

7-1-1965

A Scottish Source for Wordsworth

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Recommended Citation

Gillis, William (2013) "A Scottish Source for Wordsworth," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, 62–64.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol3/iss1/6>

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Letters in the *London Journals*, subscrib'd Philaretus . . ." (London, 1728, p. xx). But in the editions of 1742 and 1756 (Hutcheson died in 1747), the letters are referred to in the preface as "SOME Letters in the *London Journals* in 1728, subscribed *Philaretus*" (London, 1742, p. xix). The subsequent dating of these letters seems to be based on Hutcheson's dating of them. For example, William R. Scott (*Francis Hutcheson: His Life, Teaching and Position in the History of Philosophy* [Cambridge, 1900]) accepts 1728 as the year in which the letters between Hutcheson and Burnet appeared in the *London Journal*. Whether or not Hutcheson is responsible for this date, it is wrong. Simple examination of the *London Journal* itself reveals that the correspondence between Burnet and Hutcheson appeared in 1725. To my knowledge, this error has never before been noted.

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A SCOTTISH SOURCE FOR WORDSWORTH

Wordsworth's "To the Cuckoo" may be ultimately indebted to "Ode to the Cuckoo" by Michael Bruce (1746-1767), a Scottish poet of strong Romantic tendencies. Wordsworth undoubtedly knew the poem only in the plagiarized version of the Leith minister John Logan. Supposed friend of Bruce and guardian of his posthumous manuscripts, Logan passed off the young poet's work as his own in a volume of poems published in 1781. He had made some minor variations in the "Ode" which had not, however, clouded the beauty of Bruce's masterpiece.¹

Hail, beauteous Stranger of the *grove*
Thou Messenger of Spring!
Now Heaven repairs thy rural seat,
And woods thy welcome sing.

¹ Following is Bruce's poem as Logan presented it, the italicized words indicating the changes made by Logan. He deleted one stanza entirely, the next to the last.

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What time the daisy decks the green,
Thy certain voice we hear;
Hast thou a star to guide thy path,
Or mark the rolling year?

Delightful Visitant! with thee
I hail the time of flowers,
And bear the sound of music sweet
From birds among the bowers.

The school-boy, wandering *thro'* the wood
To pull the *primrose* gay,
Starts, *the new* voice of *Spring* to hear,
And imitates thy lay.

What time the pea puts on the bloom
Thou fliest thy vocal vale,
An annual guest in other lands,
Another Spring to hail.

Sweet Bird! thy bower is ever green,
Thy sky is ever clear;
Thou hast no sorrow in thy song,
No winter in thy year!

• • •

O could I fly, I'd fly with thee!
We'd make, with *joyful* wing,
Our annual visit o'er the globe,
Companions of the Spring.

Of Wordsworth's composition we know only that he had completed a draft on 23 March 1802 and that he may still have been revising it on 14 May of the same year.² On 3 June Dorothy Wordsworth recorded that ". . . we have been reading the life and some of the writings of poor Logan since dinner."

Aside from the common subject, the most obvious similarities of the poems by Bruce and Wordsworth lie in their wording. While the use of the vocative in the first stanza of each poem may well be coincidence (*vide* Shelley's "Skylark"), the first two lines of the second stanzas bear closer resemblance. More significantly, in st. 6 Wordsworth uses "the green" as does Bruce in st. 2. It may be argued that the noun "green," though used occasionally by English Romantic poets, is not as common a word in England as in Scotland. Wordsworth's

² *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. William Knight (London, 1924), pp. 103, 121.

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choice of the word, in any case, suggests a debt, as does his use of "schoolboy" in st. 5. It appears more than coincidental that the schoolboy "Starts, the new voice of Spring to hear" while Wordsworth had been stimulated by "that Cry/ Which made me look a thousand ways." Each poet uses a word—"start" and "cry"—to attain a sharp, jarring effect. We note also the duplication of other words: the rhyme word "hear" in st. 2 of both poems; the rhyme word "flowers" in st. 3 of both; "vale" in Bruce, st. 5, and in Wordsworth, st. 3; "through woods" in Wordsworth, st. 6, applying to the schoolboy, as in "thro' the wood" in Logan's plagiarism, st. 4 (Bruce has "in"). The common subject, which might demand a certain sameness of diction, cannot sufficiently explain these word similarities.

"To the Cuckoo" is more poetically philosophical than the emotional outburst of the sick and dying Michael Bruce, who longed to escape the inevitable. We cannot compare subject matter, though structural comparison is possible. While Wordsworth is Romantically personal throughout, Bruce follows a Neo-classical pattern in which the final three stanzas point up a personal application after he has dealt impersonally with the bird. A similar structure occurs in Wordsworth's poem when in the last four stanzas he turns to more intensely personal recollection, the final two stanzas suggesting the significance of the cuckoo.

Each poet sings of the bird's ubiquity and freedom of movement, a rather obvious device. Bruce's cuckoo lives in eternal spring. The earth, which "is fit home for Thee," is the unlimited and mystical habitation of Wordsworth's cuckoo, representing more than simple freedom of movement — perhaps the elusive comprehension of nature Wordsworth strives for. The bird's mysterious invisibility is a central concept, whereas the concept in Bruce's poem concerns the cuckoo's mobility.

That Wordsworth drew inspiration from Scotland and her poets and that not all of his emotion recollected in tranquility was the result of first-hand experience is well known. One suspects he would have been Romantically impressed by the best single work of Michael Bruce, a work approaching the Romantic spirit, even though that work had been distorted by the pen of a plagiarist.

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