## Manchester v. Thirlmere and the Construction of the Victorian Environment

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he mid-1870s saw the beginning of a protracted and hostile public encounter, frequently headlined in pugilistic terms as Manchester v. Thirlmere. At its heart was the decision of the Manchester city fathers to dam Thirlmere, one of the lakes in the Lake District, in order to convert it into a reservoir. The ensuing controversy—conducted in Parliament, in public meetings, in the periodical press, in pamphlets, and in books—was unprecedented in its energy and its engagement of widespread public sympathy. Both those for and against the project immediately recognized that much larger issues were at stake than the fate of a single lake, however picturesque, or the needs of a single city, however large, thirsty, or in need of cleansing. The opposing parties could be (and usually were) understood as representing powerful and incompatible icons: the Lake District, symbol (however inconsistently) of both natural beauty and unspoiled countryside, and Manchester, symbol (however problematically) of modern industrial progress.

Although this opposition is still readily recognizable today, it is also true that the aspect of the confrontation that seems most familiar, even predictable, to twenty-first-century readers was the aspect that seemed most novel to contemporaries. In modern terms, the central issue would be characterized as environmental. The word "environment" existed in the Victorian period, but it referred to surroundings in general, and the OED suggests that even this usage was new in the early

ABSTRACT: The proposed conversion of Thirlmere, in the Lake District, into a reservoir for the city of Manchester sparked a conflict that has served as a prototype for subsequent environmental confrontations. The debate had a heavy symbolic charge: the icon of progress confronted the icon of unspoiled countryside. During construction, and even after the reservoir opened in 1894, critics attempted a rearguard defense of what they regarded as the pristine Lake District landscape. The appeal of the pristine was the most compelling element of anti-reservoir arguments, but the exigencies of municipal progress proved still more powerful.

nineteenth century; its current sense did not emerge until the twentieth century. Yet as the debate provoked by Manchester's ambitious water project clearly demonstrates, almost all the components of a modern environmentalist position were in place by the 1870s. Further, they were packaged for that occasion in a way that has proved persistently compelling. The arguments put forth by both advocates and opponents of what was often called the Thirlmere Scheme have been rehearsed on subsequent similar occasions: the effort in the first decade of the twentieth century to prevent San Francisco's appropriation of the Hetch Hetchy Valley, then a part of Yosemite National Park, for a reservoir was among the earliest (see Righter). Like other such attempts, that effort was unsuccessful, as was the struggle to save Thirlmere. To a large extent the reasons for these repeated failures are economic and political. But these failures also reflect a weakness in the arguments of would-be protectors. The equation of present threat with previous pristinity has continued to exert an apparently ineluctable fascination, even though such claims have become increasingly easy to disprove and disparage. Nevertheless, to qualify as attractive candidates for rescue, at least in many preservationists' eyes, landscapes must seem unsullied.

The underlying conflict of interests that triggered the confrontation over Thirlmere was far from novel; on the contrary, it was almost routine. By the 1870s, the British public and the press had become accustomed to large public works projects after a century in which both landscapes and townscapes had been repeatedly torn apart to accommodate new roads, bridges, canals, railways, and large public buildings. Approbation of such enterprises was seldom unanimous, but the weightiest objections generally came from predictable sources. Owners of property to be compulsorily purchased (that is, to be purchased via eminent domain) feared that they would not be paid enough for their land; owners or tenants of nearby property feared that they would not be adequately compensated for their inconvenience; and ratepayers or share owners feared that their money would be spent with insufficient care or excessive generosity. These concerns were not necessarily mutually consistent, but they were of the same general kind. In other words, they all focused on the most literal (or at least the most reductive) kind of value, that represented by money. This underlying consensus may explain why conflicts over most Victorian public works projects, whether in the countryside or in city centers, attracted relatively little attention outside the immediately affected

localities. The status of stakeholder—one acknowledged to have a legitimate interest in the transformation of a given area—was extended only to those with a legally documented claim on the land and not to those whose claims were based on less tangible thoughts or feelings.

When the Waterworks Committee of the Manchester City Council began prospecting for a site for a new municipal reservoir, therefore, the town fathers anticipated a process that would follow the conventional pattern. After all, there was nothing surprising about their problem—every growing manufacturing town of the period had an increasing need for water for domestic and industrial consumption—or about their proposed solution. In fact, Manchester had faced the same problem once before, in the 1840s. At that time, the city had opted to construct a massive series of reservoirs at Longdendale in the nearby Peak District, but a generation later no such convenient location was available. Manchester was surrounded by other towns and cities whose citizens and factories were equally eager for water, and all reservoir sites of sufficient size in Lancashire had already been claimed. So the Manchester City Council had to look farther afield, but again, both this need and the direction of the search to supply it had long been predicted. In the previous decade, a parliamentary inquiry into the water supply of London had considered piping water from the hilly, rainy Lake District-an area that seemed to have been created for conversion into reservoirs, at least in the view of some pragmaticallyminded and anthropocentric people (fig. 1). There turned out to be no need to follow this path: adequate resources for the capital were identified within the drainage area of the Thames, and these could be exploited much more quickly and cheaply. The report explained this decision in terms of principle as well as of convenience: the Parliamentary Committee was persuaded that London should relinquish any claim on Cumbrian water to the industrial cities of the north, which had both greater need for it and, by virtue of geography, greater right to tap it (Royal Commission on Water Supply, see especially 255).

