

# From Superstition to Enlightenment: Wordsworth's Antiquarian and Virtuoso Selves in the *Ecclesiastical Sketches*

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## Introduction

Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (1822) consist of three series of linked sonnets that form a chronological narrative on the history of the Church of England. Wordsworth published the *Sketches* in the same year as another book of sonnets, *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent*, 1820.<sup>1</sup> However, most of the *Sketches* were composed after the tour, but before the tour poems.<sup>2</sup> The first part of the *Sketches* explores of the development of the modern church out of the piety of the ancient Britons; the second part considers Catholic England through the Middle Ages to the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the reign of Charles I; the third part omits the Civil Wars and covers the period from the Restoration (1660) 'to the present times' (Wordsworth, *SSIP* 187).

This paper will focus on Part I of the *Sketches*. It will give a detailed analysis of the opening poems of the series, in order to consider tensions in Wordsworth's representations of the religion of the ancient Britons and historical uncertainty regarding the arrival of Christianity in Britain. The poems in Part I reflect Wordsworth's reading of antiquarian research on the ancient Britons, including Sharon Turner's three-volume *History of the*

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- 1) See Wordsworth, *Sketches*; Wordsworth, *Memorials* 1820. 'The work was printed, along with *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent*, 1820, in the first two months of 1822; Wordsworth received proofs by February 22 and the two volumes... were being distributed a month later' (*SSIP* 131; Coburn 237).
  - 2) 'After his return to England, Wordsworth soon became involved in work on his *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, and a year passed before he began to commemorate the tour in a series of sonnets interspersed with other poems' (Wordsworth, *SSIP* 351).

*Anglo-Saxons* (1820) and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (SSIP 934; Turner). Poems throughout the *Sketches* draw on other antiquarian sources, such as Gilbert Burnet's *History of the Reformation* and *History of His Own Time* (Burnet, *Own Time*; Burnet, *Reformation*). The poems also reflect Wordsworth's observations of various church buildings and forms of worship in France, Belgium, Germany, and the Swiss cantons during his 1820 tour. Thus the *Sketches* demonstrate the work of an active early-nineteenth-century antiquarian mind: one not bound in a library, but making first-hand observations of the material fabric and ritual practices of churches in Britain and on the Continent.

Published in Wordsworth's middle age, when his lifelong struggle for poetic recognition in Britain was finally bearing fruit, the *Sketches* did not receive favourable reviews. The *Literary Gazette* (30 March 1820) judged that the poems alternated 'between poetry and doggrel [*sic*]... between the sweet and the ridiculous' (Jerdan 192).<sup>3</sup> The same publication's review of the *Memorials* was similarly scathing: 'there is hardly one... worth reading at all' (SSIP 131; De Selincourt and Hill i. 127 and n). Nevertheless, the sonnets demonstrated, as Wordsworth's 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface' of his *Poems* (1815) argued, that great poetry must create the taste by which it is read.<sup>4</sup> The *Sketches* helped to shape the tastes of Wordsworth's proto-Victorian readership. The poems' spiritual and political ideology, and their sense of British destiny, proved increasingly popular in the decades after their publication. Although the poems never debate specific Anglican doctrine, the spiritual dogmatism of the texts contrasts unfavourably with the searching subtlety of Wordsworth's philosophical blank-verse poetry

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3) The review concludes: 'we have to wade through too much of the tiresome for the value of the pleasing; the chaff is out of all proportions to the grains' (Jerdan 192; SSIP 131).

4) '... every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed: so has it been, so will it continue to be.... The predecessors of an original Genius of a high order will have smoothed the way for all that he has in common with them;—and much he will have in common; but, for what is peculiarly his own, he will be called upon to clear and often to shape his own road:—he will be in the condition of Hannibal among the Alps' (Wordsworth, "Essay 1815" Paragraph 31).

from 1793–1805. The *Sketches* have thus remained somewhat neglected by recent Wordsworth criticism.

This paper argues that reading the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* for tensions between two paths in intellectual history—scholastic antiquarianism and Enlightenment virtuosity—reveal the philosophical complexity of the texts, and some of their strongest aesthetic moments. This reading of the *Sketches* shows the text working productively against Wordsworth's stated plan to create a teleological history of the church in verse. Wordsworth's impulses towards philosophical illumination through mystery, obscurity, and superstition work against his aversion to idolatry on the one hand, and his Enlightenment scepticism towards revealed religion and teleological history on the other.<sup>5)</sup>

The paper hypothesises that (a) tensions between antiquarian and Enlightenment knowledge in the *Sketches* shape their representations of self and mind; and similarly, that (b) tensions between the texts' religious and intellectual convictions affect their representations of shifts between scholasticism and naturalism—antiquity and Enlightenment—through British history. The paper will focus on evidence in the first five poems of Part I to support this argument through close readings. At the same time, the paper will support the textual evidence with biographical evidence that divides the composition of the *Sketches* into two periods: one from before Wordsworth had access to a set of antiquarian books he had requested in early 1821, and one after.

### **Wordsworth and the Church of England**

The Christian beliefs expressed in *Ecclesiastical Sketches* do not represent an abrupt break with Wordsworth's younger self. As Stephen Gill writes:

[Wordsworth] detested religious cant, mistrusted sectarians who pursued ideological purity, and declined to satisfy those who wanted assurance that the religion of *The Excursion* was four-square with the

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5) For a detailed study of Wordsworth and ideas of Biblical idolatry, see Jarvis.

thirty-nine articles. But by 1822 he had become committed to the Church of England... the necessity of defending it as *the* safeguard against anarchy and social retrogression was a constant in all of his future thinking about politics and national culture. (Gill 344)

Although Wordsworth's loyalty to the established church developed gradually, many of the ideas expressed in the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* remain consistent with those of his earliest published work.

Wordsworth witnessed first-hand the effects of atheistic republicanism in France in 1792. His poems of that period demonstrate a love for natural piety, heartfelt tradition and ritual, and the material fabric of religion in churches and monasteries. In *Descriptive Sketches*, he laments the destruction of the Grand Chartreuse by partisans of the revolution:

Ev'n now I sigh at hoary Chartreuse' doom  
 Weeping beneath his chill of mountain gloom.  
 Where now is fled that Power whose frown severe  
 Tam'd 'sober Reason' till she crouch'd in fear?

...

The cloister startles at the gleam of arms,  
 And Blasphemy the shuddering fane alarms;

...

Vallombre, mid her falling fanes, deplores,  
 For ever broke, the Sabbath of her bow'rs.

(Wordsworth, *DS* ll.53–6, 60–1, 78–9)

Similarly, according to the *Prelude*, while Michel Beaupuy tutored him in the republican principles of the revolution during their walks around Blois in the spring of 1792, Wordsworth did not relinquish his love of tradition—specifically, chivalric literary tradition, and the religious architecture that blended France's natural and cultural landscapes. In language reminiscent of *Descriptive Sketches*, but written more than a decade later, Wordsworth writes in *1805 Prelude* Book 9:

And sometimes  
 When to a Convent in a meadow green  
 By a brook side we came, a roofless Pile  
 And not by reverential touch of Time  
 Dismantled, but by violence abrupt,  
 In spite of those heart-bracing colloquies,  
 In spite of real fervour, and of that  
 Less genuine and wrought up within myself  
 I could not but bewail a wrong so harsh,  
 And for the matin Bell, to sound no more,  
 Griev'd, and the evening Taper, and the Cross  
 High on the topmost Pinnacle, a sign  
 Admonitory, by the Traveller  
 First seen above the woods.      (Wordsworth, 1805 *Prel* ix. 468–81)<sup>6)</sup>

Wordsworth's interactions with both nature and society are often reverential, and occasionally penitential; as early as the stolen boat episode of *The Two-Part Prelude*, and the Blind Beggar of 1805 *Prelude* Book 7, his poetry represents experiences of being 'admonished from another world' (1805 *Prel* vii. 623). By 1807 when writing *The White Doe of Rylstone*, and in 1814 in *The Excursion*, Wordsworth's natural piety had begun to associate itself poetically with the forms and traditions of the Church of England. He saw this church as negotiating between extremes of Dissenting enthusiasm and proleptic authoritarianism: 'With the Methodists on one side, and the Catholics on the other, what is to become of the poor Church and people of England, to both of which I am most tenderly attached' (De Selincourt and Moorman i. 313). We must therefore read the pieties of the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* not as a fundamental philosophical shift in Wordsworth's poetry, but the development of another layer of formal argument on an existing framework of philosophical belief and poetic language.

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6) The phrase 'reverential touch of Time' in this passage marks an allusion to Wordsworth's own juvenilia, and a similar phrase reappears in *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, in 'Mutability': 'the unimaginable touch of time' (*SSIP* 197).

