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FROM SKIDDAW TO “SCURFELL”: SIGHTLINES OVER THE SOLWAY

Christopher Donaldson and Joanna E. Taylor

This essay deals with a noteworthy passage from Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland, A.D. 1803*. The passage in question appears in the book’s opening pages. There, Wordsworth recalls the places through which she and her brother William had passed with Samuel Taylor Coleridge during the first days of their tour. The three travellers had crossed over the Sark on their way to Dumfries on 17 August, and they had formed a mixed impression of the places through which they passed. They commented that the “hills heave and swell prettily enough,” but the settlements were uninspiring.¹ The houses in the new village of Springfield were too dull and uniform. Those in the old town of Gretna were worse: Dorothy dismissed them as “dirty and miserable” (*ibid.*).

The trip to Dumfries that evening was also disappointing. The ancient royal burgh lay on the post road to the north west, but the Wordsworths and Coleridge were not bound there out of necessity alone. They also wished to pay their respects to the late Robert Burns. Thankfully, their inn was “tolerably comfortable,” which must have been a boon after fifty miles of bumpy roads. The people, moreover, were congenial (*ibid.*). But the town was too bustling and “unpoetic,” and they struggled to feel much connection with Burns as they wandered among the “expensive monuments” in St Michael’s churchyard (*ibid.*, 42).

Things improved as they made their way up the Vale of Nith to Brownhill on the 18th. Their route passed near near Ellisland, the farm where Burns had lived from 1788 to 1791. Here, they were struck by the view of the Cumberland fells on the far side of the Solway. “I cannot,” Dorothy confided,

take leave of the country without mentioning that we saw the

¹ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland* (1803), ed. Carol Kyros Walker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 41.

Cumberland mountains within half a mile of Ellisland ... the last view we had of them. Drayton has prettily described the connexion which this neighbourhood has with ours when he makes Skiddaw say—

Scurfell from the sky,
That Anadale doth crown, with a most amorous eye,
Salutes me every day, or at my pride looks grim,
Oft threatning me with clouds, as I oft threatning him.

These lines recurred to William's memory, and we talked of Burns, and of the prospect he must have had, perhaps from his own door, of Skiddaw and his companions, indulging ourselves in the fancy that we might have been personally known to each other, and he have looked upon those objects with more pleasure for our sakes (*ibid.*, 44).

This is a remarkable passage, not least because it reveals the source of a sentiment William later worked into one of his poems. Two aspects, however, have not yet been given due attention: first, that the passage recycles a way of thinking about the Solway that had, by Dorothy's day, become proverbially linked with ideas of Anglo-Scottish unity; and second, that it personalizes this proverbial notion in order to assert a binding emotional and imaginative connection across space and time, and between writers living and dead.

Dorothy's adaptation of the proverb that appears in Drayton's poem affords insight into the other acts of place- and meaning-making found in her *Recollections*. In this passage, she repurposes a popular idiom to affirm the personal attachment she and her companions feel with absent family members and friends. The affirmation reconfigures the area around the Solway, recognizing the firth as the boundary between two kingdoms while at the same time asserting that the people who live on either side of the sands are connected by regional ties. Like the Solway itself, though, the character of that connection is changeable: its identity rests on shifting viewpoints had from either side of the firth. The fanciful "connexion" with Burns in which Dorothy, William and Coleridge indulged is an important case in point.

Much the same can be said of the remarks Dorothy next jotted down. Having looked back towards the Cumberland fells, she wrote, "We talked of Coleridge's children and family, then at the foot of Skiddaw, and our own new-born John a few miles behind it."² This sentence affirms Dorothy's and William's affection for the people and places they had left behind, and suggests that Burns would have taken a similar interest in their family lives, and they in his, had they ever met.

² Wordsworth, *Recollections*, 44. The "new-born John" was William's son and Dorothy's nephew, John Wordsworth (1803-1875).