When Manchester looked in this direction, then, it was merely following a path that had already been laid out. After considering all the larger lakes, the Waterworks Committee settled on Thirlmere as the likeliest candidate for conversion into a reservoir. The choice was based on its multiple advantages. Some were technical, of primary interest to the engineers who would be responsible for designing the dam and pipeline and overseeing their construction: Thirlmere was

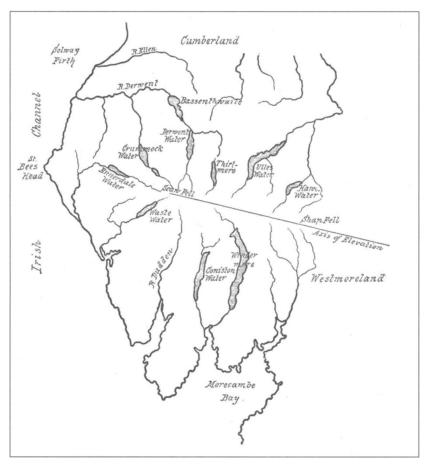


Fig. 1. "Sketch-map of the Lake District," from John Lubbock, *The Scenery of England and the Causes to which it is Due.* London: Macmillan, 1902. 357.

the second highest of the major lakes, which meant that its waters could flow downhill to Manchester, powered only by gravity; it was surrounded by steep rocky cliffs, which meant that it would be relatively easy to dam; and chemical tests confirmed that the water was sufficiently pure to meet the high standards of the cotton industry. Other reasons, however, were political. Although Thirlmere lay in the geographical heart of the Lake District between the towns of Keswick and Ambleside and just to the west of the main north-south road that connected them, only a few people lived nearby, and title to the lake and the surrounding real estate was therefore in the hands of a small number of property owners. As a result, the members of the Waterworks Committee hoped that dislocations, negotiations, and other attendant fuss would be kept to a minimum.

They were, therefore, surprised and dismayed when their initial forays provoked local suspicion and resistance that seemed to transcend the merely fiscal. Some of the principal property owners proved unusually reluctant to sell or even to discuss the possibility of selling. Most notably, Thomas Stanger Leathes, who owned the lake itself as well as a substantial lakeshore property, refused to allow anyone employed by or belonging to the Manchester Corporation onto his land, so that on one occasion, a group of distinguished council members wishing to survey the proposed reservoir site had to skulk through the vegetation on their hands and knees (Harwood 27-28). And resistance was not confined to those with conventional property interests around the targeted lake or along the 100-mile-long pipeline that would carry the water to Manchester. Alarmed by the activities of Manchester's agents and by rumors (correct, as it turned out) that the planned transformation would involve raising the level of the lake so that its dramatic northern cliffs would be submerged, its area more than doubled (fig. 2), and its gentler southern banks transformed into unsightly swamps, more than fifty local property owners gathered at a hotel at Grasmere in September of 1877, where they founded the Thirlmere Defence Association (TDA).

It was more than coincidence that Grasmere, in addition to being the closest substantial village to Thirlmere along the route of the proposed pipeline, was strongly associated with the life and poetry of William Wordsworth. Like the whole of the Lake District, it occupied a special place in the national imagination on both literary and scenic grounds. Relying in large part on these associations, the Thirlmere Defence Association immediately began a program of energetic pamphleteering which resulted in such publications as Manchester and Thirlmere Water Scheme: Statement of the Case of the Thirlmere Defence Association (1878), which aimed at the much larger, vaguer constituency of "all Englishmen" (including the Anglophones scattered across the empire and ex-empire) (10), and claimed that the transformation of Thirlmere at the hands of Manchester's engineers would be an even "greater and more irreparable loss to the nation, as a whole, than . . . to the landowners in the district" (9). The writers urged sympathizers to sign and circulate petitions to "induce Parliament to deal with this matter as a national question" rather than "on local and technical grounds" (21), and also to send "donations, large and small" (22). Both requests met with positive responses. Moral and financial support poured in from throughout Britain and from as far away as the United States and

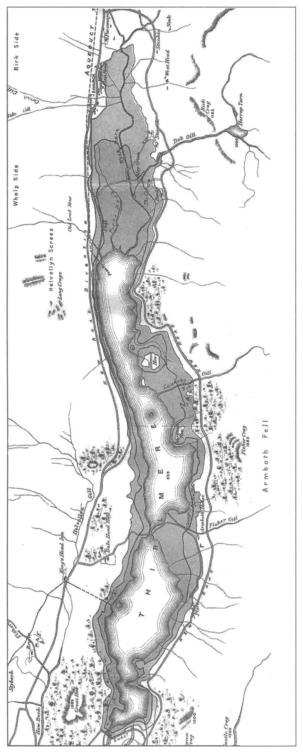


Fig. 2. "Plan Showing Works at Lake Thirlmere," from John James Harwood, The History and Description of the Thirlmere Water Scheme. Manchester: Henry Blacklock, 1895. 30-31 [insert].

Australia. In consequence, the Manchester Corporation Water Bill was subjected to more elaborate scrutiny than was usual for such private legislation (any large public works project had to obtain this form of parliamentary approval). And the Thirlmere Defence Association was able to finance an expensive opposition that prevented the passage of the bill in 1878, although not in 1879 when it was enacted without much trouble.

