

Fighting for Thirlmere— The Roots of Environmentalism

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A 19th-century reservoir in the idyllic countryside of the English Lake District sparked the origins of modern environmental activism.

Stretched placidly in the heart of the English Lake District, Thirlmere hardly presents the stereotypical face of the industrial revolution. On the contrary, with its sheet of water, its surrounding evergreens, and its lack of development or pollution, it seems to fit an alternative stereotype. Yet the process by which this lake assumed this apparently pleasant form provoked decades of conflict in the late 19th century, and the focus of resistance was the “industrialization” of the lake. That conflict still reverberates more than a century later, both with reference to Thirlmere in particular and, more generally, as conservation and other environmental issues have become of increasing concern throughout the world.

First, the story. During 1876, residents of Cumberland and Westmorland gradually became aware that the pristine beauty of one of their cherished lakes was under serious threat. Manchester, the largest industrial city in England, was planning to convert Thirlmere into a reservoir: to dam it, to raise its level as much as 50 feet, and to pipe its waters 100 miles southeast to the cisterns of Manchester. Not only would the completed dam submerge the natural outline of the lake, along with the dramatic cliffs that surrounded it, but it was feared that the new shoreline would be liable to recede during dry seasons, exposing large tracts of unsightly and smelly mud. An ad hoc group, called the Thirlmere Defence Association, organized opposition to what became known as the Thirlmere scheme. Not only local residents, but lovers of nature, beauty, and heritage from throughout the English-speaking world, rallied round.

In 1878, against formidable odds, they managed to stall the legislation necessary to empower the Manchester Corporation (that is, the body that ran the city government) to purchase the property and easements required for this massive enterprise. Nevertheless, the legislation passed easily when it was reintroduced in 1879. After that, all that remained was rearguard ac-

tion, to minimize Manchester’s impact on people, property, and landscape.

Of course, this was not the only way to look at it. The progressive industrialists who ran mid-Victorian Manchester did not think of themselves as Vandals or Goths. Not long before the Thirlmere scheme was formulated, they thought that they had provided their dynamic city with an adequate supply of high-quality water by building a series of reservoirs in the nearby Peak District. But even as this massive project drew near completion, politicians and engineers began to realize that the industrial demand for water had outstripped predictions. In addition, increasing water consumption in working-class homes not only reflected population growth, but also rising standards of hygiene. A large new source of water had to be found.

After careful deliberation, Thirlmere emerged as the likeliest site for a new reservoir. It lay within a circle of steep hills that would be relatively easy to flood, and its high elevation would simplify the technical challenges of the 100-mile-long pipeline. Thirlmere’s water was pure enough for Manchester’s textile industry, and it was potable without additional treatment. Further, its shores were undeveloped and lightly populated. Once the decision had been made, the Manchester Corporation moved vigorously to purchase as much property as possible before its intentions became public, hoping (vainly, as it turned out) to forestall both “sentimental” resistance and inflated asking prices. In the end, however, perseverance and ready money triumphed over all obstacles. In 1894, the first Thirlmere water arrived in Manchester, accompanied by official dinners for the elite at each end of the pipeline, with fireworks and dancing in the streets for the hoi polloi.

But the mere fact of controversy—of alternative perspectives—does not constitute the major significance of this case, for the Victorians or for us. Similarly massive projects, most notably railroads, were common

features of the 19th-century landscape. Resistance was inevitable, but normally only on the part of people whose properties would be directly affected or of rate-payers who would have to foot the bill (1). What made the Thirlmere scheme especially noteworthy in its own time, and especially predictive of the shape of future conflicts, was the prominence of interests unconnected with property in the narrowest sense. Thirlmere lay close to the center of the Lake District, which had for a century occupied a pre-eminent posi-



Thirlmere in 1853.

tion in the pantheon of English natural beauty, even before its sacred status was consolidated by the poetry of William Wordsworth and his fellow Lake poets. Further, by the middle of the Victorian period, many writers, politicians, and others with ready access to the press had become summer residents of the Lake District; paradoxically, chiefly because of the construction of a railroad that Wordsworth had opposed a generation earlier. And perhaps most important, the Thirlmere Scheme was broached at a time when the notion of public ownership of landscape was being expanded and consolidated, so that it was both newly potent and newly vague.

In tandem with organized attempts to protect physical access to private property, via rights of way or public footpaths, came assertions of a new kind of spectatorial right or lien on land. It was claimed that the citizenry as a whole (the nation, that is to say) had a vested interest in preserving the traditional appearance of certain rural

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landscapes. As one newspaper editorial put it, "The lake country belongs in a sense, and that the widest and best sense, not to a few owners of mountain pasture but to the people of England" (2).

Contemporaries recognized the novelty of such claims. Thus, a generation later, the projectors of the Hetch Hetchy reservoir in California scrutinized records of the Thirlmere controversy, as they formulated their own response to the opposition mounted by the Sierra Club. In addition to defending the threatened lake itself, opponents of Manchester's plan made what might now be called an ecological argument, in which the value of Thirlmere derived from its integral position within a more extensive landscape or natural system. From this perspective, Thirlmere was a vital link in a chain that connected the entire region, not only because of its geographical position, but because the preservation of every part was essential to the preservation of the whole. The fact that the Lake District had managed to preserve its

(more than a million compared with mere tens of thousands) further served as the basis for insinuating that the ostensible defenders of Thirlmere were really arrogant elitists. This elite wished to preserve a resource for their own trivial pleasure of which the laboring people of Lancashire (the county in which Manchester was located) had more serious need.

