of deliberate rewriting when he quoted it. It's particularly interesting that he chose that stanza, and to explain why, I need to tell you a little more about James Beattie. Beattie was in no sense a full-time poet, and that is one reason why his output was rather small. He was for forty years Professor of Moral Philosophy at Aberdeen, and he was a dedicated teacher — both a gifted communicator and very caring to his young students. As a philosopher he encountered the scepticism and atheism of David Hume and his school, and he thought they were a serious threat to religion and society. To counter them he wrote a book called *An Essay on Truth* (Edinburgh, 1770), which was unexpectedly well-received and successful, and which first led to Beattie's fame and popularity—with the London literary world, the church, the political establishment, and even King George III who granted Beattie a pension. So Beattie acquired the reputation of a defender of religion, who was both sincere, and had a gift for clear and combative exposition. Beattie's concern in this was deep and genuine, and it appears in *The Minstrel*. As well as the story of Edwin's childhood and education, it has comments by the poet himself, sometimes in the form of prayers for Edwin that he will not lose his innocence and goodness and love of nature, and sometimes in the form of direct attacks on sceptical philosophy. The stanza Coleridge adapted is one of these. It's very likely that Coleridge was aware of this background in quoting that passage, and probably also aware that in his reply to Godwin he was doing something very like Beattie had done in his reply to Hume, and with very similar motivation. Coleridge knew Beattie's *Essay on Truth*, because he referred to it several times in his prose, including the *Biographia Literaria*. [\[20\]](#) He will

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also incidentally have known another book by Beattie defending religion. This was *The Evidences of the Christian Religion*, briefly and plainly stated. It was first published in 1786, and James Bowyer, the headmaster of Christ's Hospital, insisted that every boy leaving the school to go to the university should be given a copy, so Coleridge presumably had one.

Incidentally, both Beattie and Coleridge lectured against the slave trade, and Beattie must have been one of the earliest to do so, starting in the 1760s.

Another firm piece of evidence that Coleridge knew *The Minstrel* well comes from a sonnet to Mrs Siddons, first published in the Morning Post in 1794, and then in Coleridge's 1796 poems. Both Coleridge and Charles Lamb had a hand in it, and at different times it was attributed to one or the other. It refers clearly and directly to Edwin listening in winter to the stories told by the Beldame. Every image in the first twelve lines of the sonnet, and many of the actual words, are from *The Minstrel*, and in 1794 the poetry reading public would immediately have recognized the allusion.

So Coleridge knew and quoted from *The Minstrel*, and there's also a suggestion that he used Beattie's less well known poems. In the *Monody on the Death of Chatterton*, there seems to be a borrowing from a satirical poem which Beattie wrote in 1765 on the death of Charles Churchill. [\[21\]](#) Beattie contrasted Churchill with the British poets Beattie approved of, repeating the phrase 'Is this the land...?'

Is this the land, that boasts a Milton's fire,

And magic Spenser's wildly-warbling lyre...

Is this the land, where Akenside displays

The bold yet temperate flame of antient days...

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and several more repetitions of that phrase. In the *Monody on the Death of Chatterton*, Coleridge uses exactly the same phrase:

Is this the Land of Song-ennobled Line?

Is this the Land, where genius ne'er in vain

Pour'd forth her lofty strain? [\[22\]](#)

Rather curiously, Thelwall seems to have borrowed that phrase too, in his *Elegy*, written in 1786:

Is this the land where liberal feelings glow?

Is this the land where Justice holds the scale? [\[23\]](#)

The dates suggest that Thelwall and Coleridge independently borrowed the phrase from Beattie. Pursuing that further, Wordsworth, Thelwall, and Coleridge all knew each other well, and Wordsworth and Thelwall certainly, and Coleridge probably, were each influenced by Beattie, but the dates show that it must have been an independent influence on each of them.

In the *Monody on the Death of Chatterton*, one just wonders too if Coleridge had Edwin a little in mind when describing Chatterton:

From Vales, where Avon winds, the Minstrel came,

Light-hearted Youth! aye, as he hastes along,

He meditates the future Song

So Coleridge knew Beattie's poems and quoted from them,. and that is interesting, but it's interesting in a footnotey way, and if that's all it isn't nearly as exciting as the influence on Wordsworth, nor is it as exciting as the case made out by Aldrich (pp.334-51), who found influences of *The Minstrel* in several other of Coleridge's poems, especially his earlier ones. For example in *The Song of the Pixies*, the youthful bard and his dreams of fairy folk are very like Edwin's dream of fairies in Book I of *The Minstrel*.