### *Ecclesiastical Sketches* as Stanzaic Narrative

The *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, like the *River Duddon* that preceded it, is a narrative in sonnet sequence. While the *Duddon* sonnets follow the topographical structure of Wordsworth's walk along the river, the *Sketches* follow a chronological structure.<sup>7)</sup> According to Mary Wordsworth, Wordsworth conceived of the *Duddon* sonnets as a single poem.<sup>8)</sup> Yet unlike the *Duddon*, *Ecclesiastical Sketches* is more than a sonnet sequence; it is a stanzaic narrative poem. The stanzaic unit is the sonnet rather than the Spenserian stanza that Wordsworth employed effectively to communicate the gothic mood and romance elements of the *Salisbury Plain* poems.<sup>9)</sup>

If the *Sketches* are a stanzaic narrative, not intended to be read as individual sonnets, why did Wordsworth not write it in Spenserians? There are two answers to this question, apart from the general point that the sonnet form dominates his poetry after 1819 (*The River Duddon*; *Ecclesiastical Sketches*; *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent, 1820*; *Yarrow Revisited*). Firstly, Wordsworth's experiment with Spenserians in 1793 taught him a lingering

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- 7) Part 1 describes the history of Christianity 'From the Introduction of Christianity into Britain, to the Consummation of the Papal Dominion' when Pope Innocent III excommunicated King John. Part 2 narrates from the founding of the Cistercian monasteries 'To the Close of the Troubles in the Reign of Charles I'. Finally, Part 3 recounts church history from the reign of Charles II and 'the Restoration, to the Present Times'.
- 8) 'W. is...sitting with his feet on the Fender, and his verses in his hand—nay now they have dropped upon his knee and he is asleep from sheer exhaustion—he has worked so long. He has written 21 sonnets (including [o]ld ones) on the river duddon—they all [to]gether comprise one poem' (Burton 41). Jackson cites Burton for this quotation but the transcriptions differ, especially in Jackson's reading of the digit '2' before the words 'old ones' and Jackson's 'compose' for Burton's 'comprise' (*SSIP* 49).
- 9) On the gothic and romance genres in the *Salisbury Plain* poems, see Tom Duggett, 'Celtic Night and Gothic Grandeur: Politics and Antiquarianism in Wordsworth's *Salisbury Plain*', in *Gothic Romanticism: Architecture, Politics, and Literary Form*, 67–95; Kurt Fosso, 'Genre, Politics, and Community in the *Salisbury Plain* Poems', *Buried Communities: Wordsworth and the Bonds of Mourning*, 67–96; Richard Grivil, *Wordsworth's Bardic Vocation*; Karen Swann, 'Public Transport: Adventuring on Wordsworth's *Salisbury Plain*', *ELH* 55.4 (1988), 811–34.

dislike of the form for narrative. As he explained in 1829, the Spenserian stanza was ‘almost insurmountably difficult’ and ‘unfit for narrative’ (*LY* 2: 58–9).

Secondly, as Anne Rylestone argues, Wordsworth’s unfinished epic *The Recluse* is ‘ultimately manifested in an exquisite wholeness by the cumulative impress of Wordsworth’s major works—particularly the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*’ (Rylestone). In other words, Wordsworth had, by the 1820s, found a way to keep writing prolifically, and pursue his lifelong obsession for poetic and philosophical unity, by deploying a form at which he was supremely skilled. Working in sonnet form removed the psychological impediment of sitting down to work on a long poem—the mental and cultural pressures of terms like ‘epic’ and ‘philosophical poem’. Although Wordsworth could just as easily hurt himself with a sonnet, as Mary wrote from the continent in 1820, he could diffuse the physical and mental distress inflicted on him by the process of composition through the compartmentalised form of the sonnet sequence.<sup>10)</sup>

Thus, as *The River Duddon*, *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, and continental tour sequences demonstrate, the sonnet in Wordsworth’s middle age becomes a cornucopia from which each single subject overflows. Because the fixed form limits the development of the subject, a single sonnet seems too limiting for one idea, spurring a number of sonnets titled ‘Continued’. With each sonnet he writes, Wordsworth finds himself with more to say, and without the lines to say it. He could thus feel confident in his creative stamina; or, to use the architectural metaphor of church building from the ‘Prospectus’—a metaphor that recurs throughout the *Sketches*—he could build his poetic cathedral one stone at a time.<sup>11)</sup>

Finally, motifs and symbol systems develop over the course of the *Sketches*. Some of these motifs, such as images of the mutability of human life, recur throughout Wordsworth’s poetry. But others—such as the repeated image of a supernatural Christian echo resounding through nature—are more

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10) See Mary Wordsworth’s journal of the 1820 continental tour, 14 June 1820.

11) On the historical context of the Church Building Act of 1818 in the *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, see Hewitt 33; Tomko 17.

specific to the *Sketches*. This latter group of motifs and symbols, along with Wordsworth's concentrated composition of the sonnets (November 1820 to November 1821), suggest that he thought of the volume as a narrative whole.

### Theoretical Contexts

The theoretical framework for this paper draws on a number of sources in historicist, structuralist, and poststructuralist criticism. Michael Tomko has pointed out, using Hayden White's terms, the need for awareness of the 'deep structure' or 'emplotment' in the *Sketches* when reading them as an example of nineteenth-century historiography:

The sonnets are not just snapshots of particular historical events but rather embody the advance of Britain's spiritual history, a cultural logic...<sup>12)</sup>

Hobsbawm and Ranger makes similar arguments regarding the construction of nineteenth-century British traditions, customs, and ceremonies (Hobsbawm and Ranger).

From this perspective, the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* makes a substantial contribution to proto-Victorian conservative and religious identity. The ideology of the *Sketches* reacts to a number of social and political realities, primarily, debate on the 'Catholic question'—the possibility of Catholic emancipation in Britain, which Wordsworth fervently opposed (*SSIP* 137, 131, 235n). Other historical context not specifically referred to by the *Sketches* include the perceived upheavals in, and breakdown of, British civil society, typified by such incidents as the Peterloo Massacre, the challenging of Lord Lonsdale's seat in the 1818 Westmorland election, and the 'nadir' of the monarchy in 1821 (after the bulk of the sonnets were written, but before publication), when George IV's 'extravagance and womanizing' turned his marriage to Queen Caroline into 'both public politics and public scandal' (Cannadine 109). Wordsworth's still somewhat liminal social and financial

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12) Tomko 16. See White 1–10.

position in 1820 may have strengthened these feelings, along with his 1820 tour of the continent. As David Cannadine writes of British culture around this time, a

lack of concern about successful foreign rivalry in trivial matters was the obverse side of supreme confidence in international competition in important affairs. The defeat of Napoleon left Britain without a rival in continental Europe.... The certainty of power and the assured confidence of success meant that there was no need to show off.  
(Cannadine 112)

A dearth of national religiosity and ritual may have satisfied Britain's pre-Victorian capitalists, but it made Wordsworth increasingly concerned.

A second theoretical framework through which I read the *Sketches* relates to the psychology of literature and religion, and in particular Roland Barthes' idea of the difference between 'readerly' (*lisible*) and 'writerly' (*scriptable*) texts (Culler 21–2). On one level this paper makes a structuralist reading that points to a clear dialectic in the text, between overt simplicity (teleology) in matters of public history on the one hand, and covert complexity or ambiguity (even obfuscation) in matters of private history (or repressed history—the 'absent cause' of Fredric Jameson's historical Real), on the other (Jameson 19–20, 33, 39–40; Roberts 40, 50–1). This reading springs from the premise—obvious even to some of Wordsworth's reviewers, and Victorian critics—that the text of the *Sketches* frequently undermines its own arguments.

The text makes no doctrinal argument specific to the Church of England. Its interpretation of British Christianity draws on British myth and folklore (suggesting 'real' or fanciful connections between the British Druids and ancient Christians); emphasises hermetic and intellectual Christianity rather than proselytising and doctrine; and laments, in Elizabethan and Jacobean tones, the loss to British art and thought caused by the dissolution of the monasteries. These sometimes conflicting interests expressed by the texts—British antiquity, spiritual-historical continuity, religious ritual, and religious themes in art in the narrative—unsettle both the book's narrative of

teleological public history, and its narrative of private allegory and spiritual conviction. Tomko represents sympathies to Catholicism in the text as what John Davis calls ‘Catholic envy’ in the context of American architectural history. Despite Wordsworth’s seeming endorsement of the principles of David Hume’s 1741 essay ‘On Superstition and Enthusiasm’, his poems on the Dissolution express ‘guilty fascination with a Catholic Other’s mysterious, embodied, communal aesthetic’ (Tomko 16).<sup>13</sup> This reading anticipates Wordsworth’s post-1833 relationship with the Oxford Movement and post-1845 commitment to Anglican doctrine.

Thus, Wordsworth writes a ‘readerly’ or straightforward text for his readers, with strong ‘denotation’ of evidence and logic, i.e. ‘this is how and why the Church of England became the true and proper faith’. But to the modern reader versed in the manuscript and publishing history of Wordsworth’s works, the *Sketches* become a ‘writerly’ text, in which their ‘connotations’ with Wordsworth’s earlier work subvert both the narrative flow and the overt teleological argument of the poem. Wordsworth’s *Sketches* appear—like the historical writings of Michelet to Barthes—as both nationalistic and unselfconscious (Culler 32). Yet if we read the sonnets as ‘manifestations of consciousness’—that is, a portrait of Wordsworth’s creative and intellectual processes, the historical narrative reveals frequent returns to the narrative of self, and continuing preoccupations with the definition of creative identity, and the role knowledge plays in creativity. David Riede provides a good account of the tension in this dialectic:

Wordsworth seeks to anchor the imagination in actualities outside the self—in nature and in human society—but ultimately he wants the imagination to transcend both nature and society, though he must struggle with the fear that the unanchored imagination may be akin to madness. (Riede 96)

The *Sketches* build an artistic and intellectual fabric as an idealised

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13) See Davis. See also Mee 214–56.

representation of the spiritual and material fabric of the church; yet simultaneously, they resist the 'bondage of definite form' against devotion to (or idolatry of) the church's material objects, and its dogma (Owen and Smyser iii. 34).

