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## A Guide that does not Guide: The Duddon Sonnets as a Guide to the Lakes

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## A Guide that does not Guide: The Duddon Sonnets as a Guide to the Lakes<sup>1</sup>

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In 1820 Wordsworth published the second version of what would become known as his *Guide to the Lakes*. Effectively the first guide to be published under his own name, this ‘Topographical Description’ was deficient as a tourist guide in that it lacked practical information for tourists; nor did it describe any particular route, site or scenery. Compared even with his other four editions, the 1820 *Guide* looks rather unhelpful.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the 1820 volume featured some poems, including a series of sonnets on the river Duddon, which could be read as a kind of guide written in verse.<sup>3</sup> Why did Wordsworth make his prose guide less tourist-friendly and write guide-like poems instead? In this essay I would like to consider the River Duddon sonnets in terms of Lake District tourism, and to see how the river Duddon helped Wordsworth to create a sonnet sequence that also came to serve as an ideal companion for many generations of tourists.

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Along with the Derwent and the Lowther, the Duddon was Wordsworth’s favourite river from his childhood, although his first visit at the age of 12 was rather miserable; he went there to fish in pouring rain, and caught nothing.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Stephen Gill asserts that the 1820 *Guide* is ‘not so much a ‘Guide’ as a poetic celebration of the Lake District as a place of extraordinary beauty and splendour’ (29). The other editions (1810, 1822, 1823, 1835) include more descriptions of specific places and directions for tourists.

3 The volume was titled *The River Duddon, a Series of Sonnets: Vaudracour and Julia: and Other Poems. To which is Annexed, A Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes, in the North of England*. Besides the Duddon sonnets, ‘To—on her first ascent to the Summit of Helvellyn’, ‘Song for the Spinning-Wheel’, ‘Ode, The Pass of Kirkstone’, ‘Ode, Composed upon an Evening of Extraordinary Splendour and Beauty’ are set in the Lake District. Immediately after the publication of this volume in April 1820, within the year, Wordsworth separated the prose guide from the poems—the poems were incorporated in the four-volume edition of *Miscellaneous Poems* (1820), and then in the subsequent *Collected Works*; while the *Guide* was published as discrete volumes in 1822, 1823 and 1835. The 1820 Duddon volume marked a significant turning point in the establishment of his reputation. See Robinson 451, Khan 45-46, and Gill 22.

Nevertheless, he returned there repeatedly, and at a time when the valley was little known to tourists<sup>5</sup> he supplied a description of it for Joseph Wilkinson's 1810 album: *Select Views in Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Lancashire*. Wordsworth says that the valley is 'very rarely visited; but [he] recommend[s] it with confidence to the notice of the Traveller of taste and feeling' (Wilkinson 37). He describes the scenic route from the north — from Coniston over Walna Scar descending to Seathwaite: 'nothing can be found more beautiful than the scene, into which [the traveller] will be received at the bottom of the hill on the other side'.<sup>6</sup> Then after pointing out a homely farmhouse where simple accommodation may be found, Wordsworth leads the traveller to Ulpha Kirk: 'the whole scene is inspirited by the sound and sight of the River rolling immediately below the steep ground upon the top of which the Church stands'.<sup>7</sup> Then he is led along the Donnerdale down to Broughton, where the vale 'terminates abruptly in a prospect of the Sands of Duddon' (37). Observing that he would like to offer 'accurate [verbal] Portraits' of scenes and things which 'may not lie within the province of the pencil' (i), in *Select Views* Wordsworth invites travellers to a remote location that Wilkinson, the artist, had not visited and sketched.