The descriptions of climbing hills, and of the views from them, in *The Ascent of Brockley Coomb*, the *Reflections on Leaving a Place of Retirement* and *To a Young Friend* have strong echoes of Edwin's experiences on cliffs and hills, and so do several others. But as Reggie Watters reminded us in his comment on those poems in his excellent book on Coleridge, the eighteenth century, from John Dyer's *Grongar Hill* on, was full of poets puffing up little hills and going into raptures at what they saw from the top. [\[24\]](#)

One intriguing parallel which Aldrich suggested is with Coleridge's rather curious poem *A Stranger Minstrel*. The title, in which the word 'stranger' has two possible meanings, both I think intended by Coleridge, in itself makes one think of Beattie's *Minstrel* if one is thinking that way.

A Stranger Minstrel is a dialogue between the poet and the mountain Skiddaw. What reminds one of *The Minstrel* is not specific verbal resemblances but the character of the poet and of what he is seeing on the mountain. Edwin, as well as his sensitivity to mountainous scenery, was very easily given to laughter and to tears, sometimes almost simultaneously. He was what the psychiatrists call emotionally labile. And this is the poet in *A Stranger Minstrel*:

As late on Skiddaw's mount I lay supine...

Then when the tear slow travelling on its way,

Fills up the wrinkles of a silent laugh —

In that sweet mood of sad and humorous thought

A form within me rose, within me wrought

With such strong magic that I cried aloud,

'Thou ancient Skiddaw by thy helm of cloud,

And by thy many coloured chasms deep,

And by their shadows that for ever sleep,
By yon small flaky mists that love to creep
Along the edges of those spots of light,
Those sunny islands in thy smooth green height...

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And by this laugh, and by this tear
I would, old Skiddaw, she were here.

Aldrich made the case for a Beattie link with these poems well, with extensive and at times quite persuasive parallel quotation. The difficulty is to know how convinced we can be that verbal resemblances represent actual causal influences when there is no supporting evidence of the influence, for example from biographical facts, or letters, or what the poet said. In Wordsworth's case there is abundant supporting evidence, as there is with many of the other poets I have mentioned. But with Coleridge for the most part there isn't. So we are left uncertain just how important Beattie was to Coleridge, though we certainly know he was familiar with Beattie's work and sometimes quoted from it.

Perhaps that would be the wise place for me to stop, because everything I have said so far is factual and documented and defensible. But what's a study weekend for if one has to stick entirely to documented facts and can't go in for a bit of flight of ideas? So I am going to end with what you may at the best see as a digression, and at the worst as a wild and wholly unjustified speculation. I'm going to say something about *Frost at Midnight*. It is a hauntingly beautiful poem, and another appeal of it for me is that the sleeping babe is, of course, the young Hartley Coleridge, the other 'minor' poet for whom I have a particular affection. Near the end of *Frost at Midnight* is STC's prediction or wish for Hartley's future:

But *thou*, my babe! Shalt wander, like a breeze

By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags

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Now that passage has haunted and puzzled readers, because Coleridge was apparently foreseeing Hartley's life in the Lake District. But the poem was written in February 1798 at Nether Stowey, and as far as I know there was no question *then* of a move to the Lakes. The prediction certainly haunted Hartley himself, because he referred to it in the dedicatory sonnet to Coleridge in his 1833 volume of poems- the only collection published in his lifetime, and a very beautiful and much neglected volume. [\[25\]](#) The dedicatory sonnet refers to his father's prayer 'in the night-watch o'er my cradled slumbers' and continues:

The prayer was heard: I "wander'd like a breeze",
By mountain brooks and solitary meres,
And gather'd there the shapes and phantasies
Which mixt with passions of my sadder years,
Compose this book.

Hartley added a note to the sonnet which quoted the relevant lines of *Frost at Midnight* and added 'As far as regards the habitats of my childhood, these lines, written at Nether Stowey, were almost prophetic. But poets are not prophets.' That characteristically astute remark shows that Hartley himself was puzzled as to why his father had apparently predicted -a Lake District future for him. The prosaic explanation is that it was the Wordsworth influence, and Coleridge would have heard about Wordsworth's Lake District childhood, though not yet in the form of *The Prelude*. The more exciting explanation I suggest is that he was not giving Hartley a Lake District childhood at all: he was giving him the childhood which we

have seen had such a profound appeal to the romantics - the childhood of Edwin. The sandy shores, after all, are not a particularly Lake District scene, but every natural image in that passage of *Frost at Midnight* is found in Book I of *The Minstrel*. For instance

[20]

The cloud stupendous, from th'Atlantic wave

High-towering...