The usefulness of such a dialectical reading is not to point out evidence for the egotistical sublime, but to suggest the value of the *Sketches* as a deeply personal work with continuities with his greatest poetry (Jones). The *Sketches* offer continuing evidence, even in problematic shape, of Wordsworth continuing to privilege the visionary over the visible (Galperin). In the context of intellectual history, this means that the *Sketches* offer a narrative of a process of theological-intellectual Enlightenment, while at the same time resisting this Enlightenment with a commitment to the intangible and invisible worlds of Christian scholasticism.

Yet this dialectic of superstition and enthusiasm on the one hand, and Enlightenment intellectual self-discipline or regulation on the other, does not address the conflict between some of the text's Catholic sympathies, and the book's public purpose of opposing the Catholic Emancipation bills.<sup>14</sup> The 'catholic' and non-doctrinal content of the *Sketches* does not lurk in their depths, but appears clearly on the surface. Therefore, I prefer to read these instabilities between the stated purpose of the text in the 'Advertisement', and the poetry itself, not simply as Wordsworth's acknowledged affinities for Catholicism and a papering over of the historical and artistic trauma of the break with Rome, but as manifestations of, as Žižek writes, 'the way spectrality operates in ideology' (Žižek 57). Throughout the *Sketches*, overt historical crimes (the destruction of the library at Bangor, the Dissolution of the monasteries, the execution of Catholic martyrs, etc.) stand as violent gestures implicit in the founding of Wordsworth's ideal religion. Paralleling Freud's interpretation of Moses in the founding of Judaism, the trauma of the British church's

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14) Hewitt lists Wordsworth's main declarations of opposition to Catholic Emancipation in the letters: *MY* 2: 540–1; *MY* 2: 541–3; *LY* 1: 309–15; *LY* 1: 358–65; *LY* 1: 678–9; *LY* 2: 36–46. See Hewitt 45 n2.

break with the pagan pre-monotheistic cosmo-religion of One Nature... is not simply the monotheistic repression of pagan enjoyment (sacred orgies, images...), but the excessively violent nature of the very gesture of repressing the pagan [and in the *Sketches*, Catholic] universe and imposing the universal rule of the One of Law. (Žižek 57)

Žižek draws on analysis by Eric Santner to warn that

one should distinguish between *symbolic history* (the set of explicit mythical narratives and ideologico-ethical prescriptions that constitute the tradition of a community—what Hegel would have called its ‘ethical substance’) and its obscene Other, the unacknowledgeable ‘*spectral*’, *fantasmatic history* that effectively sustains the explicit symbolic tradition, but has to remain foreclosed if it is to be operative.... Santner uses a very precise formulation which immediately recalls Lacan’s definition of the Real as Impossible... the spectral fantasmatic history tells the story of a traumatic event that ‘continues not to take place’, that cannot be inscribed into the very symbolic space it brought about by its intervention.... (Žižek 58)<sup>15)</sup>

The repercussions of this notion of fantasmatic history for Wordsworth, as a highly private poet writing a public history of a church he saw as a benevolent and necessary institution (but an institution with which his own philosophical and spiritual principles did not always align) are that, in this interpretation,

One becomes a full member of a community not simply by identifying with its explicit symbolic tradition, but when one also assumes the spectral dimension that sustains this tradition: the

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15) See Santner; Freud.

undead ghosts that haunt the living, the secret history of traumatic fantasies transmitted 'between the lines' through its lacks and distortions. (Žižek 58)

But as Žižek goes on to argue, the explicit historical crimes of the founding myth or culture are not the 'real' trauma; they are fantasies in the narrative sense themselves (despite their historical authenticity), which function 'as a protective shield *against* the Real'—that is, they conceal the real trauma, which may be more benign, more suffocating (Žižek 63–74).

### **Close Readings: Wordsworth's Antiquary and Virtuoso Selves**

We can use the first five sonnets of Part I of *Ecclesiastical Sketches* to test the question of how much Wordsworth depended on his antiquarian sources to shape the historical narrative, and how much he deployed or resisted the knowledge from these sources after he had read them. This examination begins by accepting the order of composition suggested in the Cornell edition of the poems, and looks for discrepancies based on allusions to a number of antiquarian writers.

Along with the first poem, 'Introduction', the other poems among the first eighteen that were supposedly composed before Wordsworth received his copies of antiquarian books including Turner and Bede include 'II. Conjectures', 'IV. Druidical Excommunication', 'V. Uncertainty', 'VI. Persecution', 'VII. Recovery', and 'XVI. Persuasion'. Those supposedly composed with knowledge drawn from antiquarian sources include 'III. Trepidation of the Druids', 'VIII. Temptations from Roman Refinements', 'IX. Dissensions', 'X. Struggle of the Britons Against the Barbarians', 'XI. Saxon Conquest', 'XII. Monastery of Old Bangor', 'XIII. Casual Incitement', 'XIV. Glad Tidings'; two of the three 'trilogy' sonnets about Edwin of Northumbria: 'XV. Paulinus' and 'XVII. Conversion'; and 'XVIII. Apology'.

### **Analysis: 'I. Introduction'**

The opening poem of the *Sketches*, 'Introduction', expresses the confidence of their narrator in bardic terms, with Miltonic phrases such as 'smote the

plausive string' and 'Immortal amaranth' (ll.6, 14). Jackson notes the emphasis on Latinate language and Greco-Roman imagery in words like 'cerulean', 'pastoral', 'laurels', 'amaranth', and 'palms' (*SSIP* 236). The sonnet neatly encapsulates both classical antiquity and virtuoso culture; the narrator represents himself in the octet as a bard, and in the sestet as an explorer or discoverer beyond northern Europe, in search of 'amaranth and palms' (l.14). The shift from the literal topography of the Duddon to the metaphorical topography of the 'heights of Time' bears an inverse relation to the narrator's roles: in the literal landscape, he 'descended' from the source of the Duddon as a bard; now in the metaphorical landscape of history, he seeks 'the source | Of a holy River' as an explorer (ll.9–10). The balanced structure of the sonnet, its stately tempo following the 'strictly-measured pace' of the sonnet as a stanzaic unit, and the mirroring transition between two kinds of landscape and intellectual authority (bardic and scholastic) declare the narrator's confidence in the sequence.

Yet in the narrative context of the first few sonnets, the opening poem establishes tensions that will grow as the sequence progresses. The Latinate language noted by Jackson will, by sonnet VII, class with the 'insidious arts' of 'deadliest servitude', as the language of the Britons' conquerors. The Anglo-Saxon 'smote' stands out: both in its defused poetical (rather than bellicose) application of smiting the 'plausive string' and its foreshadowing of the violence of conquest and religious war to follow.<sup>16)</sup>

Similarly, while the explorer-narrator promises to climb the 'heights of Time' to seek the source of Britain's 'holy River' of Christian faith, he will in practice descend almost immediately into the mire of 'Conjectures', 'Trepidation...', and 'Uncertainty' (titles of three of the first five sonnets)—a proleptic heart of historico-theological darkness, rather than an elevated, panoramic perspective. For all Wordsworth's fell-walking and mountaineering, the *Sketches* continue to do what his has done so well since his ascent of Snowdon in 1793–4; the texts focus on particularities rather than generalities,

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16) The *OED* cites Chaucer's *House of Fame* as the first use of the musical sense of 'smite' in English: 'Eke whan men harpe strynges smyte' (II, 777).

both of landscape and history, despite the entangling consequences.

As a motif representing this descent into uncertainty, the water imagery of the opening poem will persist. Yet although the 'cloud-fed spring' and 'holy River' lead to the 'sacred Well' and 'nascent Stream' of the second poem, the third, 'Conjectures', fragments flowing, sweet-voiced water into strident-voiced water-birds: the screaming seamew and the 'heavy', ill-omened cormorant ('Trepidation of the Druids'). By the end of the fifth poem, the narrator will admit that he is 'lost' in the darkness of 'Brigantian coves' and 'eyes that sought the fountain-head, | In vain' (*SSIP* 140, ll.3, 8; V, ll.2, 13–14). In the space of five poems, the narrator is deep in the Druidical landscape.

Finally, the opening sonnet stresses tensions between scholastic knowledge and classification on the one hand, and virtuoso culture on the other, through its insertion of poetical botany into the historical landscape. The bard of the octet becomes the explorer of the sestet, but the plants he discovers on the banks of the 'holy River' of Christian history are an unstable mix: the 'laurels' are not poetic laurels, but the laurels of 'lawless force' on the brows of Roman conquerors. Conversely, 'Immortal amaranth and palms' are common symbols of poetic immortality.<sup>17</sup> But in the context of the narrator as a discoverer in a new landscape, they take on a more fanciful botanical symbolism, as rare plants that might be sampled for a garden or cabinet like John Tradescant's (Tradescant; Allan). In the extended metaphor, they take on a sense of questionable physical reality, like the magical and mundane plants in Thomas Browne (*Browne, Pseudodoxia Epidemica* Book II, Ch. 6–7; *Browne, Nature's Cabinet* 70–124).