In September 1811, Wordsworth revisited the valley with his wife Mary. Starting in the south from Duddon Bridge, this time they walked upstream, stopping at each beautiful spot, until they reached Seathwaite, where they stayed overnight. Next day they headed for Coniston over Walna Scar. The tour inspired Wordsworth to write a travel essay describing the autumnal beauty of the Duddon Valley. This proved to be an enlarged version of the passage in the *Select Views*, enriched with imaginative and evocative descriptions, and it is a portion of what is now called 'An Unpublished Tour', reproduced in the *Prose Works of Wordsworth* edited by W.J.B. Owen and J.W. Smyser.<sup>8</sup> Full of poetic descriptions of the scenery, topographical, historical and anecdotal explanations of the places

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4 Wordsworth describes it as 'the stream which for many years I never thought of without recollections of disappointment and distress'. See 'Fenwick Notes', quoted in Wordsworth, *Sonnets Series* 99.

5 William Green's *The Tourist's New Guide* (1819) was the first to introduce the Duddon Valley.

6 The view from Walna Scar road would be described in the 13th sonnet, 'Open Prospect', quoted below.

7 This inspired the 30th sonnet, where the Kirk of Ulpha presents its shining forehead like a star amid the 'wave-washed Church-yard' (xxx, 10).

8 This 'unpublished tour' includes six sections: Lancaster, the Lancaster Sands and Furness Abbey, Donnerdale, Coniston, Hawkshead and Borrowdale.

and inhabitants, the essay also gives practical information on scenic routes, viewpoints and how to appreciate natural beauties. As Tomoya Oda suggests, the 'Unpublished Tour' might have made a fascinating, tourist-friendly guide, and it indicates that Wordsworth intended to publish a more substantial tourist guide of his own (62-63).

What was actually published in 1820, however, was not at all like the one he had long planned and drafted. It was limited to general introduction of topographical, climatic and historical aspects of the Lake District, and his opinion on some recent changes. Tourist-friendly directions and descriptions, which had formed attractive parts of the 'Unpublished Tour', were omitted. So a question arises: why did Wordsworth abandon his original plan?

Oda infers that William Green's meticulous *Tourist's New Guide* of 1819 changed the course Wordsworth had been taking, by raising concerns that another guide-book would attract more and more tourists to the Lake District (65-66). Wordsworth was certainly worried that an increasing number of new settlers would damage the beauty of the district, and wished that 'a better taste should prevail among these new proprietors'. 'In this wish,' he continues, 'the author will be joined by persons of pure taste throughout the whole Island, who, by their visits (often repeated) to the Lakes in the North of England, testify that they deem the district a sort of national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy' (*River Duddon* 309). In this famous passage, unchanged from the anonymous 1810 version of the *Guide*, Wordsworth counts on tourists' sense of responsibility for the preservation of the locality's beauties. Because he was aware that 'still further changes' were inevitable 'from the change of inhabitants and owners', Wordsworth wished that his writings might cultivate 'an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy'—and thus a concern for the preservation of the environment. So what kind of guide did he try to offer them?

In the 'Unpublished Tour' Wordsworth had stated the purpose of his guide as follows:

Fortunate then should I be if through long familiarity with these scenes I am enabled upon occasions to assist my Companion in representing to himself aspects of things more favourable than any chance to be before his eyes. Upon his entrance into this little valley, I would willingly afford him the



help of my own memory so that he might hear, as I have done, its brook murmuring in deeper stillness and see its circle of woods and dewy fields with the first dimness of Evening settled upon them. (313)

Here Wordsworth foregrounds his own experiences and descriptions as 'more favourable' than the Companion-tourist's comparatively limited vision. The role of a guide, in Wordsworth's view, is to turn the traveller's attention to something 'deeper' and less discernible, that may 'easily escape the notice of the cursory Spectator' (Wilkinson 39).

On the other hand, Wordsworth was alert to his own ambivalent feelings towards writing a guide-book. After recommending a 'station' from which to view Coniston, he cannot but express his regrets:

This is a singular & beautiful burst of prospect, & I much wish that my companion could have been brought to it without directions or previous knowledge of what he was about to see. But I must here observe, once for all, that these anticipations, undesirable as they are, must be submitted to, & I am confident that a Traveller who has a true relish for the beauties of landscape would much rather be introduced to a scene of this kind under such unavoidable disadvantages than miss it altogether, which otherwise he almost certainly would have done; (‘Unpublished Tour’ 20-21)

Wordsworth is uncertain if a scrupulous, attentive guide is really good for the traveller who wants to find 'hidden treasures' for himself; the book, intended to enhance the tourist's experience, would actually be a means of deprivation. What then should a guide do in order to introduce a traveller to landscape beauties without being too obtrusive?

