

INSPIRED BY ...

Jeff Dugdale

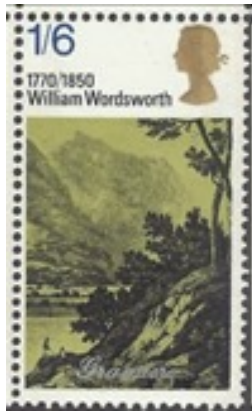
As experienced collectors of literature will know, there are three default designs for stamps celebrating a writer: using a portrait, using a scene or character(s) from a well known text and a combination of the first two types. These approaches are so common they need not be exemplified here. However, sometimes a fourth approach is taken - showing a place, building or object which had a specific or generic influence upon that writer, whose portrait may accompany the image.

A classic example of this is Great Britain's 1970 celebration of the early Romantic poet William Wordsworth (see inside front cover). This stamp uses an engraving of Grasmere (which lies in the heart of the Lake District in the North West of England) by Joseph Farrington from *The Lakes of Lancashire, Westmoreland and Cumberland*, published in 1846. Wordsworth was born in Cockermouth, Cumberland and spent his early childhood exploring the woods, fields and streams of the Lake District which attracts tourists today as "Wordsworth Country".

Much of Wordsworth's finest work is permeated with a sense of man's deeply felt connection to nature, in which Wordsworth saw God everywhere. He described Grasmere in particular as "the loveliest spot that man hath ever found" and his body lies in the village churchyard. As a young man of twenty Wordsworth undertook a walking tour of France and Switzerland, continuing his accustomed practice in his homeland of looking for places of scenic beauty. In 1798 along with his sister Dorothy and fellow poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge he visited Germany, after which he began his magnum opus *The Prelude* (a poem longer than many novels) in which he describes in considerable detail his own psychological development and his relationship with God and nature. At the turn of the century Wordsworth and Dorothy set up home in Grasmere where they lived for fourteen years and, along with neighbours Coleridge and Robert Southey, became known as The Lake Poets.

However the poet continued to travel within continental Europe from time to time, and in 1822 published *Memorials of a Tour of the Continent*. His visit in the company of Robert Southey to the Staubbach Falls at Lauterbrunnen, in the Bernese Oberland of Switzerland inspired *In Approaching the Staubbach*, Canto XII of *Memorials* referenced in a 2007 set from Switzerland dedicated to "Landscapes and English Literature". The falls from which water tumbles almost a thousand feet are also celebrated in an uncaptioned Swiss stamp of 1934 within a set of landscapes. Wordsworth wrote a note explaining his reaction to the waterfall, "this wild and savage air was utterly unlike any sounds I had ever heard.....they reminded me of religious services chanted to Streams and Fountains in Pagan times".

An equally dramatic and possibly more famous waterfall in Switzerland of course relates to a very famous short story by Scots writer Arthur Conan Doyle involving Sherlock Holmes. In "The Final Problem" first published in the *Strand Magazine* in December 1893 Holmes is locked in mortal combat with the wicked Professor James Moriarty and plunges with him seemingly to his death, at the Reichenbach Falls, also in the Bernese Oberland. The impression of the Falls in various stamps showing Holmes fighting with Moriarty is much more dramatic than the image given in the 2007 Swiss Landscapes stamp. However



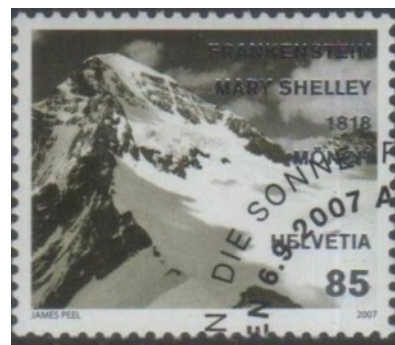
Wordsworth: Grasmere and the Staubach Falls



Conan Doyle: Sherlock Holmes and the Reichenbach Falls



Lord Byron, Lake Geneva and Château de Chillon



Mary Shelley, Frankenstein and the Mönch mountain

the falls consist of a series of plummets and this stamp shows the bottom one. Whilst on a holiday in Europe Doyle had visited many striking waterfalls in the company of Sir Henry Lunn, who founded a major travel agency in the late 1890s. Doyle had been discussing how to “kill off” Holmes as he wanted to get involved in other writing projects, and the baronet suggested the Reichenbach Falls as a good site for the great detective's demise. Once Doyle was taken to the Falls he thought it the very place for a dramatic finale, but of course because the public was very unhappy indeed at the prospect of no more Sherlock Holmes stories he had to make a comeback.