The text's possible allusion to Charlotte Smith here may be more interesting than the Miltonic allusion, because it resonates strongly with the tensions between legend and historical fact in the early poems of the *Sketches*, as well as conflicting representations of scholasticism and naturalism in virtuoso culture in *Prelude* Book 5. Smith's sonnet recalls how 'enchancing Fiction' once had the power to comfort 'sad reality'. It laments:

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17) Wordsworth quotes from *Paradise Lost*, III, ll.353–9 (*SSIP* 236).

Imagination now has lost her powers,  
 Nor will her fairy loom again essay  
 To dress Affliction in a robe of flowers. (Smith i. 48, ll.6–8)

But, the sonnet concludes, ‘if no more the bowers of Fancy bloom’, then ‘palm and amaranth’ can decorate fancy’s ‘tomb’. The plants here are symbols for poetic immortality, as they are in Milton, but the poem’s argument addresses the increasingly impermeable border between the real world of ‘Affliction’ and its gauzy curtain of folklore and fancy. This gesture resembles a neoclassical version of the wistfulness in the opening of Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* (Chaucer). In classical verse, imaginative power measured itself against its ability to represent the realm of gods and fairies; Smith’s poem contemplates the power of the imagination to shape ‘sad reality’.<sup>18)</sup> Wordsworth’s flora are similarly unstable; the ‘Immortal amaranth and palms’ are not ‘real’ like the ‘Sweet pastoral flowers, and laurels’ that crowned the brows of bloody conquerors, yet nor are they abstract symbols of poetic immortality. They are somewhere in between.

### **Analysis: ‘II. Conjectures’**

The second sonnet, ‘Conjectures’ demonstrates the tensions in the *Sketches* between the scholastic tradition of *geste*—knowledge and lore inherited from classical and medieval authorities—and Enlightenment scepticism. The sonnet assumes the rather safe structure of asking questions without demanding answers. The octet begins with a hypothesis of faith in what should be the realm of the Enlightenment philosopher (the ‘historian’ rather than the antiquarian):

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18) An earlier sonnet in Smith’s collection similarly uses flower imagery to consider how poetry affects the real; poets have used real and fanciful flowers like amaranth to ‘dress fictitious powers’, but the poem questions what flower serves as ‘a just emblem of the lovely mind’ (Smith sonnet XXXVII, i. 37). While the text still searches for a symbol or emblem, rather than a real botanical wonder, its overall argument turns on the relationship between fancy, emblem, and the living mind.

If there be Prophets on whose spirits rest  
 Past things, revealed like future, *they* can tell  
 What Powers, presiding o'er the sacred Well  
 Of Christian Faith, this savage Island bless'd  
 With its first bounty. (SSIP 139, ll.1–5) (my emphasis)

The text—in the mood of a religious narrative—perhaps appropriately begins with a supposition of a kind of prophecy. But for a historical narrative on the origins of the British church, written in the third decade of the nineteenth century, this is a mystifying start. The hierophants named as ‘Prophets’ are not prophets at all; the text inverts the definition of the word, conjecturing ‘Prophets on whose spirits rest | Past things, revealed like future’. The text substitutes this phrase for the plain word, ‘antiquary’ or ‘historian’—the former scorned as unphilosophical in the early nineteenth century, the latter not quite common. Superstition obfuscates history.

Similarly, the ‘sacred Well | Of Christian faith’ in a ‘savage Island’ does not evoke Wordsworth’s idea of enlightened Christianity inherited from a Unitarian tradition of Priestley and Coleridge, but the conflation of Pagan and Christian ceremony typical of early Catholic missionaries. The line alludes to Milton’s Pagan invocation in ‘Lycidas’: ‘Begin, then, Sisters of the sacred well | That from beneath the seat of Jove doth spring’. The end of the octet attempts to obscure this history by postulating a pure ‘Fountain’ or ‘nascent Stream’ of Christianity begun by the hand of Paul himself:

Wandering through the West,  
 Did holy Paul a while in Britain dwell,  
 And call the Fountain forth by miracle,  
 And with dread signs the nascent Stream invest? (SSIP 139, ll.5–8)

The sestet makes a no more plausible conjecture by alluding to Joseph of Arimathea in England:

Or He, whose bonds dropp'd off, whose prison doors

Flew open, by an Angel's voice unbarred?  
 Or some, of humbler name, to these wild shores  
 Storm-driven, who having seen the cup of woe  
 Pass from their Master, sojourned here to guard  
 The precious current they had taught to flow? (ll.9–14)

The final question of the last four lines, however, makes a gesture towards historicity, by imagining an unnamed, 'humbler' Christian refugee bringing their faith to England. Between the superstitious antiquarianism of the late eighteenth century and Carlyle's 'great man' theory of history, 'Conjectures' briefly throws up a modern sense of coincidental, social history—the flotsam and jetsam Foucault terms 'genealogy' (Foucault).

The relationship between the sonnet and its published note further complicates the tensions between scholasticism and history in the text. The note states:

Stillingfleet adduces many arguments in support of this opinion, but they are unconvincing. The latter part of this Sonnet alludes to a favourite notion of Catholic Writers, that Joseph of Arimathea and his Companions brought Christianity into Britain, and built a rude Church at Glastonbury alluded to hereafter in the passage upon the dissolution of Monasteries. (SSIP 227)

The note radically changes the reading of the poem by illuminating *geste* and superstition with Enlightenment scepticism. What idea, we might ask, has authored the text? What is it playing at? Not irony—the voice in the poem is sincere. The text creates a mood of religious mystery and superstition; the note dispels it. The aesthetic and epistemological effects of the poem (what mood it conveys, and how seriously the reader takes its legendary and antiquarian knowledge) depend on the point at which the reader reads the notes: after each sonnet; after the whole narrative; not at all, etc.

Although Wordsworth supposedly composed 'Conjectures' before receiving his parcel of antiquarian books from London, Jackson notes a

verbal echo from Thomas Fuller's *Church-History of Britain* (1655), which uses the word 'Conjectures' to describe the Bards of the ancient Britons as backward-looking ('Relations') and forward-looking ('Predictions') in their poetic composition:

to preserve their Ancestours from Corruption, [the Bards] embalmed their Memories in *Rhiming Verses*, which looked both backward, in their *Relations*, and forward, in their *Predictions*: so that their Confidence meeting with the Credulity of others, advanced their wild Conjectures to the Reputation of *Prophesies*.

(Fuller, *Church-History* Book I, Century i, Paragraph 4, p.2)<sup>19)</sup>

With appropriate caution, Jackson does not find this sufficient evidence that Wordsworth is reading Fuller between 17 January and 12 March 1821, the period of probable composition for the 'pre-Turner' sonnets.<sup>20)</sup>

The sceptical tone of Wordsworth's note, in contrast to the tone of the sonnet, presents an ironic parallel that would not have been lost on Wordsworth had he read Fuller; the purpose of the *Sketches* as a whole, like the poetry of the British Bards, is to 'preserve [Wordsworth's] spiritual Ancestours from Corruption' through the composition of '*Rhiming Verses*'; yet to effect this outcome, the sonnet 'Conjectures' relies on a drama of superstition, attempting to convert its own 'wild Conjectures' into 'the Reputation of [poetic and historical] *Prophesies*'. Wordsworth thus takes the role of mountebank or street-antiquary, flouting his curiosities while candidly admitting, in the small print, that they are fabrications.

I suggest that we should entertain the possibility that Wordsworth was using copies of Fuller and Stillingfleet from mid-January to mid-March 1821, based on other verbal echoes and plays of meaning in the text. The examples

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19) Subsequent citations from Fuller follow this format: book, century, paragraph, and page number.

20) 'There is a verbal resemblance here, although the context is quite different' (*SSIP* 236).

from Fuller presented below do not prove conclusively that Wordsworth used him before 12 March; nevertheless, they suggest additional potential evidence. Even if Wordsworth only used Fuller after 12 March, these examples present new observations about the antiquarian context in which the ancient Briton sonnets were written. If the sum of examples suggests Wordsworth writing this sequence with (and against) Fuller, then perhaps Fuller's *Church-History* was not among the package of books (including Turner's *History of the Anglo-Saxons* and Burnet's *History of his Own Time*) so urgently enquired after by Wordsworth and Dorothy from 23 January 1821 (De Selincourt and Moorman ii. 644, n2; De Selincourt and Hill i. 22, 37, 43). This would mean that Fuller, so praised in the note to 'XI. Saxon Conquest', served as the poet's main antiquarian source in the early composition of the *Sketches*, when letters suggest the poet's strong motivation was frustrated by a lack of historical background (*SSIP* 129–30).<sup>21)</sup>

The first two sonnets in the *Sketches* that mention the British Druids ('III. Trepidation of the Druids' and 'IV. Druidical Excommunications') do not use the trope of Druid pacifism and nature worship as evidence of a tradition of Celtic Christianity in pre-Roman Britain; the former was probably written after the arrival of Turner on 12 March, the latter before (*SSIP* 134–5). In contrast, 'X. Struggle of the Britons Against the Barbarians'—probably written with Turner available as a source—depicts Christian Britons, including Druids and Bards, resisting Saxon invasion. The earlier two sonnets convey Fuller's mix of disdain for British Paganism, and sympathy for the *geste* tradition of a retroactive Christianity. On the one hand:

... let us recount the sad Condition of the *Britans* our Predecessours,  
before the *Christian Faith* was preached unto them. *At that time they*

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21) The note states that Wordsworth's 'obligations to other Prose Writers are frequent,—obligations, which even if I had not a pleasure in courting, it would have been presumptuous to shun, in treating an historical subject. I must, however, particularize Fuller, to whom I am indebted in the Sonnet upon Wicliffe and in other instances' (Wordsworth, *SSIP* 227). Poems throughout the series allude to, and paraphrase, both Fuller's *Church-History* and his *Historie of the Holy Warre* (Fuller, *Holy War*).