They even challenged their critics on aesthetic grounds, asserting that, rather than impairing the Cumbrian landscape, their works would "enhance the natural beauties in that district" (3). The carriage road to be built along with the proposed waterworks would, in addition, make Thirlmere more accessible, so that the best views of the lake, which had previously been restricted to intrepid pedestrians, would become available to less enterprising visitors. And while making the lake more beautiful and more open to the admiring gaze, Manchester's plan would paradoxically also preserve Thirlmere from the deprivations of tourism and ordinary commerce. As one engineer pointed out, "in order to maintain the purity of the water ..., the Corporation have purchased the whole drainage ground of the lake, and it is their interest to prevent the erection of buildings, or lead workings, or of anything which will tend to injure or contaminate the water" (4).

All this may sound as though these two positions, although opposed, were not irreconcilable. But of course, as is normally the case in such confrontations, absolute recognition that the opposing position had some merit was not really the issue. Only the most blinkered of industrialists and engineers refused to acknowledge that Thirlmere, and the Lake District more generally, embodied and represented values that could not be completely gauged in utilitarian terms. Similarly, only the most intransigent of the lake's defenders regarded Manchester's desire for more water as intrinsically indefensible. For example, John Ruskin irascibly wished that Manchester would be drowned by the water it wished to steal. But for most of the combatants, the issue was relative: of two acknowledged goods, which one should have priority? To members of the Thirlmere Defence Association, there was no question that the preservation of the Lake District was more important than supplying Manchester with the best and cheapest water. From the perspective of the Manchester Corporation, the physical and financial requirements of their citizens and factories easily trumped the more nebulous con-

cerns of remoter constituencies. As the Lord Mayor put it at the official opening of the works, "Of course the inhabitants of that district did not desire to see their country disfigured, but they forgot, what ... they ought to have taken into consideration, the object that Manchester had in view. Sentimentalism ... ought to have given way in the face of the necessity of conferring upon a large and crowded population the inestimable boon of a good supply of water" (5). Such statements, with their bland self-confidence and their good-natured, condescending dismissal of countervailing concerns, offered the preservationists only the coldest kind of comfort.

Hindsight does not help much in reconciling these positions. The assessment of a policy or set of actions must depend to some extent on the range of available options. In 1878, the most compelling alternative to the Thirlmere scheme was the Thirlmere non-scheme, that is, the preservation of the status quo. Of course, that option no longer exists. Instead, possible alternatives are represented by the other Cumbrian lakes, which exemplify various histories of exploitation and development. Next to Thirlmere in its current incarnation, undistinguished but relatively undisturbed, some of them seem to have suffered at least equal disfigurement, and perhaps in not so good a cause.

Around the world, dams remain among the most controversial of public works projects. The river dams designed in the middle and late 20th century, such as the Grand Coulee on the Columbia, the Aswan on the Nile, and the still unfinished Three Gorges on the Yangtze, are on a much grander scale than a Victorian reservoir, with correspondingly greater environmental, demographic, and political stakes. The pressures that triggered the Thirlmere conflict have in the meantime been exacerbated. Increasing human population, heightened individual expectations, and national economies based on constant growth make it unlikely that these pressures will become less intense any time soon.

References and Notes

1. The Lake District constituted a small exception to this generalization, as illustrated by William Wordsworth's unsuccessful opposition to the construction of the Kendal and Windermere Railway, which was completed in 1847. His letters to the editor of the *Morning Post* are reproduced in *The Illustrated Wordsworth's Guide to the Lakes*, P. Bicknell, Ed. (Congdon and Weed, New York, 1984), pp. 186–198.
2. Thirlmere Defence Association, 1877, *Extracts from the Leading Journals on the Manchester Water Scheme* (J. Garnett, Windermere, UK, 1878), p. 15.
3. Thirlmere Water Bill, Report of Meeting of Owners and Ratepayers in the Town Hall, Manchester, UK, 16 August 1878.
4. J. F. L. Bateman, *History and Description of the Manchester Waterworks* (T. J. Day, Manchester, UK, 1884), p. 216.
5. J. J. Harwood, *The History and Description of the Thirlmere Water Scheme* (Henry Blacklock, Manchester, UK, 1895), p. 179.



Thirlmere today.

ugged beauty as a region, rather than as a set of isolated beauty spots, was cause for celebration, but not for complacency. The extent of undeveloped territory itself became a distinctive asset, meaning that it all should be protected, not that there was some to spare.

The advocates of the Thirlmere scheme countered with arguments that have become equally familiar, stressing progress and prosperity. They pointed out that the entire nation had a stake, since the British economy depended heavily on the manufacturing districts of the north. And, as the Manchester Corporation's spokesmen tirelessly repeated, in terms that combined populism and paternalism, more water was required to ensure full employment and modern sanitation for Manchester's working classes, amenities that they had often notably lacked. The sheer number of individuals to be benefited figured prominently in such arguments. The disproportion between the population of Manchester and its hinterland and that of the Lake District