Thus, in the end, this story did not diverge greatly from the conventional plot anticipated by the Manchester city fathers. But its intermediate twists and turns were highly unusual. One reason that opposition to the Waterworks Committee was bound to fail in the end was the legal originality of the grounds on which it was based—that is, to put it literally, its lack of precedent. The TDA's arguments invoked a nebulous new conception of ownership, the idea that citizens of a nation should have some say in the disposition of significant landscapes even if they held no formal title to the property in question. This kind of claim seemed so radical that on 22 March 1878, one shocked member of the Parliamentary Select Committee characterized it as "rather communistic" (House 460). Even if his more broad-minded colleagues were inclined to sympathize, there was no clear legislative way for them to express their sympathies. Non-parliamentarians were not, however, similarly constrained by mere law, and they endlessly rehearsed these inadmissible arguments in the court of public opinion, where they received a more responsive hearing. It was in this figurative court that something like the modern sense of "environment" began to emerge, although it was not so characterized.

To some extent, the uproar reflected the charisma of the Lake District, rather than that of the threatened lake. By the time that the Thirlmere Scheme was mooted, the history of Lake District appreciation stretched back for nearly two centuries. Tourists had begun to visit the remote hills of Cumberland and Westmorland toward the end of the seventeenth century, although they were not universally pleased with what they saw there. For example, Daniel Defoe found the Cumbrian landscape "eminent only for being the wildest, most barren and frightful of any that I have passed over in England, or even in Wales itself" (291). By the middle of the eighteenth century, guided by the accounts of more appreciative viewers like the poet Thomas Gray, travelers were learning to love the deep valleys and rugged uplands, although Arthur Young, the evangelist of agricultural improvement,

still considered its "totally uncultivated" moors to present "one dreary prospect, that makes one melancholy to behold" (169).

By the time that John Bailey and George Culley made their agricultural survey of the lake counties at the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, even the pragmatic gaze had moderated. They parenthetically noted that the area was "ornamented with many beautiful and extensive lakes; which, with their pleasing accompaniments have of late years made the tour of the lakes a fashionable amusement" (204). Along with tourists came the infrastructure of tourism: inns, carriages, guides, and guidebooks. Aficionados of the picturesque began to build houses so that they could admire the scenery on a more protracted basis (Pevsner 37). As aesthetic sensibilities grew less restrained, the charms of Cumbria's "romantic landscape" became still more compelling; a travel book published in 1821 claimed that England "can vie with any country in Europe in wild and romantic scenery" and, still more strongly, that "in all that constitutes the perfection of romantic landscape, England is without a rival" (Picturesque iii-v). As a slightly earlier traveler put it, "Nature" could be admired judiciously in the Lake District without "the eye . . . being either glutted by expanse, or DISGUSTED by deformity," hazards that awaited the sensitive English tourist in Switzerland and other foreign destinations (Budworth and Palmer xiv).

The appreciation of Thirlmere itself lagged somewhat behind that of the Lake District as a whole. The striking harshness of the lake's setting made most eighteenth-century visitors uneasy. Even Thomas Gray found that "the water looks black from its depth (tho, really clear as glass) & from the gloom of the vast crags, that scowl over it" (87). James Clarke, a contemporary land surveyor, complained that the valley lacked "anything very entertaining"; further, the "tremendous mountains" that constituted its sides were "laden with large loose stones, which seem ready to drop . . . on the smallest occasion, a sight of sufficient terror to hasten the traveller from a scene of such seemingly impending danger" (118). The artist William Gilpin, who traveled in search of the picturesque, identified the "entrance into Cumberland" (that is, the descent into the valley of Thirlmere from the south) as "a scene very strongly marked with the sublime," and the lake itself as in "every way suited to the ideas of desolation, which surround it" (1: 170-71). Another visitor, Adam Walker, referred to Thirlmere's shape as "antlike" and regretted that the proximity of "lofty Helvellyn" (the mountain or hill that rises immediately to the

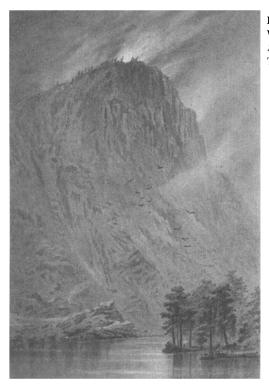


Fig. 3. "Raven's Crag" by Elijah Walton. In Walton, English Lake Scenery. London: W. M. Thompson, 1876. N. pag.

east of Thirlmere) could not prevent the scene from "degenerating" as he passed it on his way south (107-08). Even Ann Radcliffe, the celebrated purveyor of the exoticised fictional Gothic, proved less than enthusiastic in the presence of the domestic sublime. She found Thirlmere a "narrow and unadorned lake, having little else than rocky fells," Wythburn at its southern tip a "poor village," and the whole valley a scene of "ruin and privation" (469-70).