*were without Christ, being Aliens from the Common-Wealth of Israel, and strangers from the Covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the World. They were foul Idolaters, who, from misapplying that undeniable Truth of Gods being in every thing, made every thing to be their God, Trees, Rivers, Hills, and Mountains.*

(Fuller, *Church-History* I.i.1, p.1)

On the other:

As for those learned Pens [Camden and Bishop Goodwin], which report that the *Druides* did instruct the Ancient *Britans* in the Knowledge and Worship of onely one God, may their Mistake herein be as freely forgiven them, as I hope and desire that the Charitable *Reader* will with his Pardon meet those unvoluntary Errours, which in this Work by me shall be committed.

(Fuller, *Church-History* I.i.2, p.2)

'Trepidation of the Druids' negates the implications of 'Conjectures', and follows Fuller in clearly stating that Christianity arrives in Britain following the Julian and Claudian conquests:

... all shall be fulfilled;—the Julian spear  
 A way first open'd; and, with Roman chains,  
 The tidings come of Jesus crucified;  
 They come—they spread—the weak, the suffering, hear;  
 Receive the faith, and in the hope abide.<sup>22)</sup>

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22) Fuller writes: 'it pleased God *with a strong hand, and stretched-out Arme*, to reach the *Gospel* unto them [the *Heathen Britans*'], *who were afarre off*, both in *locall* and *theological* Distance. This was performed in the later end of the Reigne of *Tiberius*, some thirty seven years after *Christ's Birth*; as *Polydor Virgil* collecteth out of the *testimony* of *Gildas*' (Fuller, *Church-History* Book I, Century i, Paragraph 5, p.2).

Analysis of these two Druid sonnets below demonstrates (a) other possible candidates for authors included in the package of antiquarian books; and (b) Wordsworth's retention of knowledge from sources read as early as 1793.

As further context for 'Conjectures', Fuller carefully considers arguments provided by earlier scholastic sources that the Apostles Peter or Paul visited Britain ('Did holy Paul a while in Britain dwell').<sup>23</sup> Similarly, he considers the case for Joseph of Arimathea. Fuller rejects accounts of both men in Britain as apocryphal. He writes of Paul:

Passing by *Peter*, proceed we to the rest of the *Apostles*, whom severall Authours alledge the first Planters of Religion in this Island... *St. Paul* by others shipt over into our *Island*; amongst who, thus sings *Venatius Fortunatus: Transit & Oceanum, vel qua facit Insula Portum: | Quasque Britannus habet terras, quasque ultima Thule*. But lesse credit is to be given to *Britannus*, because it goeth in companie with *ultima Thule*: Which being the noted expression of *Poets*, for the utmost bound of the then-known-world, seems to favour more of Poeticall *Hyperbole*, than Historicall Truth, as a Phrase at *Randome*, only to expresse farre forreign Countries. (Fuller, *Church-History* I.i.8, p.4)

Fuller gives a more detailed examination of the legend of Joseph of Arimathea. With an echo of the sonnet's lines 'to these wild shores | Storm-driven', Fuller describes the widely repeated story of how Joseph of Arimathea, Lazarus, Mary Magdalene and her sister Martha, and many others were banished from Judea 'and put... into a Vessell without Sailes and Oares, with intent to drown them. Yet they, being tossed with tempests on the *Mid-land Sea*, at

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23) 'But now, who it was that first brought over the *Gospell* into *Britain*, is very uncertain. The *Conversioner* (understand *Parsons* the *Iesuite*) mainly stickleth for the Apostle *Peter* to have first *preached* the *Gospel* here. Yea, when *Protestants* object against *St Peter's* being at *Rome*, because *St. Paul*, in his *Epistle* to the *Romans*, omitteth to *name* or *salute* him; The *Iesuite* handsomely answers, That *Peter* was then probably from home, employed in *Preaching* in *Britain*, and in other places. His Arguments to prove it are not so strong...' (Fuller, *Church-History* I.i.7, p.3).

last landed at *Marseilles* in France' (Fuller, *Church-History* I.i.11, p.6).

Fuller goes on to describe the legend of Joseph's welcome by the British King Arviragus, who 'though he would not be dissuaded from his Idolatry', bestowed land on Joseph and his 11 companions, 'in a desolate Island, full of Fenns and Brambles, called the *Ynis-Wittrin*, since by translation, *Glassenbury*' (Fuller, *Church-History* I.i.11, p.6). Fuller's analysis of the scant evidence demonstrates a combination of his keen historical mind (shades of Enlightenment scepticism in a Cavalier, writing a generation before Locke and Newton's works), and the scholastic impulse of a seventeenth-century antiquarian towards credulity, or the hope for revelation. Fuller hedges:

... we shall find... that no Writer of credit can be produced, before the Conquest, who mentioneth *Ioseph's* coming hither; but since that time (to make recompence for former silence) it is resounded from every side.... Yet, because the *Norman* Charters of *Glassenbury* refer to a succession of many ancient Charters, bestowed on that Church by many *Saxon* Kings, as the *Saxon* Charters relate to *British* Grants in intuition to *Ioseph's* being there: We dare not wholly deny the substance of the Story, though the leaven of Monkery hath much swoln, and puff'd up the Circumstance thereof.

(Fuller, *Church-History* I.i.12, pp.6-7) (my emphasis)<sup>24</sup>

These are the same tensions, I argue, at work throughout the *Sketches*.

'Conjectures' thus simultaneously resists, and falls prey to, the national pride that Fuller describes as the cause of illustrious founding myths for religions:

*Churches* are generally ambitious to entitle themselves to *Apostles*, for their Founders.... Wherefore as the *Heathen*, in fetching after the

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24) With his typical wit, Fuller describes the use of antiquarianism to perpetuate superstition as 'a young mans Brow, with an old mans Beard; I mean, novel Superstitions, disguised with pretended Antiquity'.

original of their Nations, never leave *Soaring* till they *touch* the *Clouds*, and fetch their Pedigree from some God: So *Christians* think it nothing worth, except they relate the first *Planting* of *Religion* in their Countrie to some *Apostle*. *Whereas* indeed it matters not, if the *Doctrine* be the *same*, whether the *Apostles* preached it by themselves, or by their Successours. (Fuller, *Church-History* I.i.8, p.4)

‘Conjectures’, and its related sonnet ‘V. Uncertainty’ below, hint at the possibility of founding myths, even as the narrative’s notes and major sources dismiss them.

Fuller’s examination of the evidence of early Christians in Britain thus contradicts Stillingfleet (cited in Wordsworth’s note) and aligns with the note’s scepticism; however, Wordsworth does not quote or cite Fuller in the note—surprising given his succinct analysis. These examples thus suggest, contrary to the possibility above, that Wordsworth did *not* have access to Fuller’s two texts until after 12 March 1821. In this case the package of books may therefore have contained not only Turner, Bede, and Burnet, but also two volumes of Fuller, and the two volumes by Edward Davies mentioned below.

Finally, a reading of the Briton passages in Fuller gives a cogent political reason why Wordsworth would choose to extend, and retract, the antiquarian possibility that the apostle Paul, or Joseph of Arimathea, had brought Christianity to early Roman Britain. Britain inheriting its Christian tradition directly from the apostles linked the islands to Rome. Rome could then cite such a tradition as precedent for papal control:

We have stayed the longer in confuting these Arguments, because from *Peters* preaching here, *Parsons* would inferred an *obligation* of this *Island* to the *See* of *Rome*.... *Rome* is of so *tyrannicall* a disposition, that making herself the *Mother-Church*, she expects of her *Daughters* not only *Dutifulnesse*, but *Servility*; and (not content to have them ask *her Blessing*, but also do her *Drudgerie*.) endeavoureth to make *Slaves* of all her *Children*. (Fuller, *Church-History* I.i.7, p.4)

Confirming such a precedent in an antiquarian work presented as much danger in Fuller's time, during the crises of the Civil Wars, as it did in Wordsworth's mind, during the debate over Catholic emancipation.