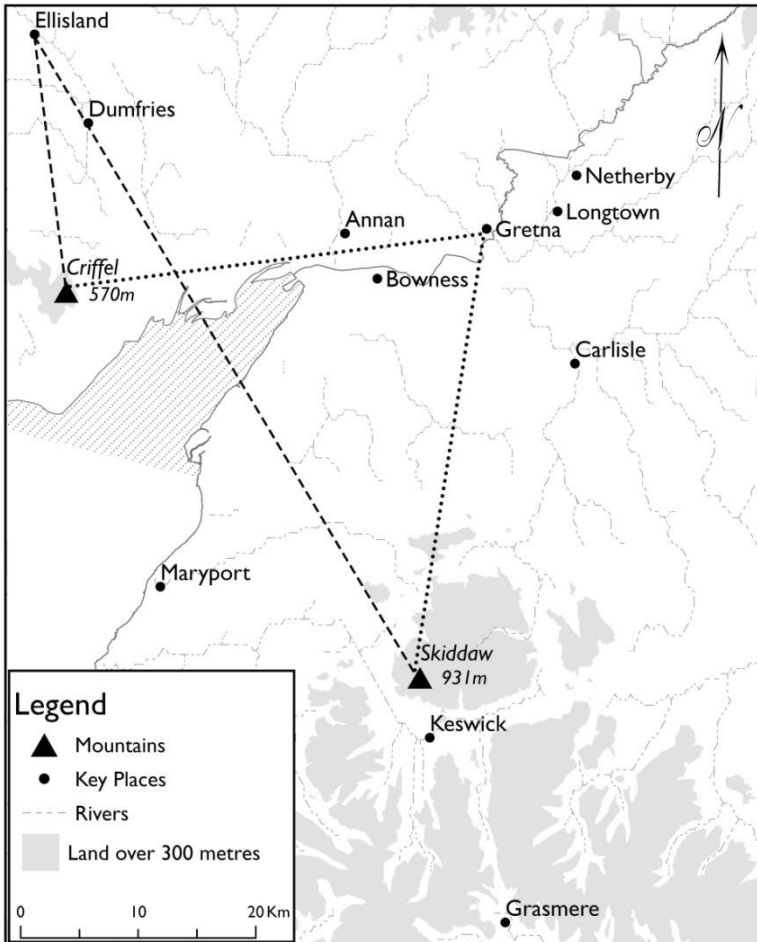


Fig. 1: Mountains and Sightlines across the Solway

In recycling a proverbial commonplace, the passage asserts a personal sense of connection that spans the Solway. Skiddaw and “Scurfell” (or Criffel, as we call it today), the prominent summits on each side of the firth, come to signify much more than just neighbouring hills in Dorothy’s account, anchoring emotional attachments that seem to transcend the boundaries of space and time, and even, through the “connexion” claimed with Burns, the boundary of the grave.

Dorothy herself points out the source of the proverb, in her reference to Drayton. The lines she claims “recurred to William” come from the

thirtieth (and final) song of Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion*: a long chorographical poem published in two parts in 1612 and 1622. As the woodcuts that accompanied Drayton's poem suggest (Fig. 2), *Poly-Olbion* picks up on the conventions of the masque to celebrate the counties of England. As the poet proceeds from place to place, he attributes voices to the key local features and landmarks, to sing the many blessings (the "poly Olbia") of Albion.

The passage that Dorothy quoted comes mid-way through the thirtieth song, where the poet treats Skiddaw, the double-hummocked fell commonly, but wrongly, assumed in Drayton's day to be the highest summit in England. He pictures Skiddaw surveying the landscape that surrounds it to the west and the south, and when it turns to gaze north over the Solway, it describes Criffel, across the Solway, as its alternately affectionate and tempestuous counterpart:

... when Scurfell from the skie,
That Anadale doth crowne, with a most amorous eye,
Salutes me every day, or at my pride looks grim,
Oft threatning me with Clouds, as I oft threatning him.³

Evidently, their relationship runs hot and cold. On some days, it is sunny, on others stormy, and Drayton's use of "threatning" to invoke the sense of a gathering menace is apt. This is an eloquent figuration not only of the changeful weather of the Solway, but also of the political climate of Drayton's age. The unification of the crowns under James VI and I helped bring about greater stability along the Anglo-Scottish Border, but some old enmities remained.