As time went by, however, visitors' default experience shifted from depression to exaltation. Coleridge poetically forecast this reversal in an 1803 notebook, apostrophizing the lake—"O Thirlmere!"—in order to celebrate the very features that had disturbed earlier visitors: its "naked or ferny Crags—ravines, behaired with Birches . . . dazzling wet places of small rock—precipices . . . Cliffs like organ pipes" (qtd. in Lindop 119) (fig. 3). Within a few decades, this altered perception had become widespread among tourists of ordinary sensibility, even verging on a stock response. Describing a trip taken in the late 1820s, the journalist Edward Baines evoked a scene that his eighteenth-century predecessors would have recognized easily—"the dark, narrow lake . . . overhung . . . by crags . . . naked and gloomy"—but he attributed to it an

opposite aesthetic and emotional valence, appreciatively characterizing the surrounding cliffs as "stupendous" and the whole scene as one of "wild magnificence" (117). Thirlmere's shore was not prettified by decorative plantations of trees, in contrast with the cultivated shores of more densely inhabited lakes, and Baines noted with relief that its few stands of fir only tended to increase its gloom (117). So strongly did subsequent Victorian taste run in this direction that several decades later, Harriet Martineau regretted the disappearance of these dark arboreal masses, complaining that "the only gloom in the scene is from Helvellyn" (*Complete Guide* 71).

Public opposition to the conversion of Thirlmere was grounded in this aesthetic sensibility. But aesthetics alone do not explain the intensity-at once moralistic and nationalistic-that characterized much of the resistance to Manchester's plans. Members of the Thirlmere Defence Association and their sympathizers rallied to protect purity as well as picturesqueness, chthonic Englishness as well as traditional countryside. Opponents repeatedly claimed that Lake District landscapes-and therefore Thirlmere as well-were not only unique but uniquely natural, to be appreciated because they were unpeopled and unaltered by human activity. Sometimes observers expressed this conviction obliquely, by describing a scene composed exclusively of natural features. For example, when the young John Ruskin and his cousin Mary Richardson visited the lake in 1830, they noted the height of Helvellyn, as well as "numerous beautiful crags . . . sunbeams . . . little streams" and the "glassy waters of Thirlmere"; human manufacture entered only figuratively, as the "smoothest mirror" to which they compared the surface of the lake (41). This assertion could also be explicit, as when Thomas De Quincey claimed that the Lake District had recently been "one paradise of virgin beauty"; in his view, even aesthetic appreciations of the region had caused it to be tainted by "false taste, the pseudo-romantic rage" (he died before the Thirlmere Scheme was mooted) (3: 311). The lake's later defenders offered similar accounts. Stanley Hughes Le Fleming, the proprietor of Rydal Hall, a distinguished residence located several miles south of Thirlmere, petitioned Parliament against the Thirlmere Scheme, claiming that he was "peculiarly interested in the preservation of the Lake District in its natural state, unmarred by modern engineering works" ("Petition").

Tampering with such a pristine landscape was inevitably castigated in the language of contamination, error, and transgression. In

its mildest form, this rhetoric suggested that the Thirlmere Scheme was a thoughtless misdemeanor, a "needless tampering with the beauties of the Lake District" (Somervell 11). But the "defacement of Thirlmere," as one architectural journal called it, was more frequently presented in terms of physical assault (TDA, *Extracts* 11), as when Robert Somervell called the proposed dam a disfiguration that would "mar the face of nature" (13). Such characterizations, colored by the religious overtones of words like "sacrifice," suggested offenses against God as well as against nature and the people of England, a suggestion made more forcefully when Somervell condemned the project as "the desecration of Thirlmere" (Somervell 15).

In the nineteenth century, as at present, however, the notion of virgin land was both complex and compound. Along with the (rather feminine) overtones of vulnerable purity, it could carry the (rather masculine) overtones of untamed wilderness—something much closer to the frontier, as it existed (or was imagined to exist) in the Americas, Asia, or Africa. Among the voluminous literary and paraliterary effusions inspired by the debate about the Thirlmere Scheme were some that made that connection explicit, putting it into the mouths of fictional speakers. For example, King Croesus; or Harlequin Town Clerk Irwell and the Thirlmere Lake, is a closet drama in three brief acts, dedicated by its pseudonymous author to "all corporations, local boards, and public bodies in England, and the general bumbledom of Europe" (n. pag.). In it, Titania, the Queen of Thirlmere, learns with horror of Manchester's designs on her lake, and then tricks and humiliates the members of the delegation from the city council when they arrive heavily laden with purses and picnic baskets. Titania and her immortal attendants (including Puck and Ariel as well as various fauns, nymphs, and satyrs) all speak in pentameter couplets as they lament the proposed violation, while the mortals from Manchester express themselves in the most vulgar and pedestrian prose. Mr. William W. Shakespeare Esau Bung, an American tourist who predictably speaks no more elegantly than the visitors from Manchester, also gives initial cause for concern. But he nevertheless ends up on the side of the fairies, truculently declaring to the acquisitive civic officials that the landscape of the Lake District should be as wild and free as that of the American frontier: "I say this 'ere lake and those there mountains are as much mine as your'n; they are the natural wild scenes of my ancestors' home as of yours. . . . I don't understand our old country being spoilt for nothing. . . . I shall like to catch you trying to buy our Niagara" (22).