The opening sonnets of the *Sketches*, in which a new sense of historical time struggles against the 'dark backward and abysm of time' of pre-Enlightenment antiquarianism, suggest an awareness of the political dangers of superstition and Catholicism, even as they reproduce them (Shakespeare 1.2). In this way Wordsworth's narrative resembles the *geste* or legendary histories of Britain, in their power to capture the reader's fancy, but also in their tendency to perpetuate superstition. The text shows a consciousness of the former quality; editions from 1827 include the following motto on the verso of the half-title page:

'A verse may catch a wandering Soul, that flies  
 Profunder Tracts, and by a blest surprise  
 Converts delight into a Sacrifice.' (SSIP 138)<sup>25</sup>

The 'Profunder Tracts' may allude not only to sermons, as in Herbert's *Church Porch*, but also to antiquarian tracts of religious history. In transforming antiquarian prose into art, versification aims to 'delight', but it may also oversimplify; thus the opening sonnets of the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* may run afoul of the same accusation that Fuller levels against the rhymes of the ancient British bards:

The *Bards* were next the *Druides* in Regard, and played excellently to their *Songs* on their *Harps*; whereby they had great Operation on the Vulgar, surprising them into Civility unawares, they greedily swallowing whatsoever was sweetened with Musick.

(Fuller, *Church-History* I.i.4, p.2)

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25) Jackson follows other editors in noting that these lines adapt George Herbert's *The Church Porch* (1633), ll.5, 6: 'A verse may finde him, who a sermon flies, | And turn delight into a sacrifice' (SSIP 236).

The next few sonnets in the series demonstrate the text continuing to resist superstition, but drawing (where no antiquarian sources are available to Wordsworth) on textual and personal memory. This drawing on biographical past draws earlier forms of knowledge (late-eighteenth-century antiquarianism and virtuoso culture) into the third decade of the nineteenth century.

### **Analysis: 'III. Trepidation of the Druids'**

We can compare the third and fourth sonnets, 'Trepidation of the Druids' and 'Druidical Excommunication', in order to compare Wordsworth's use of antiquarian sources in 1821 against those of his earlier reading. Jackson concludes that 'Trepidation' was composed after Wordsworth received the long-awaited package of antiquarian books from London; while 'Druidical Excommunication' was one of the first sonnets composed for the *Sketches*, originally conceived as a sequel to the sonnet 'The Monument Commonly Called Long Meg and her Daughters, near the River Eden'.

Both of these sonnets, and the fifth in the sequence, 'Uncertainty' revisit images and themes that appear in some of Wordsworth's first mature poetry, including *Salisbury Plain* (1793); in the first version of that poem, the Druids represent patriarchal authority in English politics, and the heavy-handed powers of the Pitt government in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the build-up to England declaring war on France (Wordsworth, *SPP*). Thus the political authority of the Druids in 1793 becomes oppressive religious authority (idolatry; revealed religion; Catholicism) in 1820–21. *Salisbury Plain* remained unpublished until 1842, when it appeared, heavily revised, as *Guilt and Sorrow*; similarly *The Prelude* with its Salisbury Plain passage (Book XII) remained unpublished until 1850. These three sonnets show Wordsworth rooting the historical narrative of the *Sketches* in a strong autobiographical context, and the epistemological contexts of antiquarian reading and writing from almost three decades earlier.

'Trepidation' does not use Fuller or Stillingfleet, but may draw on other early-nineteenth-century antiquarian writing on the Druids. Abbie Potts' seminal study of the *Ecclesiastical Sketches* cites an unpublished thesis by

Georgina Melville that suggests two books by the antiquarian Edward Davies that may have contributed to this sonnet (Potts; Melville; *SSIP* 237). The sonnet represents a different sort of Druidic prophecy from that suggested in 'Conjectures': the intuition or impending sense of a religion (or an entire culture) about to be eradicated. The water imagery of 'Introduction' and 'Conjectures' here becomes images of symbolic water-fowl:

Screams round the Arch-druid's brow the Seamew\*—white  
 As Menai's foam; and towards the mystic ring  
 Where Augurs stand, the future questioning,  
 Slowly the Cormorant aims her heavy flight,  
 Portending ruin to each baleful rite,  
 That, in the lapse of seasons, hath crept o'er  
 Diluvian truths, and patriarchal lore... (*SSIP* 140, ll.1–7)

Unlike 'Conjectures', Wordsworth's note to this sonnet follows it immediately, explaining the asterisked reference to the 'Seamew' in line 1.<sup>26)</sup> Melville locates this symbol in Davies' *Mythology and Rites of the British Druids* (1809), in a translation from the sixth-century bard Taliesin: 'I knew the eminently white *sea-mew* in Dinbych'; Davies' note adds: 'by the description which is given of this *sea-mew*, it is evident he was no other than the hierophant, or chief Druid' (*SSIP* 237; Davies, *Mythology and Rites* 510). Similarly, Davies annotates a quotation about a cormorant a few pages later, using language almost identical to Wordsworth's note.<sup>27)</sup>

How does Wordsworth's access to contemporary (early nineteenth-century) antiquarian scholarship on the Druids affect the argument of the

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26) 'This water-fowl was, among the Druids, an emblem of those traditions connected with the deluge that made an important part of their mysteries. The Cormorant was a bird of bad omen' (*SSIP* 140).

27) 'A cormorant approaches me with long wings. She assaults the top of the stone with her hoarse clamor.—There is wrath in the fates! Let it burst through the stones!' Davies notes: 'The cormorant, a bird of ill omen, denounces an approaching persecution' (*SSIP* 237; Davies, *Mythology and Rites* 512 and n).

sonnet? Both this poem and the one that follows (in contrast, presumably written without access to Davies) represent the Druids as early British religious authorities and lawmakers, whose rituals have become corrupted. In this way both sonnets align with Wordsworth's sentiments of 1793 in *Salisbury Plain*. The Roman conquerors who arrive in the sestet of 'Trepidations' come as the enslavers of British culture ('Roman chains') but with them come 'The tidings... of Jesus crucified'. Thus images of nature (the sea-mew and cormorant) draw on the symbolism of Davies' antiquarian lore in order to represent the justice of the divine in nature against corrupt authority severed from nature.

As the starting point of a generally anti-deistic narrative (supporting the established Church), divinity in this sonnet seems remarkably deistic or Spinozan; the water imagery of the first two sonnets continues here not only in the form of the seabirds, but in the image of 'Menai's foam'—describing the Menai Strait between Anglesey and Wales—and the 'Diluvian truths' of early British religion. The Cormorant 'aims her heavy flight', like the 'Julian spear', against 'each baleful rite, | That, in the lapse of seasons, hath crept o'er | Diluvian truth'. This language neatly inverts the image of the Biblical flood as a source of revelation rather than destruction. The Druids' 'baleful' rituals (represented earlier in the unpublished *Salisbury Plain* poems and the hallucinatory vision of Stonehenge in *The Prelude*) here take on the destructive force of a natural cataclysm like the Deluge. These rituals have 'crept o'er | Diluvian truths'; gradual corruption of religious ritual has overflowed the flood. The sonnet ironically laments the persecution of Pagan Britons by Pagan Romans (as a precondition of Christianity's arrival) but not the Roman destruction of the Druid religion.

#### **Analysis: 'IV. Druidical Excommunication'**

Similarly, 'Druidical Excommunication'—the fourth sonnet in the series, but written earlier than 'Trepidation'—emphasises the religious and judicial harshness of Druid authority. 'Trepidation' juxtaposes the pride of the British bards (also mentioned by Fuller) against the gentleness of Christianity: 'Haughty the Bard;—can these meek doctrines blight | His transports?

wither his heroic strains?’ (SSIP 140, ll.8–9). ‘Druidical Excommunication’ describes the Druids as ‘jealous Ministers of Law’, contrasted to the human kindness (not explicitly connected with Christianity) that the ‘Outcast’ receives in the first line of the poem: ‘Mercy and Love have met thee on thy road’ (SSIP 141, l.1).

However, perhaps ‘Excommunication’ contains textual evidence of a lack of access to sources such as Fuller, Turner, and Davies, in that the poem praises the Druids as monotheistic lawmakers devoted to ‘Justice, and Order’. A simile associates the Druids’ presumed monotheistic worship and their aspiration to justice and order, describing these two qualities—again using the water motif that links the first five poems—as ‘the one sole fount whence Wisdom flowed’. Despite the harshness of exile from the congregation, the poem confesses:

Yet shall it claim our reverence, that to God,  
Ancient of days! that to the eternal Sire  
These jealous Ministers of Law aspire,  
As to the one sole fount whence Wisdom flowed,  
Justice, and Order. (SSIP 141, ll.5–9)

Wordsworth either did not have access to Fuller’s *Church-History* when he wrote this sonnet, or chose to ignore that scholar’s clear statement that the Druids were polytheistic, worshipping not only the trinity of Belinus, Andraste, and Diana, but also

other *Portenta Diabolica, pene numero Aegyptiaca vincentia*: as indeed they who erroneously conceive one God too little, will find two too many, and yet Millions not enough. (Fuller, *Church-History* l.i.2, p.2)

Potts cites Davies’ *Celtic Researches* (1804) as a possible source for this poem’s theme of Druidical excommunication.<sup>28)</sup> Davies uses language quite similar

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28) ‘Amongst their disciples, these *Druids* could at all times ensure peace by

to Wordsworth's, who in the opening lines of the poem describes the

... wretched Outcast, from the gift of fire  
And food cut off by sacerdotal ire,  
From every sympathy that Man bestowed! (ll.2–4)<sup>29</sup>

However, if Wordsworth had access to Davies when he wrote this sonnet in early 1821, then he likely also had access to Fuller; either he chose to use the former but not the latter, or he had access to neither.