The 10c stamp in the 2007 Swiss Landscapes set shows Lac Léman which features in Lord Byron's narrative poem *The Prisoner of Chillon* composed whilst Byron was staying in Geneva in 1816. (“Lac Léman” is the French name for Lake Geneva, one of the largest lakes in Europe with a surface area of over 230 square miles). Having left England under a considerable shadow on account of his outrageous behaviour, Byron settled in Villa Diodati close to Lake Geneva with a group of close friends including the poet Percy Shelley and Mary Godwin who would become Shelley's wife. The weather was so unpleasant for long periods that, unable to enjoy travelling to see various sights, the whole group began to compose fantastic stories in order to amuse the company, some of which would make it into print, notably Mary (Godwin) Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Byron's *The Prisoner of Chillon*, a long narrative poem, gives a version of the story of the five years the monk Francois Bonivard spent cooped up in Château de Chillon, an island castle on the shore of Lake Geneva in the mid 1530's, shown on Switzerland 1934 and 2007. The narrative, which tells of the monk who watches his brothers die one by one around him but is saved from madness by the song of a bird, appears to have been inspired by an impromptu visit Byron and Shelley made to the Château and its dungeons in late June 1816. Having quickly written a fourteen-line poem in sonnet form about the incarcerated monk, Byron went on within a fortnight to write the monk's monologue in some 390 lines. A stamp from Malta in 1990 celebrates a visit Byron made to the island during an earlier European tour, in May 1811, which inspired a sprightly and rather disrespectful poem entitled *Farewell to Malta* which begins;

“Adieu, ye joys of La Valette!
 Adieu, sirocco, sun, and sweat!
 Adieu, thou palace rarely enter'd!”

and ends:

“And now, O Malta! since thou'st got us, Thou little military hothouse! I'll not offend with words uncivil, And wish thee rudely at the Devil, But only stare from out my casement, And ask, for what is such a place meant?”	Then, in my solitary nook, Return to scribbling, or a book, Or take my physic while I'm able (Two spoonfuls hourly by the label), Prefer my nightcap to my beaver, And bless the gods I've got a fever.”
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One of Byron's house guests in Villa Diodati on Lake Geneva in 1816 was nineteen year old Mary Godwin, who later that year married Percy Shelley (who had rented a neighbouring villa), and she was also inspired by her time there to write one of the most famous of all Gothic horror novels: *Frankenstein*, celebrated by GB stamps in 1997 and 2008. The final Swiss stamp in the 2007 set shows Mönch, the German for “monk” and a mountain in the Bernese Alps, one of a group containing the more famous Eiger and Jungfrau climbing challenges. Shelley chose the lower reaches of this mountain to stage the “reconciliation” of the Monster who had escaped from Dr Victor Frankenstein's



*Thomas Hardy and
Clyffe Clump*



Joseph Conrad



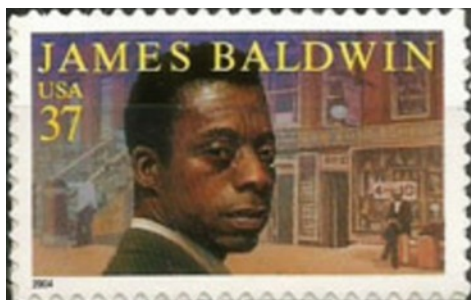
James Michener



Anne Frank



O. Henry



James Baldwin



Katherine Anne Porter



Robert Burns

laboratory, lived wild and had begun to associate with a family living in a country cottage, which he had later burned down in rage when they displayed fear and disgust with him on account of his appearance. However, Shelley may also have been inspired by the mountain's dramatic ice fields to place the opening of the novel in which the dying Dr. Frankenstein and the Monster are discovered near the North Pole by Arctic explorer Captain Walton, to whom Frankenstein tells the story of the creation of his Monster, which constitutes the bulk of the story most films use.

The juxtaposition of a row of trees from Clyffe Clump, Dorset (Hardy writes of this place in his poem *Yell'Ham-Wood's Story*) beside a portrait of English novelist Thomas Hardy in the 1990 GB issue is a clear reference to his Wessex novels which include *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), in which the often sombre and dark geographical setting - the environment in all its senses - is as important as any character. The county of Wessex does not exist in reality but is understood to represent generically the rural parts of such southern English counties as Dorset, Wiltshire, Somerset, Hampshire etc. The son of a stonemason, Hardy was born in Dorset and spent his adolescence as a country lad, and of course such influences permeate his writing in prose and poetry.

If the countryside was vital to Hardy's writing, the sea played that role in novels by his contemporary Polish-British author Joseph Conrad, aka Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, as recognised on stamps from the land of his birth in 1957 and 2007. The earlier stamp shows Conrad and the clipper *Torrens*, full-rigged, on which Conrad served as Chief Officer from 1891-93 as it journeyed from London to Australia, whilst the more recent stamp shows part of a Conrad manuscript and the barque *Otago* on which he served as Captain in 1888 sailing in the Far East. Aged 21 Conrad joined the British merchant marine and by 1886 had gained his Master Mariner's certificate before doing sixteen years in the marine. Thereafter he lived a life of adventure, being involved in many underhand dealings in foreign lands which he used in his novel *The Arrow of Gold* (1919). A later journey along the coast of Venezuela inspired many aspects of one of his famous novels published in 1904 *Nostramo* (Our Man), with major characters being fictionalised versions of men he sailed with. The plots of his novels *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897) and *Lord Jim* (1900) and *Youth* (1902 short story) all draw upon his seafaring experiences.