Whatever their experience of remote wilderness settings, most of the people who argued for the purity and wildness of Thirlmere in particular and the Lake District in general were very familiar with the area. They knew exactly what it looked like, and many of them had walked extensively through it. As has often been the case, however, cognitive dissonance wilted in the face of strong conviction. In this, as in so many other aspects of Lake District appreciation, Wordsworth led the way. He devoted one of the main subdivisions of his 1810 Guide to the Lakes-entitled "Aspect of the Country as Affected by its Inhabitants"—to a survey of the human impact on the Lake District from the ancient Britons to the early nineteenth century. Although he noted a variety of conspicuously artificial structures, Wordsworth concluded that "the hand of man has acted upon the surface of the inner regions of this mountainous country" in a way that was "subservient to the powers... of nature" (105). His conflation of human and natural processes became increasingly thorough as he descended the social ladder, so that the cottages of the humbler inhabitants reminded him "of a production of nature, and may . . . rather be said to have grown than to have been erected; ... so little is there in them of formality, such is their wildness and beauty" (105).

Wordsworth produced increasingly elaborate versions of his Guide over the next quarter century. To the end of his long life he continued to view the Lake District through this naturalizing lens, even as he bemoaned the changes to which his own poetry and prose had significantly contributed. The responsibility was not his alone, of course. In Wordsworth's childhood, the Lake District had become easier for outsiders to reach as a result of improvements to the road between Kendal and Keswick (Bouch and Jones 279). And the infrastructure continued to improve, despite Wordsworth's best efforts. The first flush of railway development in the 1830s did not reach into the heart of the Lake District, but by the early 1840s, planning had begun for a branch of the main line from Lancaster to Carlisle that would pass through Kendal on the way to Windermere (Rollinson 139). Wordsworth was the most conspicuous objector, contributing first a sonnet and then several long letters to the Morning Post (rpt. in Wordsworth 185-98). The sonnet, entitled "On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway" and published on 12 October 1844, famously began, "Is then no nook of English ground secure / from rash assault?" and went on to characterize the proposed railway line as "blight," "ruthless change," and "false utilitarian lure." He

was especially worried about the damage that might be done to the "beautiful romance of nature" by the flood of impecunious tourists, for whom it would become newly accessible.

Wordsworth's grandiloquent arguments against the new line proved inefficacious; indeed, they never stood a chance. Although his position as poet laureate gave him ready access to the press, it did not guarantee a sympathetic reception for what was generally perceived as both selfish elitism and moralistic opposition to progress (Marshall and Walton 205-06; Richard 125). (And in any case, his attempted intervention came too late. Supported by powerful local interests, the Windermere Railway was already in an advanced state of planning by 1844, and it transported its first passengers in 1847.) However, neither this conspicuous failure nor the increase in traffic that followed the railroad's tracks made Wordsworth's perspective less appealing to subsequent defenders of the unspoiled Lake District. On the contrary, that perspective gained wider appeal as the evidence supporting the idea that the region was untouched diminished, and counterevidence became increasingly conspicuous. The virgin or natural condition of the Lake District seems to have become not only a major component of its aesthetic and patriotic value, but almost a necessary precondition for its defense.

But the effort involved in maintaining such beliefs was considerable. Although the immediate surroundings of Thirlmere, like the Lake District as a whole, were sparsely populated and, even by nineteenth-century rural standards, undeveloped, that did not mean that they were untouched (or even insignificantly touched) by human hands. In fact, the traces of long and transformative human occupation were readily apparent. In the last half century or so, scientists have developed methods that allow us to pinpoint and characterize successive human impacts with greater precision than was possible in the late nineteenth century, but even without these techniques the basic story was accessible and knowable. Indeed, it was clear enough that failure to read it could be counted as an act of will.

To begin with what is most obvious, a sparsely populated area was not the same as an empty one. As had been the case for centuries, almost every level of rural society and every kind of rural activity was represented in the neighborhood of Thirlmere in the 1870s. A few families, all of whom were to play important parts in the acquisition story, controlled most of the lakeside property. The Leathes family, who owned the lake itself in addition to their terrestrial acres, had inhabited Dale

Head Hall since the reign of Queen Elizabeth (Thompson 109). Although it lacked the grandeur of an aristocratic country seat, it was a "beautiful old house" with an impressive literary pedigree (Rawnsley, Coach Drive 65); earlier in the century, Wordsworth and Southey had been frequent visitors. Across the lake from Dale Head Hall was Armboth House, which had been the home of the Jackson family for about the same stretch of time. It was less imposing than Dale Head Hall—really just a substantial farmhouse—but, at least according to Victorian legend, it could claim a supernatural distinction: it was supposedly haunted by a drowned bride, who resurfaced from time to time with a large dog, swimming shoreward to partake of her "ghostly wedding feast" (Martineau, Guide to Keswick 8; Baron 14-15).