The Wordsworths probably encountered Drayton's lines from *Poly-Olbion* in volume three of Anderson's *Works of the British Poets* (1792-1795). Their brother John had given them a set of Anderson's collection in 1797.⁴ But Dorothy and William might not have realized the degree to which Drayton's verses depend on the earlier description of Skiddaw found in William Camden's *Britannia*. Camden's brief initial account simply tells us that "the high mountain of Skiddaw shields" the Vale of Keswick "to the North."⁵ In his expanded fifth edition (1600), though, Camden added substantially to this passage, explaining:

That [mount Skiddaw] riseth up to such an height with two

³ Michael Drayton, "The thirtieth Song," *The Second Part, or a Continuance of Poly-Olbion* (London: John Mariott, John Grismand and Thomas Dewe, 1622), 165 (ll. 183-206).

⁴ Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1770-1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 4-5.

⁵ "Skiddaw mons aeditus ab Aquilone defensit": William Camden, *Britannia* (London: Ralph Newbery, 1586), 452.

heads like unto Parnassus, and with a kind of emulation beholdeth Scruffell hill before it in Anandale within Scotland, that from these two mountaines, according as the misty clouds arise or fall, the people thereby dwelling make their prognostication of the change of wether, and commonly sing this note:

—If Skiddaw hath a cap
Scruffell wots full well of that.⁶

This expanded description appeared in every subsequent edition of Camden's book, including Philemon Holland's English translation in 1607. Where Camden came across the proverb remains obscure, though, given that he added it after his 1599 visit to Cumberland, it seems plausible that he learned of it then.

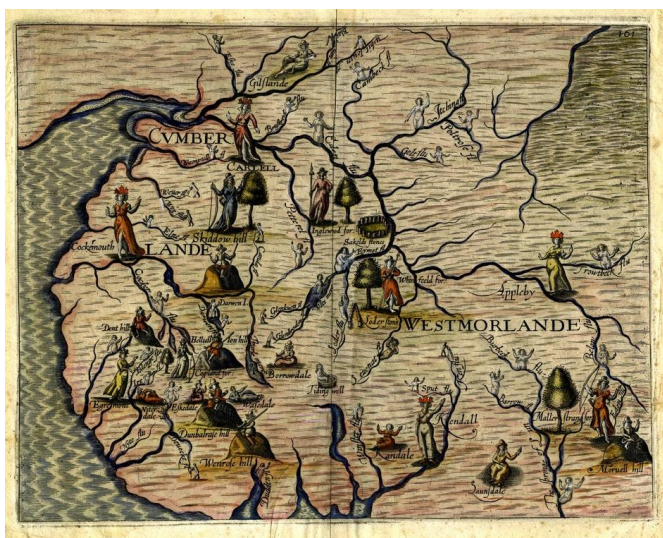


Fig. 2. “Cumberlande and Westmorlande,” engraved by William Hole, in Michael Drayton, *The Second Part, or a Continuance of Poly-Olbion* (London: Mariott, Grismand and Dewe, 1622). Courtesy of Cumbria County Council.

Camden may have learned of the proverb from John Senhouse (d. 1604), with whom he stayed during his “survey” of the North in 1599. Camden publicly acknowledged Senhouse in the 1600 edition of *Britannia*

⁶ “ille ... sublime in nubes biceps quasi Parnassus adeo surgit, & Scruffell montem in Anadia Scotiæ quasi æmulus prospicit, e quibus prout nubes vel ascendunt, vel descendunt præagiade aëris mutatione captant accolæ, & vulgo cantitant”: William Camden, *Britannia* (London: George Bishop, 1600), 692-93. The translation quoted is from William Camden, *Britannia*, trans. Philemon Holland (London: G. Bishop, 1610), 767.

as a hospitable host and a “well learned” man who was “not ignorant of ancient literature” (*Britannia*, 1600, 694). It is also possible, of course, that the source was another of Camden’s northern correspondents, such as Reginald Bainbrigg (1544/5-1612/13).⁷

As yet, no one seems to have looked into the origin or earlier history of the proverb before Camden. There is, for instance, no entry for it in *Brewer’s Dictionary* or the *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*. What is clear, though, is that the proverb belongs to a family of English adages relating to forecasting the weather. Most of these expressions depend on a conditional logic whereby a phenomenon can be used to predict an event in the near future: “red sky at night, shepherds delight,” for instance. One finds topographically specific examples of such saws in the works of Camden’s successors, including those of antiquaries like Francis Grose. Thus, in North Yorkshire, it was said that “When Roseberrye Toppinge weares a cappe / Let Cleveland then beware a clappe.”⁸ Similarly, near Bolton, the saying went “If riving Pike do wear a hood / Be sure that day will ne’er be good.”⁹ Another proverb, recorded on an estate map of Grizedale Hall, in Lancashire, from 1697 reads:

When Mount Charron weares a cap
Graisdale expects a rainy clap
But when its head is low and bair
It betookens weather faire.¹⁰

It seems to have been through Camden that the proverb pairing Skiddaw and Criffel passed into the work of Cumberland county historians, such as Thomas Denton of Warnell (1637-1698), who quotes the proverb in his *Perambulation of Cumberland* of 1687/8.¹¹ Camden is also credited as the source of the proverb in Thomas Fuller’s *Worthies of England* (1662) and, subsequently, in John Ray’s *Collection of Proverbs*

⁷ See, among others, John Cramsie, *British Travellers and the Encounter with Britain, 1450-1700* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2015), 325-26, 362-67, and Angus Vine, *In Defiance of Time: Antiquarian Writing in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 93-99. Further research is required, and due to the closure of libraries and records offices in the UK in 2020-2021, we have not been able to access all of the documents we would have wished to see.

⁸ MS. Cotton. Julius F. vi. 431: qt. in John Gough Nichols (ed.), *The Topographer and Genealogist*, 3 vols (London: John Bowyer Nichols & Sons, 1846-58), II: 409.

⁹ Francis Grose, *A Provincial Glossary* (London: S. Hooper, 1787), O3^r.

¹⁰ Plan of Grizedale Hall (1697), Lancashire Archives, DDX 398/122: Qtd. in Angus J. L. Winchester, *Lake District Field-Names* (Lancaster: Regional Heritage Centre), 18. “Mount Charron” refers to Carron Crag.

¹¹ Angus Winchester and Mary Wane, eds, *Thomas Denton: A Perambulation of Cumberland 1687-8* (Woodbridge: Surtees Society and Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarians and Archaeological Society, 2003), 138.

(1678).¹²

What is worth noting about these reprintings of the proverb, though, is that they attribute to it an additional moral significance. Both Fuller and Ray present the expression as a variation on the Horatian maxim “You, too, are in trouble when your neighbour’s wall is ablaze.”¹³ As they explain: Skiddaw and Criffel “are two neighbour hills, the one in this Country, the other in *Anandale in Scotland*.... It is spoken of such who must expect to sympathize with their sufferings by reason of the vicinity of their habitations.”¹⁴ The proverb, in other words, refers not just to the weather. Rather, it gestures to a sense of shared understanding and experience between people living on opposite sides of the border.

After 1707, this aspect of the expression became even more politicized than it had been in Drayton’s day. One outstanding example is a pamphlet commonly (but dubiously) attributed to Daniel Defoe, which dubs the expression “The Union Proverb,” explaining that the “main Stress and Purport” of the proverb

lyes higher yet, than either of the cloudy Mountains in Distress of Weather, or in Labour of Rain: For, in a political Sense, it contains the kindest Innuendo for the Welfare, and Happiness of both Kingdoms. It is an excellent Lecture of mutual Friendship on either Side of the TWEED.¹⁵

The proverb, then, as it passed through Drayton to Dorothy, had acquired a specific political resonance relating to the idea of English and Scottish unity. And the Wordsworths were not the only writers of their era who drew on the expression in this way. Sir Walter Scott slipped the “union proverb” into *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* (1818) to sum up the shared experiences of people living on the opposite sides of the Solway. He also alluded to it in his account of the view over the firth in the third volume of *Redgauntlet* (1824): “where ... distant Skiddaw raised his brow, as if in defiance of the clouded eminence of Criffel.”¹⁶ Admittedly, these words do not suggest ideas of unity so much as they call to mind the “threatning” glance that Drayton described. But that is not necessarily at variance with the unionist ethos of Scott’s novel. Recent criticism has tended to emphasize the more disruptive effects of Scott’s engagement

¹² Thomas Fuller, *History of the Worthies of England* (London: Thomas Williams, 1662), 217; John Ray, *A Collection of English Proverbs* (Cambridge: John Hayes, 1678), 303.