Another novelist whose experiences far from home inspired his writing was Pulitzer Prize winning novelist James A. Michener (1907-97). In 2007, Vanuatu (which lies over 1000 miles north east of Australia), a territory formerly known as the New Hebrides, issued four stamps marking his achievements relating to this idyllic volcanic archipelago. This all began during World War II, when as a U.S. Navy Reservist with the rank of Lieutenant Commander he was sent as a naval historian to the South Pacific. He kept personal notes and diaries of his time there which he later turned into *Tales of the South Pacific* (1947) which won him the Pulitzer for Fiction the following year. Some of the story lines within *Tales* were adapted for Rogers and Hammerstein's musical *South Pacific*. *Tales* comprises a series of short stories linked by character and theme about contemporary life on and around the island of Espiritu Santo, the largest in the group. The stories tell how the occupying American forces integrate (or not) with the local people.

Most of the writers referenced so far travelled hundreds if not thousands of miles for their inspirational experiences, but one teenager who wrote a very famous book travelled no distance at all. In this issue from Israel in 1988, Anne Frank is shown beside the Amsterdam tenement in which she and her Jewish family and friends hid from Nazi soldiers

for over two years from July 1942, before being betrayed, captured and sent to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where Anne died of typhus in 1945. In the time Anne spent in cramped quarters, converted from space above her father Otto's office building, none of the family would have walked more than a few yards within their rooms each day and had to make minimal sound throughout the daytime, not laughing or arguing loudly, not flushing the toilet and being careful not to drop anything. All of these unique experiences Anne recorded in her diary given to her on her 13th birthday in 1942. Published posthumously this has become one of the world's most widely read books, frequently taught in schools in its original form and as a stage drama.

The approach to stamp design of using an author's portrait beside an influential place in his/her life has been an occasional one within the long running Literary Arts series from U.S. Post. For example both the 2012 Literary Arts issue for O. Henry (pseudonym of William Sydney Porter (1862-1910) and the commemorative from the Soviet Union issued in 1962 use the skyline of New York behind a portrait; apposite because though Porter was born in Greensboro, North Carolina he moved to The Big Apple after a spell in prison for embezzlement, restarted his life and wrote many stories published weekly in the *New York Sunday Magazine* about ordinary and some extraordinary New Yorkers in such anthologies as *The Four Million* (1906) and *Options* (1909). Porter typically writes a story (like the poignantly ironic "The Gift of the Magi") full of cleverly observed detail regarding human behaviour, and sardonic comment with a "twist in the tail", and his stories are still much read today.

The 2004 Literary Arts issue celebrates the black and openly gay poet James Baldwin (1924-87) with a Harlem street scene in the background, intended to evoke the atmosphere of Baldwin's first novel: the semi- autobiographical *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, published in 1953. Baldwin moved to Harlem as a child, had a harsh upbringing and suffered beatings by his stepfather and local police officers, the latter racially motivated.

Katherine Anne Porter was the 2006 Literary Arts subject and her portrait appears on the stamp with an oceangoing liner in the background, this being a direct reference to her only full-length novel *Ship of Fools* the best selling novel of all published in the USA in 1962. This novel, which gives an account of the interplay between a group of characters on board, all of whom are running away from disappointing situations and seeking brilliant new lives but all heading for new personal disasters, was developed out of a diary Porter kept on the sea journey from Veracruz in Mexico to Bremerhaven in Germany in 1931 and draws upon people she encountered on that voyage.

This article has shown a variety of stimuli and influences upon writers, ranging from geographical features like waterfalls and mountains, ships and buildings, and wide swathes of country and cityscapes, all of which have been easy to spot in stamp design and then research, but occasionally a glass is required to spot the stimulus as is the case with a stamp for our final writer, Robert Burns, Scotland's national bard.

Careful study of the higher value issue of the two GB commemoratives in 1966 shows not just a writing quill, and a rose and a thistle extreme left and right of the band behind Burns' head, but also a sheaf of corn and ploughshare (in Scots a "coulter"), the ends of which I have arrowed, which is a general reference to the poet's background as an active farmer and to his soubriquet as "The Ploughman Poet". But it is also a specific reference to one of his most famous poems stimulated by an actual event on his farm in 1785: *To a Mouse*, the full title of which continues *On Turning Up Her Nest with a Plough*, in which the plough can be seen as a metaphor for "Black Swan" events which overturn our lives despite our best plans . . . 