Wordsworth's device in the 1820 volume seems to have been to make poetry itself serve as a form of guidance. Prose supplied a general introduction; poetry evoked specific scenes and places for visitors to discover for themselves.<sup>9</sup> These descriptions are faithful to reality, accordingly practical, yet lyrically not too instructive. In the 1820 volume prose and poetry complement each other.

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9 Wordsworth had already published such guide-like poems as *The Excursion*, 'Michael', *The Waggoner*, *An Evening Walk*, 'The Idle Shepherd-Boys', 'The Brothers' and 'Written with a Pencil upon a Stone in the Wall of the House (Out-house), on the Island at Grasmere'.

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So it was that the Duddon sonnet sequence assumed some guide-like features:<sup>10</sup> the thirty-three sonnets are topographically arranged, tracing the river from its source to its estuary, gently inviting readers to ramble along it, as many later travel writers and guidebooks recommended.<sup>11</sup> The sonnets introduce several outstanding picturesque ‘spots’ along the valley, such as a grey cottage near Cockley Beck Bridge (v), the Stepping Stones (ix, x), Seathwaite Chapel (xviii), the Tarn Beck (xix) and Ulpha Kirk (xxx); and also some hidden charms such as a ‘deep chasm’ on which quivering sun-beams play (xv), a ‘hidden pool’ as crystal as Dian’s looking-glass (xxii), and a ‘Nook, with woodbine hung and straggling weed’ (xxiv). They are replete with vivid evocations of scenery, found in reality when one traces the stream; and they are furnished with various anecdotes and legends about the region.

Although the sonnets are faithful to local topography, however, they are not too detailed or precise. For instance, when introducing the source of the river upon the ‘lofty waste’ of Wrynose Fell, the poem fancifully and elusively invokes a ‘Child of clouds’ (ii, 1). The third sonnet starts as follows:

How shall I paint thee?—Be this naked stone  
My seat while I give way to such intent;      (iii, 1-2, my underline)

The demonstrative pronoun ‘this’ invites the reader-tourist to visit the scene. But, like ‘this dark sycamore’ in ‘Tintern Abbey’, where ‘this naked stone’ may actually be is not specified. The source is marked by nothing but ‘a gleam / Of brilliant moss’ (12-13), which might easily escape notice. The poem opens our eyes to minute details of natural beauty around the source of the river, and yet it leaves the exact locations unspecified and awaiting discovery. James Thorne published an engraved image of the Duddon source in his 1844 guide, and in the

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10 The attached lengthy notes—28 pages in all—were especially written in a guide-like manner—mainly a topographical description of the Seathwaite Valley and a biographical description of one dalesman, ‘Wonderful’ Walker, curate at Seathwaite. They were extensively quoted in many later guidebooks.

11 Christopher Donaldson also points out the guide-like nature of the Duddon sonnets, referring to Norman Nicholson’s poem, ‘To the River Duddon’: ‘[Wordsworth] left his verses gummed to your rocks like lichen, / The dry and yellow edges of a once-green spring. / He made a guide-book for you, from your source’ (10-12). See Donaldson 195, Nicholson 16.

1880s another investigator H.D. Rawnsley fancied that the rock he happened to sit on might have been the one Wordsworth had taken for a seat, and thought he had identified ‘the “brilliant moss instinct with virtue [*sic*] rare,” which the poet’s eyes had rejoiced in so many years ago’ (374). On the other hand, Herbert Rix claimed that it was impossible to find (61-62). In short, the Duddon sonnets invoke the pleasures of investigation.