¹³ Horace, *Epistles* 1.18.84-85: “*tua res agitur, paries cum proximus ardet.*”

¹⁴ Fuller, *History*, 217; Ray, *Collection*, 303. Rising to the west of the Nith estuary, Criffel is in fact located in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright.

¹⁵ *The Union Proverb* (London: J. Morphew, c.1707), 3.

¹⁶ Walter Scott, *Redgauntlet: A Tale of the Eighteenth Century*, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co., 1824), vol. 3, 3-4.

with history, but David Daiches's well-known argument that *Redgauntlet* dramatizes old Anglo-Scottish enmities in order to dispel them remains credible.¹⁷

The passage from Dorothy's *Recollections* picks up on this tradition, but it does something more as well. In her account, the political implications of the view linking Skiddaw with Criffel give way to perspectives that are both much bigger and much smaller than national concerns. Dorothy had recorded how, when they looked back towards "the Cumberland mountains" from Ellisland, she and William had imagined Burns doing the same:

indulging ourselves in the fancy that we might have been personally known to each other, and he have looked upon those objects with more pleasure for our sakes (*Recollections*, 44).

In his preface to Dorothy's *Recollections* in 1874, John Campbell Shairp suggests that the Wordsworths were more disposed to feel kinship with their Scottish neighbours than many other English tourists. The Wordsworths, he wrote,

were north-country English..., and between these and Lowland Scots there was less difference of fibre and of feeling than there generally is between Cumbrians and Londoners.¹⁸

What is more, Shairp suggests, both Dorothy and William would have known the view over the firth from the English side; often during "their lives," he wrote, "they had been wont to gaze across the Solway on the dimly-outlined mountains of the Scottish Border," and this was partly what had "lured them northward" (*ibid.*). Once there, though, they found themselves looking back on their own mountains and fancying how Burns might have felt about that view, had he known them. This momentary indulgence suits the idiom of Dorothy's *Recollections*, which is quite literally a backwards-glancing work. But in this passage, as Shairp reads it, that backward glance is reciprocal, where she, her brother and Coleridge imagine how they might have shared sightlines with Burns: he gazing pleasantly on them, and they on him.

There is, however, a significant difference between Dorothy's record of the journey around the Solway and many other parts of her *Recollections*: the lack of maps. Portions of Dorothy's account of the later phases of the

¹⁷ David Daiches, "Scott's *Redgauntlet*," in D. D. Devlin, ed., *Walter Scott: Modern Judgements* (Nashville: Aurora, 1969), 148-61. On these opposing views, cf. Gerard Lee McKeever, *Dialectics of Improvement: Scottish Romanticism, 1786-1831* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 95-96.

¹⁸ J. C. Shairp, "Preface to First Edition," in Dorothy Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland, A.D. 1803*, ed. Shairp, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1874), xv-1 (xli).

tour are accompanied by sketch maps, and as Nigel Leask has recently averred, these maps “opened up the possibility of an imaginary itinerary.”¹⁹ They were examples of what Julia Carlson has called “cartospection”: visual aids which recycled images derived from other maps and guided the eye through the remembered topography of the tour.²⁰ Dorothy’s *Recollections* are just that, recollections; she composed her account after returning home. This helps to account for the sense of distance that at times characterizes Dorothy’s perspective in the book. But the fact that she did not choose to make a sketch map of the region around the Solway suggests that the inland reaches of the firth were too familiar for her to need a visual aid, let alone an *aide-mémoire*. Indeed, as she noted in June 1804, the Lowlands as a whole “differ” little from the landscapes they “had seen in England.”²¹

As Dorothy’s account implies, the journey through Dumfriesshire involved an act of home-going that was also a sort of homecoming. Seeing Cumberland from Ellisland affirmed the close connection she and her companions felt with their distant families, but it also strengthened their affection for Burns to the point of suggesting the possibility of friendship from beyond the grave. That possibility was merely a passing fancy, and one undercut by an abiding awareness of Burns’s death, but that does not make the feeling less sincere. What really matters here, though, is the way the fanciful “connexion” with Burns becomes a counterpart to the domestic affection Dorothy and her companions feel when they see the distant fells. In that instance, the landscape becomes a frame by which the three travellers attempt to reconcile their awareness of being in another country, and yet still in the neighbourhood of their home. The sightline linking Nithsdale with Keswick and Grasmere, like the one connecting Skiddaw and Criffel in Drayton’s poem, establishes a sense of common ground between people living on either side of the boundary of two kingdoms.