The head of the Leathes family owned the manor of Legburthwaite, on the northeastern side of the lake, and the head of the Vane family, whose seat was elsewhere in Cumberland, owned the adjoining manor of Wythburn. By the middle of the nineteenth century, they unofficially presided over about two hundred residents of the Vale of Thirlmere. These inhabitants tended to live on the less hilly areas near the road, either south as it headed toward Dunmail Raise (the boundary between Cumberland and Westmorland) or northwest toward the opening of the Vale of St. John (Armstrong 6; Mannix and Whellan 564-65). In addition to isolated cottages, there were also a few small settlements. Just south of the southern end of Thirlmere was Wythburn, site of what was at one time mistakenly celebrated as the smallest church in England and the only building in the vicinity of Thirlmere that Nikolaus Pevsner later thought worth mentioning (Brabant 164; Pevsner 213). In recognition of its local preeminence, Wythburn was referred to as "The City," although whether with hubris or humor was not clear, at least to the authors of Victorian guidebooks. Travelers also disagreed about its other characteristics. It looked "cold and comfortless" to Adam Walker in 1791 (107), and it still seemed "a miserable hamlet with nothing curious about it" when Eliza Lynn Linton visited seventy years later (44), but just before the Thirlmere dam was completed, Samuel Barber called it "a marvelously picturesque spot," noting that "the old world character of the buildings greatly enhances its picturesque charm" (21). Its two inns, the Nag's Head and the Cherry Tree, were generally noted with approval, however.

Although they had been established long before the age of recreational travel, the inns (and the members of their staffs) throve on

the increasing numbers of Victorian tourists, especially those vigorous enough to wish to climb Helvellyn but not bold enough to attempt the more challenging ascent from its eastern slope. By the middle of the nineteenth century Wythburn's population included clergymen, a schoolmaster, several tradespeople, and such artisans as carpenters, blacksmiths, stonemasons, and shoemakers, but most local inhabitants continued to live off the land in one way or another. Farmers planted the relatively small amount of flat land at the bottom of the valley with grain (mostly oats) and hardy vegetables, even though the growing season was short and the soil "generally barren" (Clarke 118). The real farming wealth of the district lay in the still less fertile hills and fells, where grazed enormous flocks of Herdwick sheep, a small, sturdy breed that, although disparaged by agricultural improvers, was well adapted to the demanding upland environment (Dickinson 264). After farming, the most significant local extractive industry was mining. In addition to small lead, iron, and copper workings scattered around the lake, there was a commercialscale lead mine on the face of Helvellyn.

The landscape surrounding Thirlmere bore traces of all of these people and pursuits. Most conspicuous were the buildings, whether gathered in the hamlets, or scattered as isolated dwellings and outbuildings. Only the main road was passable by horse-drawn carriages, but the valley was crisscrossed by less commodious paths and trails. Most of these served the purposes of residents, connecting farmsteads with the hamlets and the main road, or with each other and the upland sheep walks. But tourists also made use of them, if they heeded the advice offered by the more judicious and elaborate guidebooks to view Thirlmere and Helvellyn from the rougher track along the western shore, or if they scaled Helvellyn, or if they undertook one of the more extended pedestrian tours of the Lake District, for which a great deal of published advice was also available. Additionally, field boundaries were marked by laboriously assembled dry stone walls, and evidence of repeated patterns of sowing and plowing remained imprinted in the earth itself. Active and abandoned mines dotted the hillsides, often to the regret of unwary walkers. And the wooden bridge (fig. 4) that spanned the lake at its wasp waist-variously characterized as Celtic and primitive or as "quaint" (Huson 28) and "highly picturesque" (Prior 36)—distinguished it from "all the other lakes in Cumberland and Westmorland" (Robinson 201-02).

These were only the most recent and conspicuous indications of the extent to which human activity had shaped a landscape that persis-

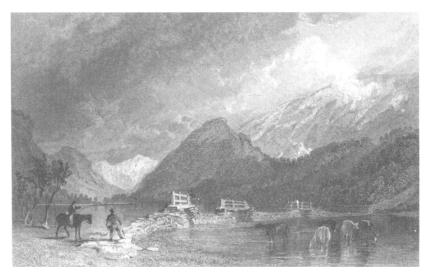


Fig. 4. "Thirlmere Bridge Looking North, Cumberland" by Thomas Allom. From Thomas Rose, Westmorland, Cumberland, Durham, and Northumberland, Illustrated. London: Fisher and Son, 1833. 117.

tently struck observers as wild and forbidding. Such relatively superficial modifications were part of a longer history, one that Thirlmere shared with the rest of the central Lake District. But as the celebration of nature tended to obscure living human inhabitants and their impact on the landscape, it similarly tended to overlook their vanished predecessors. By the time that the railroads and waterworks began to encroach on the Cumbrian hills, people had been exploiting them for about ten thousand years, since the retreat of the latest Pleistocene glaciation. The ice hung on longer there than in less elevated regions, and it had visibly marked the land, scouring valleys, depositing stones, creating lakes, and rearranging watersheds. During the Mesolithic period (the time between the disappearance of the glaciers and about 4,000 BC), human impact on the Lake District was slight. Hunter-gatherers burned vegetation, and on the coastal plain to the southwest they did so with sufficient frequency and vigor to alter the composition of the flora (Halliday 45-46; Hey 190; Millward and Robinson 72-73). In the succeeding Neolithic period, people began to settle even on the less promising uplands, and pollen analysis suggests that by the second millennium BC (the Bronze Age) there had been significant forest clearance, for both pastoral (grass) and arable (cereal) farming, as well as to provide fuel (Piggott 173-76; Millward and Robinson 74-75). Sediments preserved at the bottom of Thirlmere indicate cycles of clearance and regrowth of the surrounding

woods as early as 1,000 BC (Pearsall and Pennington 231-32). The results of pollen analysis were not, of course, available in the nineteenth century, but these early agriculturists also left less subtle mementos of their presence. Thirlmere is surrounded by prehistoric monuments, ranging from modest cairns and boulders, to the remains of hill forts, to the large stone circle at Castlerigg, spectacularly situated within a bowl of hills (Clark and Thompson 10). Nor is the evidence of early human exploitation of the Lake District confined to the immediate vicinity. Not far south of Thirlmere lay an important center of Neolithic industry. Axe heads manufactured from Langdale stone have been unearthed throughout Britain, indicating that this apparently remote area was already embedded in a far-flung trading network (Davis 37; Cunliffe 21).