[fig.1 ‘The Source of the Duddon’, by James Thorne, from *Rambles by Rivers* (1844)]

The course of the river can be traced more easily than its source, and the reader-traveller can enjoy what ‘Protean change’ (iv, 3) the river goes through—how the creeping water-thread grows into a boisterous rill, jumping down the steep, flowing into a ‘brook of loud and stately march’, meandering through flowery fields, deep chasm and shady nooks until it glides into the sea. Rawnsley confessed, however, that it was not easy to identify exactly which spots the sonnets describe. For instance, the fifth and sixth sonnets turn our attention to familiar trees and plants such as alders, ashes, birch-trees, pines, hawthorn bowers, strawberry, ‘eye-bright’ and ‘purple thyme’ visited by birds and humming bees. This sketch of a cottage garden might well lead readers to the grey farm-house near Cockley Beck Bridge, pointed out in Thorne’s guide with a woodcut illustration. On the other hand, Rix indicates that the sheltering pines actually surround another cottage half a mile lower down the stream. He surmises that ‘the spot furnished [Wordsworth] here, ... with the main idea, while accessory features were borrowed from other quarters, or created by the imagination’ (63).

The Stepping Stones featured in the ninth and tenth sonnets seem very easy to identify, but there have been arguments as to which of the four sets of

stepping stones is intended. Thorne's woodcut image shows the uppermost set near Cockley Beck Bridge, which was accepted by James Wilson's guide of 1859; Rix and Rawnsley suggested the stones near Seathwaite, for which James Payn's *Lakes in Sunshine* of 1867 included an illustration by T. L. Aspland.<sup>12</sup> As Thorne remarked, 'every reader of Wordsworth ... will "have a vision of his own" about them' and 'need not fear that the reality will fall short of his conception' (19).



[fig.2 'The Stepping Stones' by T.L. Aspland, from James Payn, *The Lakes in Sunshine* (1867)]

The location of the Faery Chasm in the 11th sonnet has been less disputed. Thorne located it near the uppermost Stepping Stones; Rix identified it with the rocky gorge crossed by Birks Bridge. William Knight and Grevel Lindop accepted this (Knight 254, Lindop 292), and many drawings and photographs have been taken of this gorge and the bridge. But one may wonder where the 'sky-blue stone' is, as Rawnsley did. Instead of the gorge under the Birks Bridge, 'further down the valley' Rawnsley found 'in mid-stream a huge blue-grey boulder that may have suggested Sonnet XI to the poet' (377). There is no local tradition, however, regarding the child-stealing faeries associated with either place.

Like this sonnet, there are some pieces dealing with traditions or folktales although they are not necessarily associated with the locality. Such figures as the

12 See Rix 65-67, Rawnsley 376, Payn 69. Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in Westmoreland and Cumberland* (1866) also mentions the sonnets on the Stepping Stones in the Seathwaite section. On the other hand, Harriet Martineau seems to suggest a still lower one near Ulpha Kirk as the one celebrated by Wordsworth (111).



love-sick youth (vii) or the innocent lovers trying the Stepping Stones (x) do not seem to be based on local traditions, but they are plausible enough to inspire the traveller to see the landscape through the lens of human stories. As the 12th sonnet declares: ‘the Bard who walks with Duddon for his guide, / Shall find such toys of Fancy thickly set’ (xii, 11-12). This suggests that an ideal guide should be pitched so as to stimulate the traveller’s imagination. So the 15th sonnet offers the fanciful image of a tutelary spirit, placed inaccessibly in a chasm, leaving the reader to seek pleasurably for a suitably ‘gloomy Niche’ (xv, 3) in the landscape. If one finds some hidden pool, deep and crystal as ‘Dian’s looking-glass’ (xxii, 3), one would muse upon the hapless doom of the love-lorn maid drowned there as described in the 22nd sonnet. Although the resting-place described in the 24th and 25th sonnets cannot be identified, the traveller would find several such ‘tempting recess[es]’ (xxiv, 6) fit for a noon-tide rest, where ‘the waters seem to waste / Their vocal charm [and] their sparklings cease to please’ (xxv, 13-14).