I concur with Jackson that Wordsworth's knowledge of Druidical excommunication could come not from Davies in 1821, but from a number of sources that he likely knew well since making his notebook list of authorities on Druids in DC MS. 12 (Wordsworth, *SPP* 35n). These include Julius Caesar's *Commentaries* on the Gallic Wars; William Mason's play *Caractacus* (1759); and John Selden's 'illustration' (long note) to William Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* (Caesar Book VI; Mason, *Caractacus* 1.126; Drayton Song IX note).<sup>30</sup> Therefore, this sonnet evokes a representation of the Druids built on the same antiquarian knowledge as Wordsworth's texts of 1793 and 1804–5. Both the third and fourth sonnets (pre- and post-March 1821) present negative representations of Druid authority. The earlier composition ('Druidical Excommunication') presents a less accurate representation of Druid religion (the suggestion of monotheism) as we might expect of Wordsworth writing without sources; ironically, however, it presents a less harsh critique, not only suggesting that Druidical exiles found 'Mercy and Love', but that their persecutors aspired to the 'sole fount' of 'Wisdom'.

This ambivalence towards Druid authority immediately after 'Trepidation'

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holding up the rod of *excommunication*, their most rigorous instrument of doom' (Davies, *Celtic Researches* 172).

29) '... the wretch on whom it fell, was not only menaced with severe punishment hereafter, but was deprived, in the mean time, of all social comfort and benefit' (Davies, *Celtic Researches* 172).

30) Jackson excerpts the relevant quotations on Druidical excommunication from these sources (*SSIP* 237–8).

makes sense in the context of Wordsworth's antiquarian reading and writing of 1793. The Morgan MS of 'Druidical Excommunication' shows the poem's direct continuation from 'The Monument Known as Long Meg...' (written on or before 17 January 1821); in this draft, the narrator ponders the 'cumbrous Load' of the 'Long Meg' stone circle, and begins:

Yes! whether Earth received that cumbrous Load  
 For midnight pomp of sacrificial fire  
 For social exercise of harp and Lyre  
 Or Rites prelusive to a crown bestowed  
 This claims at least our reverence that to God  
 Antient of days to thee eternal Sire  
 Did Priest and Lawgiver and Bard aspire... (SSIP 141)

The draft shows Wordsworth working through what Stuart Piggott classifies as 'pessimistic' and 'optimistic' representations of Druids in early antiquarian texts (Piggott). The narrator looks at the stone circle and considers that it might have been used for human sacrifice; poetic performance; or political ceremony. Uncertainty regarding at what point Wordsworth read various antiquarian sources again enters this reading, however, as the description of the Druid as 'Priest and Lawgiver' working in conjunction with 'Bard' gives a textual echo of Fuller's diagram of these two classes of British authority figure in the opening pages of his *Church-History*.

Similarly, the closing lines of 'Druidical Excommunication' echo Davies' commentary on the relationship among the ancient Britons between excommunication and martial prowess. Unlike Wordsworth's other potential antiquarian sources, Davies is writing during the Napoleonic Wars; his commentary on the irony of the Druids compromising their self-defence echoes the sense in the sonnet of two communities—Druids and exiles—the former corrupted, the latter fortunately linked to survival and 'primal truth' by nature:

Tremblingly escaped,  
 As if with prescience of the coming storm,  
*That* intimation when the stars were shaped;  
 And yon thick woods maintain the primal truth,  
 Debased by many a superstitious form,  
 That fills the Soul with unavailing ruth. (ll.9–14)

These syntactically difficult lines represent the exciting epistemological turn in the sonnet: the ‘intimation’ of ‘when the stars were shaped’ has ‘escaped’ from Druidical corruption through exile; in other words, the intimation of ‘primal truth’ (with its implied connection both to nature, in ‘yon thick woods’ and future Christianity) becomes personified, and equated with the unnamed ‘Outcast’ of the poem.

Knowledge has escaped in human form; this knowledge suggests the ‘secret asylum’ of a community of ‘strangers’ in Davies.<sup>31</sup> Whether Wordsworth wrote with or without knowledge of this source, the text makes an argument that pulls in two epistemological directions—in terms of what sort of knowledge leads to ‘primal truth’. The exiles have a more pure relationship with the ‘Diluvian truths’ of ‘Trepidation’, suggesting a backward-looking scholasticism, a sense of a Golden Age. In contrast, their excommunication from Druidical authority suggests a move towards futurity and Enlightenment; the exiles have ‘prescience’ of the Roman invasion and the changes in store for their culture.

### **Analysis: ‘V. Uncertainty’**

Uncertainty—the tension between scholasticism and Enlightenment, the ‘abysm of time’ and historicised knowledge—overshadows the first

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31) ‘But, in the eyes of strangers, who confided in their own strength, this weapon was disarmed of all its terrors, and *their* presence [i.e. strangers’] must have opened a secure asylum to the turbulent amongst the *Celtae*. In the hour of invasion, *Druids* could only withdraw from the field, and permit the military chiefs, and the people, to defend the region. Their power, as *Druids*, and the purity of their discipline, must, therefore, have been on the decline, long before the time of *Caesar*’ (Davies, *Celtic Researches* 172).

five poems in the *Ecclesiastical Sketches*. The poems probably written before 12 March show Wordsworth relying more strongly on memory—both of earlier antiquarian reading, and of his own experience. This imagery becomes most concentrated in the fifth sonnet in the series, appropriately titled ‘Uncertainty’. In this poem, the tension between antiquarianism and Enlightenment becomes almost completely subsumed by autobiography.

The first eight lines of ‘Uncertainty’, although overtly about the impossibility of accurately knowing the historical origins of Christianity in Britain, take us back to Wordsworth’s most uncertain years between 1791 and 1794:

Darkness surrounds us; seeking, we are lost  
 On Snowdon’s wilds, amid Brigantian coves,  
 Or where the solitary Shepherd roves  
 Along the Plain of Sarum, by the Ghost  
 Of silently departed ages crossed;  
 And where the boatman of the Western Isles  
 Slackens his course—to mark those holy piles  
 Which yet survive on bleak Iona’s coast.                    (SSIP 141–2, ll.1–8)

Taken out of context, this could be purely autobiographical poetry. As Richard Gravil writes:

This *tour de force* maps onto the topography of the sacred sites of the tribe a personal poetical history. It tallies Wordsworth’s journeys with Jones in Snowdonia, alone on Salisbury Plain, and with Coleridge and Dorothy in search of Burns and Ossian. The Brigantian coves might well include the Leven Estuary, where verses from Gray’s *Elegy* were engraved on the headstone of Wordsworth’s schoolmaster.                    (Gravil 67)<sup>32</sup>

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32) Gravil cites Hutchinson in his note: ‘The Brigantes, according to Roman writers, possessed a very large tract of country on the western coast of Britain;

The first line of the sonnet also recalls the uncertainty of crossing of the Alps in *Prelude* Book 6: 'I was lost as in a cloud | Halted without a struggle to break through', and Wordsworth's response to that 'first' 'spot of time' in Book 11, 'Oh! mystery of Man, from what a depth | Proceed thy honours! I am lost, but see | In simple childhood something of the base | On which thy greatness stands...!' (1805 *Prelude* 6.529–30, 11.329–32) (my emphases). Wordsworth was himself the 'solitary shepherd' wandering on the 'Plain of Sarum', where he encountered ghosts both living and dead—the Female Vagrant, and the fantasies or hallucinations of ancient Britons and Druidical sacrifice.

However, composing before receiving his package of antiquarian sources, Wordsworth finds himself without a reliable historical context for his narrative. Without this context, his philosophical ideas lose their conviction; with happy irony, this seems to lead him to rely more on memory and personal conviction, as he did in the early composition of the *Prelude* in the terrible Goslar winter of 1798–9. The shifts from history to autobiography (and back again) are often abrupt, detectable only to modern readers who can assess Wordsworth's lifelong philosophical development in the context of his chronology of poetic composition, rather than publication. For example, the conclusion to 'Druidical Excommunication' expresses the idea of 1798–1800 that nature preserves truths which religion can debase:

... yon thick woods maintain the primal truth,  
Debased by many a superstitious form... (SSIP 141, ll.12–13)<sup>33</sup>

Yet only four sonnets later, in 'VIII. Temptations from Roman Refinements', Wordsworth sounds as puritanical as Malvolio; the 'humanizing graces' of Roman culture are no more than 'soul-subduing vice' and 'instruments of

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but... it is enough for us to observe, they inhabited the district now called Cumberland' (Hutchinson 3).

