

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

9 *The Last of the Flock*

In distant countries I have been,
And yet I have not often seen
A healthy man, a man full grown
Weep in the public roads alone.
But such a one, on English ground, 5
And in the broad high-way, I met;
Along the broad high-way he came,
His cheeks with tears were wet.
Sturdy he seemed, though he was sad;
And in his arms a lamb he had. 10

He saw me, and he turned aside,
As if he wished himself to hide:
Then with his coat he made essay
To wipe those briny tears away.
I follow'd him, and said, "My friend 15
"What ails you? wherefore weep you so?"
— "Shame on me, Sir! this lusty lamb,
He makes my tears to flow.
To-day I fetched him from the rock;
He is the last of all my flock. 20

When I was young, a single man,
And after youthful follies ran,
Though little given to care and thought,
Yet, so it was, a ewe I bought;
And other sheep from her I raised, 25
As healthy sheep as you might see,
And then I married, and was rich
As I could wish to be;
Of sheep I number'd a full score,
And every year increas'd my store. 30

Year after year my stock it grew,
And from this one, this single ewe,

Full fifty comely sheep I raised,
As sweet a flock as ever grazed!
Upon the mountain did they feed; 35
They throve, and we at home did thrive.

— This lusty lamb of all my store
Is all that is alive:
And now I care not if we die,
And perish all of poverty. 40

Ten children, Sir! had I to feed,
Hard labour in a time of need!
My pride was tamed, and in our grief
I of the parish ask'd relief. 45

They said I was a wealthy man;
My sheep upon the mountain fed,
And it was fit that thence I took
Whereof to buy us bread:"
"Do this; how can we give to you,"
They cried, "what to the poor is due?" 50

I sold a sheep as they had said,
And bought my little children bread,
And they were healthy with their food;
For me it never did me good. 55

A woeful time it was for me,
To see the end of all my gains,
The pretty flock which I had reared
With all my care and pains,
To see it melt like snow away!
For me it was a woeful day. 60

Another still! and still another!
A little lamb, and then its mother!
It was a vein that never stopp'd,
Like blood-drops from my heart they dropp'd. 65

Till thirty were not left alive
They dwindled, dwindled, one by one,
And I may say that many a time
I wished they all were gone:
They dwindled one by one away;
For me it was a woeful day. 70

To wicked deeds I was inclined,
And wicked fancies cross'd my mind,
And every man I chanc'd to see,
I thought he knew some ill of me.
No peace, no comfort could I find, 75
No ease, within doors or without,
And crazily, and wearily,
I went my work about.
Oft-times I thought to run away;
For me it was a woeful day. 80

Sir! 'twas a precious flock to me,
As dear as my own children be;
For daily with my growing store
I loved my children more and more.
Alas! it was an evil time; 85
God cursed me in my sore distress,
I prayed, yet every day I thought
I loved my children less;
And every week, and every day,
My flock, it seemed to melt away. 90

They dwindled, Sir, sad sight to see!
From ten to five, from five to three,
A lamb, a weather, and a ewe;
And then at last, from three to two;
And of my fifty, yesterday 95
I had but only one,
And here it lies upon my arm,
Alas! and I have none;
To-day I fetched it from the rock
It is the last of all my flock." 100

1798

(From *Lyrical Ballads*. Ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones.
The text of the 1798 edition, with the additional 1800
poems. London: Methuen, 1968)