And what of that boundary: the Solway? The day before their visit to Ellisland, as they passed along the coast, Dorothy recorded that “there is a pleasant view from the churchyard over Solway Firth to the Cumberland mountains” (*Recollections*, 41).²² She went on to observe that “on our left

¹⁹ Nigel Leask, *Stepping Westward: Writing the Highland Tour c. 1720-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 200.

²⁰ Julia S. Carlson, *Romantic Marks and Measures: Wordsworth’s Poetry in Fields of Print* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 68, 78 and 142.

²¹ Qtd. in Leask, *Stepping Westward*, 199.

²² At this point, Dorothy comments only on the Cumberland mountains, not on the Scottish-English connection. As Fig. 1 makes clear, from the viewpoint of Gretna, equidistant from Skiddaw (931m) and Criffel (570m), the English and Scottish mountains would have been very unequal in height; only later, from the Scottish

as we travelled along appeared the Solway Firth and the mountains beyond, but the near country dreary” (*ibid.*). The churchyard here is the one at Gretna. It is the Solway that links her native mountains with the “near country.” And her comment that this locale is “dreary” is perhaps not quite so damning as it might appear in extract: in the previous paragraph, she used the same word to describe the Cumberland side of the firth. On both sides, the appearance of the houses—earth-built in Cumberland, and of stone in Scotland—seem to contain little comfort, and cattle feed on both sides, too. Between them lies a “dreary” and “treeless, ... peat-moss common ... cheered by the endless singing of larks” (*ibid.*). The firth, it seems, may mark a boundary line on official maps that, on the spot, is harder to distinguish. This is a recurrent revelation in accounts of the Solway, as the various contributions to this issue amply affirm. In the case of Dorothy’s *Recollections*, the sense of the boundary dissolves into a visual and auditory continuum, and in doing so, her account forges an affective link between Cumberland and Scotland, between adults and children, and between the generations of poets who write about these spatial and temporal connections.

When William Wordsworth added his recollections to Dorothy’s, he united the poetic tradition started by Drayton with the sense of communal spirit his sister had affirmed. In “At the Grave of Burns. 1803” (the poem mentioned earlier), he, too, paused to note how, in sharing the same region, Criffel and Skiddaw brought national geographies and literatures together:

Huge Criffel’s hoary top ascends
 By Skiddaw seen,—
 Neighbours we were, and loving friends
 We might have been;
 True friends though diversely inclined;
 But heart with heart and mind with mind,
 Where the main fibres are entwined,
 Through Nature’s skill,
 May even by contraries be joined
 More closely still.²³

“True friends though diversely inclined”: on the one hand, this is a new, post-Jacobean interpretation of Anglo-Scottish relations; but, on the other, these national political debates do not really matter: “Through Nature’s skill, / May even by contraries be joined / More closely still.” Here, Skiddaw and Criffel become evidence on a massive scale of the

side, looking south from near Ellisland, would the two appear equal, as in William’s poem.

²³ William Wordsworth, “At the Grave of Burns. 1803,” *Poems, Chiefly of Early and Late Years* (London: Edward Moxon, 1842), 53-54 (ll. 39-48).

fibres that entwine Cumberland with Scotland, and William Wordsworth with Burns.

Yet the mountains also reflect William's elegiac situation: Skiddaw looks to Criffel, but the gaze is unrequited. Criffel does not look back. Much like the two poets, they were "neighbours," and they remain so. But they were not mutually intimate enough to be "friends." Much as the passage from Dorothy's *Recollections*, then, William's poem presents the Solway not only as a boundary, but also as a common ground. The poets' hearts, minds and lines entwine here across a region defined more by affection for a shared landscape than by national boundaries. Still, the sense of regional connection and national division overlaps. The enjambment at "joined" bespeaks a division at the same time as it analogically enacts the crossing of the divide between England and Scotland—between Wordsworth and Burns—between Skiddaw and Criffel. That gap—a brief, shifting pause between the lines—might then recall the Solway Firth: the joining point between two entwined contraries.

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