Despite its proximity to Hadrian's Wall, the Romans did not show much interest in the Lake District. Some of the high Cumbrian roads show signs of Roman engineering, but in general British patterns of settlement and land use persisted, with cultivation and forest clearance fluctuating up and down the hills as the climate became milder or more severe (Fell 65-68; Millward and Robinson 122-23). The English and Danish invaders who succeeded the Romans shared their lack of interest in mountain living, and so the central Lake District remained a peripheral Celtic preserve (Darby 13; Fell 84). But the next wave of invaders—the Norse, who arrived in the tenth century—included people well accustomed to scratching an agricultural living from barren uplands. They settled the high valleys with a thoroughness to which the names of local people and places offer persistent testimony—and apparently without too much violence, since much of this relatively undesirable land had remained untenanted (Darby 19-20). They cleared woods in order to make farmsteads, and their cattle and sheep grazed the hills. Over time, the more efficient and less choosy sheep became the dominant ungulate presence, steadily nibbling away at struggling tree saplings and so preventing reforestation (Fell 84; Winchester 103-04). Thus people and livestock together consolidated the dramatic landscape of bare fells and long views that seemed so natural to Wordsworth and his friends more than half a millennium later.

This stark romantic setting also included some trees, but the woods that Wordsworth admired were very different from those that the Norsemen had felled, let alone those burned by much earlier farmers and hunter-gatherers. As William Gilpin had reflected a generation earlier, "even the wild features of nature suffer continual change . . .

above all, from the growth, or destruction, of timber" (ix-x). He attributed the "devastation" (xi) of the timber of the northern Lake District to a proximate political cause: after the Jacobite uprising of 1715, the Earl of Derwentwater's estates had been "forfeited to the Crown," and their trees had been clear cut "to increase the endowment" of the naval hospital at Greenwich (xi). In fact, however, Gilpin was describing only the most recent consequences of a process with much older roots and deeper motivations. Woods had been decaying and falling since people had made their first appearance. The deforestation begun by the earliest settlers had proceeded without any intentional check through the medieval period, although it was occasionally interrupted or even reversed by forces beyond human control: the vicissitudes of climate (unusually cold or wet periods made marginal lands still harder to cultivate) or of epidemiology (reduced population led farmers to abandon less rewarding terrain). When small-scale local industry became more prevalent in the Lake District, as it did in many rural areas where the soil and topography made arable farming difficult, trees were as likely to be cut to fuel furnaces as to create new fields.

The industrial consumption of trees had very different implications for the landscape, however. Agricultural lumbering was, on the whole, unidirectional; once a field was cleared, it tended to stay cleared, its timber a windfall bonus rather than a renewable crop. Furnaces, on the contrary, required a constant supply of wood or charcoal. When, in the sixteenth century, shortages began to loom, smelters, tanners, and other industrialists attempted to safeguard this essential resource by protecting existing trees, planting new ones, and promoting sustainable methods of wood harvesting, such as coppicing (Smout 47-48). The fact that highly industrialized rural counties like Cumberland tended to be much more heavily forested than intensively farmed areas testified to the success of their strategies. Of course, in a sense, these woodlands had been preserved as much in principle as in practice. That is, since their purpose was to provide fuel, they lacked the permanence as well as the biological diversity of their predecessors. Stands of trees were repeatedly cut down and monoculturally replanted, with species dictated by botanical fashion rather than by indigenous natural history. In the century before the Thirlmere Scheme was mooted, most descriptions of the lake included some notice of the nearby woods. Their lack of consistency is very striking. In 1773, a traveler noted only "scattered trees" around the margin of the lake (Hutchinson 177), and

two decades later it seemed "beautiful though unadorned with trees" (Budworth and Palmer 158). Nevertheless, Victorian observers looked back nostalgically to a time in the youth of people who were old when Wordsworth was a boy, when "the squirrel could go from Wythburn to Keswick (six miles) on the tops of trees" (Whellan 41). This recollection might have been accurate but other squirrels attempting the same route earlier as well as later would have had to pick their way along the ground.

