

A Portrait of Anna Seward

Anna Seward: "Swan of Lichfield"

Born in Derbyshire in 1742, Anna Seward was the daughter of Thomas Seward and Elizabeth Hunter. Her father undertook her education and Anna developed her literary tastes at an early age, reading Milton at two and writing religious verse at ten. After her father became Canon of Lichfield Cathedral in 1754, Anna and her family moved to Lichfield and became neighbours of Dr Erasmus Darwin. He became aware of her literary talents and encouraged her to write poetry.

In 1764 Anna's sister, Sarah died and subsequently, Canon and Mrs Seward adopted Honora Sneyd, who later married Richard Lovell Edgeworth. After her mother died in 1780, Anna remained at home, caring for her father and continuing to write poetry. She published *Elegy on Captain Cook*, which established her literary reputation. In 1781 she published *Monody on Major Andre*, which dealt with the hanging of one of Honora Sneyd's suitors in the American War of Independence. The poem enjoyed success both in Britain and America. Between 1782 and 1787 Anna Seward published *Louisa*, a poetical novel and other poems and also wrote a series of letters under the name of "Benvolio" to the *Gentleman's Magazine*. By now, Anna increasingly moved in literary and intellectual circles and was frequently meeting with Darwin, Thomas Day, Edgeworth and Dr Johnson.

In 1790 Canon Seward died. Anna remained living in the Bishops Palace at Lichfield. In 1802 Anna began corresponding with Walter Scott, whose work she admired. Her *Memoir of Dr Darwin*, was published in 1804, a not entirely flattering account of the great man, as Anna accuses him of plagiarising her own work for *The Botanic Garden*. Anna met Scott when he visited Lichfield. After her death he edited her work.

Anna Seward died in 1809 and was buried in Lichfield Cathedral. Darwin credited her with inventing a poetic form, the epic elegy and she is clearly a major contributor to romantic poetry. Her poem *Colebrookdale* (1785) is an early criticism of the ways in which industrialisation violates nature.