Where 'midst the changeful scenery ever new

Fancy a thousand wondrous forms descries...

Rocks, torrents, gulfs', and shapes of giant size,

And glittering cliffs on cliffs (1.43)

seems a possible source for the rather unusual idea in *Frost at Midnight* of

the clouds,

Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores

And mountain crags.

To summarise, Beattie was a very prominent feature of the poetic landscape in the late eighteenth century, he had an influence on many other poets, supremely on Wordsworth, which went far beyond what might be expected from his obscurity today, he was certainly known to Coleridge and quoted by him, and it is just possible that he contributed an important piece to one of Coleridge's most beautiful poems.

Kilve Court Study Weekend, September
1994.

[1] *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Later Years*, edited by E. de Selincourt, 3 vols (Oxford,1939), 3 1334.

[2] *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, edited by E. de Selincourt (Oxford, 1935),p.93.

[3] *The Early Wordsworthian Milieu*, edited by Zera Fink (Oxford,1958).

[4] Letter of Gray, November 1769. *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, 3 vols, edited by P.Toynbee and L.Whibley (Oxford, 1935), 3,1084.

[5] Beattie to Lady Forbes, 12 October 1772. *Sir William Forbes, An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1806),1.204-7.

[6] *The Minstrel* 1.16,17. Quotations from *The Minstrel* are from the text of 1784, and are referenced by book number followed by stanza number.

[7] 'Sylvanus Theophrastus', *The Peripatetic*, 3 vols (Southwark, 1793),1.100.

[8] Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: the Borders of Vision* (Oxford, 1982),pp.310-12.

[9] Letter to Beattie, March 8,1771. *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, edited by P.Toynbee and L.Whibley (Oxford, 1935), 3.1169.

[10] Nicholas Roe, 'Coleridge and John Thelwall: Medical Science, Politics & Poetry', *Coleridge Bulletin*, New Series No. 3 (Spring,1994).

[11] Letter to William Unwin, April 5,1784. *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, edited by J. King and C.Ryskamp (Oxford,1981), 2.231.

[12] *Recollections of the Table Talk of Samuel Rogers*, edited by Alexander Dyce (New Southgate, 1887),p.41; P.W.Clayden, *The Early Life of Samuel Rogers* (London, 1887), pp.58-60.

[13] Grevel Lindop, *The Opium-Eater: A Life of Thomas De Quincey* (London, 1981), p.101.

[14] A comprehensive account of the influence of *The Minstrel* is given by Earl A. Aldrich, *James Beattie's 'Minstrel': its sources and influence* (PhD thesis, Harvard University, 1927). The evidence is summarized by Everard H. King in *James Beattie* (Boston, 1977), and *James Beattie's 'The Minstrel' and the Origins of Romantic Autobiography* (Lewiston/Lampeter/Queenston, 1992).

[15] T.W. Thompson, *Wordsworth's Hawkshead*, edited by Robert Woof (Oxford, 1970), p.344.

[16] In *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 44(1838), 508-23. 21

[17] See Fenwick note to *The Excursion* in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, 5 vols (Oxford, 1940-49) 5.373.

[18] Alexander Bower, *An Account of the Life of James Beattie* (London, 1804), p.226.

[19] *Lectures 1795 On Politics and Religion. Collected Coleridge* (Princeton, 1971), pp.158-9.

[20] e.g. in *The Friend*, Essay IV, *Collected Coleridge* (1969)/1.28; *Biographia Literaria* ch 2 *Collected Coleridge* (1983), 1.270; *Logic*, Part 11, ch.8. *Collected Coleridge* (1981), p.192.

[21] This link was first suggested by 'Hugh Haliburton' (pseudonym of James Logie Robertson) *Furth in Field* (London, 1894), p.257. it was also argued by Aldrich (see above), p.338; and by E.H. King in 'Beattie and Coleridge: new light on the damaged archangel' *Wordsworth Circle*, 7 (1976), 142-51.

[22] Quotations from the *Monody* are from the version in *Poems, supposed to have been written at Bristol, by Thomas Rowley and others* (Cambridge, 1794), but these passages changed little from the 1790 *Liber Aureus* version to that of 1796.

[23] *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement*, 1801. Woodstock facsimile (Oxford, 1989), p.100.

[24] Reginald Watters, *Coleridge* (London, 1971), p.31.

[25] Hartley Coleridge, *Poems*. Vol 1 (Leeds, 1833).