33) For example, consider *Home at Grasmere* and the 'Poems on the Naming of Places'.

deadliest servitude' (VIII, ll.13, 1, 14). Wordsworth's descriptions of decadent Roman lifestyle, although taken almost verbatim from Samuel Daniel, sound rather like Coleridge's description of Kubla Khan's pleasure dome:

Fair houses, baths, and banquets delicate,  
 And temples flashing, bright as polar ice,  
 Their radiance through the woods... (SSIP 144, ll.3-4)<sup>34)</sup>

This one example demonstrates a dialectic that appears throughout the *Sketches*, in which Wordsworth's earlier strain of naturalistic, holistic Christian feeling strives to pierce through his more puritanical instincts in late middle age.

This tension continues throughout the texts of Part I, just as Coleridge attempts to balance the poetically productive pagan or daemonic in *The Ancient Mariner* and 'Kubla Khan' and *Christabel* against more philosophically satisfying, but less instinctive, Christian consolation and oneness. In one of the strongest poems in Part 1 ('X. Struggle of the Britons Against the Barbarians'), Wordsworth takes up the trumpet of Milton and the wreathed horn of Triton that he wielded to such effect in 1802. The sonnet's power depends on the historical fabrication that the post-Roman Druids assimilated Christianity and fought as Christianised Britons against the Saxons. Mason's *Caractacus* and Arthurian legend provide literary sources where antiquarianism hesitates:

Rise!—they *have* risen: of brave Aneurin ask  
 How they have scourged old foes, perfidious friends:  
 The spirit of Caractacus defends  
 The Patriots, animates their glorious task:—  
 Amazement runs before the towering casque  
 Of Arthur, bearing thro' the stormy field  
 The Virgin sculptured on his Christian shield:—  
 Stretched in the sunny light of victory bask

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34) See Daniel 3. Cited in Gravid 68.

The Host that followed Urien as he strode  
 O'er heaps of slain;—from Cambrian woods and moss  
 Druids descend, auxiliars of the Cross;  
 Bards, nursed on blue Plinlimmon's still abode,  
 Rush on the fight, to harps preferring swords,  
 And everlasting deeds to burning words! (SSIP 144–5)

The language of this sonnet is not as naturalistic as the sonnets of 1802, with the archaic verb-before-noun construction of lines 8–9 and 13, and the cliché of 'strode | O'er heaps of slain'. But lines 10–11 are strong, and the rhyme moss/Cross encapsulates Wordsworth's early love of the material fabric of British churches and monasteries, and the mutability of their ruin in nature. In another self-referential gesture, and one of the spectral images of the *Sketches*, Wordsworth returns to one of his earliest British heroes, Caractacus; he first alluded to William Mason's dramatic hero in *Descriptive Sketches*, and (as noted above) used Mason's notes to the play when compiling his 'bibliography of Druids' for work on *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*.<sup>35</sup>

Despite their syntactical archaisms, both 'Uncertainty' and 'Struggle of the Britons...' stand out as some of the finest poems in the volume. Line 12 of the latter, 'Bards, nursed on blue Plinlimmon's still abode', is one of the best in the *Sketches*: dense, mellifluous, and carrying the symbolic weight of Wordsworth's 1791, 1793, and 1798 Welsh tours and the wealth of memory and poetry they produced. Plynlimon, a mountain in Ceredigion, is the source of both the Severn and the Wye (Wordsworth, SSIP 241). Therefore the sonnet draws symbolically on 'Tintern Abbey', as much as Wordsworth explicitly alludes to his ascent of Snowden in 'Uncertainty'. Thus one of the most vigorous poems in the *Sketches* connects obliquely with Wordsworth's great poem of 1798.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the opening poems of the *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, in which

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35) Mason, *Caractacus*. See *Descriptive Sketches* 44; Wu 97–8; Nabholz.

the narrative explores the origins of Christianity among the ancient Britons, shows Wordsworth again at work creating the taste by which he would be read, this time on historical and moral, rather than aesthetic, grounds. Although they sold poorly (even by Wordsworth's standards) the *Sketches* helped lay the foundation—along with the didactic aestheticism of John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold—for late Victorian religiosity and nationalism. Their lack of contemporary popularity suggests they were half a century ahead of their time, in appealing for nationalism and religious feeling at what David Cannadine identifies as a nadir of such sentiment and associated ritual in British culture.

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that, through epistemological tension between scholastic and Enlightenment forms of knowledge, Wordsworth uses the early poems of the *Sketches* to 'convert' himself out of hermetic reclusiveness and uncertainty, and become a voice for the Church of England. Wordsworth is not drastically changing his beliefs, in comparison to his earlier poetry, but bringing his religious sense—a combination of feeling and philosophy inextricably linked to his own poetic development—into line with an extrinsic national system. The changes in his thinking that clash on the ears of modern readers comfortable with his earlier work represent the necessary quashing of a few heresies. As the readings in this paper have demonstrated, many of these attempts at suppression or extirpation are not successful, as the poetics and images of individual sonnets slip the noose of the book's stated purpose in its 'Advertisement'.

The tension between superstition and scepticism, amorphous antiquarianism and Enlightenment 'historicity', does not resolve in the opening sonnets of the *Sketches* but remains productive. Further analysis of the antiquarian contexts offered by the books Wordsworth received after 12 March 1821 should illuminate Wordsworth's process of composition as it involved the reliance on, and resistance towards, textual authorities. The antiquarian context offered above suggests evidence in Fuller, Davies, etc. that points to opposite tendencies: (a) Wordsworth reading antiquarian sources but writing against them; or (b) Wordsworth not having access to antiquarian sources and feeling he cannot write 'historically' without them.

One productive outcome of these conflicting creative processes in the early *Sketches* becomes clear in ‘Uncertainty’ and ‘Struggle of the Britons Against the Barbarians’: where Wordsworth feels he most strongly lacks historical context for a philosophical argument, the text becomes hesitant; it then turns to memory and personal experience for inspiration—and the result is some of the strongest poetry in the volume.

Finally, we should not assume that tensions in the *Sketches* between two types of knowledge—scholastic antiquarian and Enlightenment virtuoso—are new in 1821, or that they represent a fundamental reordering or revision of the ‘Wordsworthian’ philosophy of *The Prelude*, the great *Ode*, or other early philosophical verse. We should return to Wordsworth’s first extant poem, *Lines on the Bicentenary of Hawkshead School* as a text expressing both religious sensibility and Enlightenment scepticism. Wordsworth writes in 1785 of a time

When Superstition left the golden light  
 And fled indignant to the shades of night.  
 When pure Religion rear’d the peaceful breast  
 And lull’d the warring passions into rest...  
 ...  
 Science with joy saw Superstition fly  
 Before the lustre of Religion’s eye.  
 With Rapture she beheld Britannia smile  
 Clapp’d her strong wings, and sought the cheerful isle.  
 The shades of night no more the soul involve,  
 She sheds her beam, and Lo! the shades dissolve.  
 No jarring Monks to gloomy cell confin’d  
 With mazy rules perplex the weary mind. (ll.29–32, 43–50)

Thus Wordsworth has always been a crusader against dark ‘Superstition’, clearly associated with the ‘jarring Monks’ in these lines. Nor does he write as a deist, or as a young convert to the *philosophes* and the cause of the French Revolution. In *Salisbury Plain* he will oppose ‘Superstition’ and ‘Pride’ with

the 'herculean mace' of Reason, but here his champion is 'pure Religion', who clears the way for Baconian Science (*Salisbury Plain* ll.548, 544, 543). The productive tension between scholastic withdrawal and Enlightenment engagement stretches back to Wordsworth's earliest compositions.

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## Abstract

This paper explores the antiquarian contexts of the opening sonnets in the first edition of William Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (1822). The first section of the *Sketches* explores the period from pre-Christian Britain to Norman Britain, including the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. The paper looks at the language of the first five poems in this section, comparing their language and imagery to Wordsworth's antiquarian sources. During the composition of these poems, Wordsworth was impatiently waiting for a package of books to add historical research to his writing. Evaluating which sonnets may have been composed with access to which antiquarian sources provides insight into Wordsworth's parallel deployment of scholastic antiquarianism and Enlightenment scepticism. The paper argues that reading the *Sketches* for tensions between two streams of intellectual history—scholastic antiquarianism and Enlightenment virtuosity—illuminates important tensions in Wordsworth's creative mind during the period of composition. The paper hypothesises that (a) tensions between antiquarian and Enlightenment knowledge in the *Sketches* shape their representations of self and mind; and similarly, that (b) tensions between the texts' religious and intellectual convictions affect how the poems represent historical shifts between scholasticism and naturalism (antiquity and Enlightenment) in British history. Close readings of the first five sonnets in the *Sketches*, in the biographical context of what antiquarian sources Wordsworth had available to him during composition, allow us to draw conclusions as to how much Wordsworth depended on his antiquarian reading, and how much he resisted or rejected the arguments of these sources. The paper concludes that Wordsworth's use of seventeenth-century and contemporary antiquarian sources such as Thomas Fuller's *The Church-History of Britain* (1655) and Edward Davies' *Celtic Researches* (1804) shows two opposite creative tendencies in the *Sketches*: (a) Wordsworth reading antiquarian sources but writing against them; and (b) Wordsworth not having access to antiquarian sources, and feeling that he cannot write 'historically' without them. As a productive result of these opposing impulses, Wordsworth sometimes turns

to memory (including both biography and earlier antiquarian reading) for inspiration, and produces a more aesthetically vigorous, optimistic portrait of ancient religion in Britain.