Some pieces are more obviously associated with local history and geography. As Wordsworth himself points out in a note, the 13th sonnet describes a view from Pen Crag, on the way from Walna Scar down to the valley:

Hail to the fields—with Dwellings sprinkled o’er,  
And one small Hamlet, under a green hill,  
Cluster’d with barn and byer, and spouting mill! (xiii, 1-3)

The poem asserts how pleasant and welcoming the people of Donnerdale are both in summer and winter; while the attached note evokes the morning gladness and evening quietude of the valley in September.<sup>13</sup> The sonnet and the note show the traveller more than he could behold by himself at a single visit, and encourage him to imagine the hamlet in different weather conditions.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Wordsworth’s text enriches travel experience.

The 18th sonnet featuring Seathwaite Chapel was to be the most frequently referenced in guidebooks, not so much for the chapel itself as for Robert Walker,

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<sup>13</sup> The evocative description in the note of the vale looked upon from Walna Scar is reproduced with some alterations from the ‘Unpublished Tour’. This note was popularly quoted in guidebooks including Hudson’s *Complete Guide* (1842 and onwards), James Thorne’s *Rambles by Rivers* (1844), Adams’s *Pocket Descriptive Guide to the Lakes* (1852) and Murray’s *Handbook* (1866).

<sup>14</sup> As Rawnsley suggests, the 6th sonnet describes the Duddon in April, while the 21st sonnet is tinted by autumnal colours (Rawnsley 376). The sonnet sequence goes through different seasons.

a celebrated eighteenth-century clergyman. He was known as ‘Wonderful Walker’ for his virtuous life, elaborated by Wordsworth in a long note to the sonnet, and also in *The Excursion*.<sup>15</sup> The traveller is here encouraged to muse upon the life of dalesmen—simple, pious and industrious, who, Wordsworth was afraid, were being corrupted by the tourist industry. Given that many later guidebooks repeatedly referred to Wonderful Walker, in many cases extracting extensively from Wordsworth’s note on his life, the poet’s views gained wide circulation.

Along with Seathwaite Chapel, Ulpha Kirk (St John’s Church) became a popular spot for travellers, after Wordsworth featured its star-like appearance on a hill:

The Kirk of Ulpha to the Pilgrim’s eye  
Is welcome as a Star, that doth present  
Its shining forehead through the peaceful rent  
Of a black cloud diffused o’er half the sky; (xxx, 1-4)

Sarah Hutchinson, Mary Wordsworth’s niece, in her tour along the Duddon Valley with her sister and mother in 1850, visited the church, and enjoyed the magnificent view of the river from its ‘wave-washed Church-yard’ (xxx, 10), reciting the sonnet by her uncle.

After Ulpha Kirk the river flows for four more miles through woods, but the 31st sonnet leaps ahead to the estuary:

—now expands  
Majestic Duddon, over smooth flat sands,  
Gliding in silence with unfettered sweep!  
Beneath an ampler sky a region wide  
Is opened round him; (xxxi, 6-10)

The river now looks very different from what has been passed—not boisterous, nor deep or treacherous, but slow, shallow, voiceless, and majestic. Having passed through a rather closed space, we are suddenly faced with an open prospect connected with the outer world.<sup>16</sup> At this point the metaphysical or symbolic associa-

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Walker (1709-1802) served his curacy at Seathwaite for 66 years from 1735 to 1802; his exemplary life appears in Book Seven of *The Excursion* (vii, 359-79).



tions of the Duddon, implicit throughout the sequence, become more explicit. The reader-traveller is encouraged to muse on time, journeying, and human life; on an entity ever moving and never changing, as can be seen in the last sonnet:

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; (xxxiii, 1-7)

It would not be off the mark to say that Wordsworth here thinks of the past, present and future of the Lake District. He continues to say:

Enough, if something from our hands have power  
 To live, and act, and serve the future hour;  
 And if, as tow'rd the silent tomb we go,  
 Thro' love, thro' hope, and faith's transcendent dower,  
 We feel that we are greater than we know. (xxxiii, 10-14)

'We' and 'our' may be generic but they can also refer to Wordsworth and his partner, the river Duddon. And this passage can be interpreted as a declaration of his wish: that what he, with the help of his native river, has produced in the Duddon Sonnets may have power to inspire sympathetic visitors to act for preserving the Lake District, to serve all future generations. In writing to his friend in 1826 he says that 'No one who has not [visited the Duddon] has an adequate

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16 In the 31st sonnet the Duddon is, through the ocean, even allied to the 'sovereign Thames' (xxxi, 12), a symbol of the monarch or the state. There have been several discussions that this sonnet sequence shows Wordsworth's dual awareness of the regional and the national. For instance, Jonathan Bate suggests that Wordsworth's Duddon is 'an emblem of the nation ... grounded in the region' (223). Stephen Gill asserts that 'Now with the *River Duddon* volume Wordsworth consolidated the presentation of himself in terms that are regional but emphatically not limited' (26). And James M. Garret argues that 'the Duddon is represented as losing its local character, of becoming more and more an abstract symbol and in its increasing abstractness seen to be allied to that other national river and symbol of the state' (145). Following this line of argument, it may be possible to say that featuring a regional river, Wordsworth tried to appeal to the national sympathy towards the preservation of his native land for the nation.

idea of the varieties of this district of the Lakes'.<sup>17</sup> For Wordsworth the variegated Duddon was an epitome of the Lake District as a whole, guiding us as to how to appreciate its beauties and counselling their protection for the years to come.

The river Duddon was thus Wordsworth's partner and guide: it first inspired him to write a prose essay to make its features better known. Then it encouraged him to render its various aspects in verse, both faithful to its topography and full of fanciful stories. The fourteen-line restriction of the sonnet form prevented him from writing too much.<sup>18</sup> Thus the sonnet sequence became the model of an ideal guide, helping recognition of what might 'easily escape notice', while leaving the pleasure of discovery and room for imagination—in brief, a guide that does not guide too much.

Later, Wordsworth revised and enlarged his prose *Guide to the Lakes*, adding some basic information for tourists and descriptions of specific scenes and places.<sup>19</sup> But, fundamentally, his book was not essentially tourist-friendly. Instead, his poems, and especially the Duddon Sonnets, came to seem more welcoming for many literary tourists. *Allison's Northern Tourist Guide* (1837) introduced tourists to 'the Duddon extolled in the poetry of Wordsworth'; James Thorne's *Rambles by Rivers* (1844) gave a model tour based on the sonnet sequence; and in 1846 Charles Mackay's guide recommended readers to recite all the sonnets while walking along the Duddon. Thus the Duddon gradually became popular among tourists; especially after the Furness Railway reached Broughton in 1848 and the Duddon Valley became more accessible. Martineau warned in 1855: 'the series of sonnets that Wordsworth has given us may have led strangers to expect too much' (107), which suggests that many readers of the sonnets were induced to visit the valley. In 1867 James Payn asserted that 'there is no better guide-book for even the most prosaic to take with him on this occasion than that little volume' (67). In this way, by the end of the 19th century 'the river Duddon was

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17 William Wordsworth to Benjamin Duckray, 17 October 1826 (William and Dorothy Wordsworth 486).

18 In the postscript to the sonnet sequence Wordsworth remarks that 'the restriction which the frame of the Sonnet imposed upon [him], narrowing unavoidably the range of thought, and precluding, though not without its advantages, many graces to which a freer movement of verse would naturally have led' (*River Duddon* 38). The advantages surely include that it prevents writing too much.

19 'Directions and Information for the Tourist', 'Excursions to the top of Scawfell and on the Banks of Ullswater', 'Ode: The Pass of Kirkstone', and 'Itinerary' were added to the general introduction.

classic' (Tweddell i, 3), thanks to Wordsworth.

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