

# 91 and Not Dead Yet:

## *Iconic Poem Has Been Misleading Readers For Centuries*

by [Reg Green](#) (July 2020)



*Westminster*, Giuseppe De Nittis, 1878

**For a long time I've** wanted to pull the rug from under one of the most famous poems in the English language. I know its riveting last line is grossly inaccurate but it is so universally admired that I haven't dared to challenge it.

But an unlikely event has suddenly given me a prod that I

can't ignore: the clear air in the early morning that has come with the lighter traffic thanks to the coronavirus. So, since I may never get another chance, here goes.

The poem is William Wordsworth's sonnet, "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3 1802," which also was written about the early morning.

From the bridge he paints a picture of London on the other side of the river that combines grandeur and gentleness:

This City now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

He caps it with this incomparable image: "And all that mighty heart is lying still."

But that's just where the problem is.

What the young toff was oblivious of was the army of people who had to get up hours before to make sure he got to his viewpoint safely and comfortably. Instead of the heart lying still, it had been palpitating wildly for hours.

By the time the sun was up that morning the stalls at the open-air markets had already sold much of their daily supply of fresh food, their fish, fowl, fruit and every other letter in the alphabet so the poetic gentleman could have a good breakfast before starting out.

Hours even earlier than that, in the blackness of the night, knots of people from every point of the compass had been converging on central London, bringing everything a hungry city of one million people without refrigerators needed every day. Not to mention the boy at the hotel who blacked and polished his boots. The vision of an ethereal city held in

suspense is pure imagination.

Still, I'm ashamed to carp. On my normal six o'clock hike in the mountains a dozen or so miles north of downtown Los Angeles, I too can see a great city, though more distant than his, its slim towers golden in the low-lying sun, Wordsworth's commentary giving it a layer of meaning that on its own it doesn't possess:

Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
A sight so touching in its majesty:

How wonderful to be able to relive his experience two hundred years later and five thousand miles away.



«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

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**Reg Green** is an economics journalist who was born in England and worked for the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and *The Times of London*. In his spare time he wrote about jazz for the *Telegraph*, sharing the paper's coverage with Philip Larkin, wrote a column on soccer and reviewed books on European history. He emigrated to the US in 1970 and in time started an investment newsletter.

His life changed course in 1994 when his seven-year old son, Nicholas, was shot in an attempted robbery while on a family vacation in Italy. He and his wife, Maggie, donated Nicholas' organs and corneas to seven Italians, a decision that stimulated organ donation around the world and is known as "[the Nicholas Effect](#)." Reg wrote a book, also called [The Nicholas Effect](#), which was the basis of the television movie, "Nicholas' Gift," starring Alan Bates and Jamie Lee Curtis.

He has five other children varying in age from 24 to 59. At 91, he continues to work full-time to bring attention to the hundreds of thousands of lives that have been lost because of the shortage of donated organs and, when not traveling, hikes every day in the Southern California mountains. His most recent book is [90 and Not Dead Yet](#).

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