Thus the woods, fields, and uplands that evidenced 10,000 years of human occupation of the Lake District were reconceived by Thirlmere's self-appointed defenders as components of the pristine landscape. And if economic activities involving animals and plants were frequently conflated with nature (especially by people who did not make their living from the soil), it took still greater intellectual energy to consider mining for copper and lead in the same organic light. Both its products and its processes would seem to ally it irresistibly with technology. But if the emphasis was on the miners rather than on their work, even this industrial practice could be naturalized. There had been mines and quarries in the Lake District for thousands of years, but, somewhat oddly, the excavations most frequently transfigured in this way were staffed in the mid-sixteenth century by a group of skilled workers from Germany and patented by Elizabeth I as the Company of Mines Royal. Their smelting operation was located in Keswick and most of their mines were nearby, including two in the immediate vicinity of Thirlmere (Collingwood 128). It took some time for the woods to regenerate on slopes laid bare to fuel furnaces, and for the grass to cover the spoil heaps near their pits (Bouch and Jones 125). Nevertheless, the German miners did not live in memory as protoindustrial despoilers, but rather as quaint contributors to local color. Even Canon H. D. Rawnsley, who was to emerge as one of the most energetic and voluble defenders of Thirlmere's status quo, had a soft spot for them, devoting a whole chapter in a volume nostalgically entitled Past and Present at the English Lakes (1916) to this Elizabethan enterprise. Acknowledging that "it is true that the German miners denuded the Lake District of trees," he nevertheless portrayed them sympathetically, perhaps because they made "riches pour into our dales" (67) or perhaps because they "re-opened what probably were old mines" (73). Thus he made it possible for readers to conceive of the miners' operation, which had introduced new techniques to the Lake

District and embedded them in the emerging commercial networks of Britain and Europe, as traditional, significantly connected to a more remote and misty past.

In sum, the image of the Lake District as an untouched natural region was sustained by an extensive series of oversights and willfully radical reinterpretations. It is impossible not to wonder how Thirlmere's defenders could have made a claim that was so easy to falsify, and therefore so likely to be falsified to their disadvantage. Of course, the argumentative and evidentiary problems that they thus created for themselves did not go unremarked by advocates of the Thirlmere Scheme, who were, in their different style, equally articulate and impassioned—and a good deal more addicted to analysis and information. They played the mutability card in the most extreme and provocative way, skipping over the alterations in the landscape caused by modern improving landlords, Norsemen and other medieval farmers, and the more distant human settlers of the Iron Age, the Bronze Age, and the Neolithic period. Instead, they pointed out that nature itself had dramatically altered the appearance of Thirlmere. The Pleistocene glaciations had scooped out the deep valleys in which the Cumbrian lakes lay, and in the immediate wake of the Ice Age, they had been filled with a lot more water. All of them had been much larger in the not-so-very-remote past before human habitation. At Thirlmere, for example, as the director general of the Geological Survey testified on 13 March 1878, "the lake was considerably longer . . . beyond the upper end as it stands at present" (House 215). With a chronological perspective sufficiently extended, it became possible to understand (or to claim to understand) the flooding of Thirlmere in its hydrologically deprived condition as the restoration of the more robust lake of an earlier epoch.

One reason that the lake's defenders resisted this lengthened time scale and thus left themselves open to critique via travesty was that it underscored problems that have also bedeviled subsequent environmentalists, whether self-styled or not. Acknowledging that both Thirlmere in particular and the Lake District as a whole had pasts that were checkered and volatile, rather than static and pure, would have confronted the lake's defenders with a series of difficult questions: What are the indications that preservation is appropriate and necessary? What is the ideal past condition at which restoration should aim? If some changes have taken place in the past, on what grounds should



Fig. 5. "Thirlmere: Before the Enlargement of the Lake," from John Edward Marr, Cumberland. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1910. 46.



Fig. 6. "Thirlmere at the Present Day," from John Edward Marr, *Cumberland*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1910. 47.

other changes be prevented in the future? Furthermore, in the late nineteenth century the lengthened chronological perspective itself raised a number of controversial issues, as the vast stretches of time required by biological evolution and uniformitarian geology, together with the smaller, sharper shocks produced by fossil bones that demonstrated that cool, tame, rainy England had once nurtured large, ferocious, tropical (and arctic) creatures, combined to complicate preservationists' claims that Thirlmere's landscape was unchanging and should therefore remain unchanged. The advocates of preservation thus risked committing themselves to the status quo in the long term as well as the short term—against progress in the Pleistocene as well as in the present.

Ultimately, arguments based on nostalgia and aesthetics could not withstand the imperatives of modern industry and demography. The reservoir was completed in 1894, and the arrival of the first Thirlmere water in Manchester was welcomed with festivities at both ends of the hundred-mile-long pipeline. Predictably enough, the needs of

Manchester received top billing. As the Lord Mayor put it at the opening ceremony,

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. (qtd. in Harwood 179)

Press coverage tended to follow a similar line. The Illustrated London News began its special report on "the inauguration of the supply of water from Thirlmere Lake to Manchester, which the citizens of Cottonopolis are about to celebrate with so much rejoicing" with praise of "a daring enterprise and a memorable engineering work" ("Manchester-Thirlmere"). Even Canon Rawnsley participated in the formalities, reluctantly admitting that it would be necessary to "trust Manchester in the future to help them in the battle for preserving the beauty of this Land of Lakes" (qtd. in Harwood 176). Although Rawnsley was not by nature an ironist, there is irony in his rhetorical attempt to enlist the agents of the Lake District's transformation in his campaign against change. In his view, the need for preservation remained constant, even when the object of preservation had been altered (figs. 5 and 6). Like every other feature of the Thirlmere controversy, Rawnsley's dilemma has recurred many times, and it has usually been similarly resolved. Environmentalists (to use the current term) have often had to admit defeat, but they have more rarely been willing to acknowledge the historically constructed quality of even those places least obviously touched by human hands.

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