

BOOK REVIEW

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The Dawn of Green. Manchester, Thirlmere and Modern Environmentalism

BY HARRIET RITVO

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Manchester's Thirlmere Scheme, the making of a new reservoir in the English Lake District for the supply of fresh water to one of the greatest industrial cities, was one of the many large scale public works undertaken in the nineteenth century. These included railway lines, river embankments and docks, and indeed many other reservoirs. These schemes were frequently controversial, but Harriet Ritvo argues in this fascinating book that the Thirlmere Scheme engendered a controversy of interest to a much wider constituency than most. Indeed, she considers that 'Lovers of the countryside from throughout Great Britain, and indeed, from throughout the empire and former empire, claimed that they would experience loss' (p. 2) as a result of the conversion of Thirlmere from a lake to a reservoir. She then provides, through a scrupulous examination of archival sources, contemporary newspapers and magazines and a wide range of secondary sources, an analysis of why this particular undertaking attracted so much public attention and notoriety.

The key reason for the intensity of the debate over Thirlmere was the crucially important role of the Lake District as a place where ideas of landscape and nature were nurtured and publicized through the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Lake District was idealized as a landscape by artists and poets, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge, who were influenced by landscape theorists of the late eighteenth century such as William Gilpin and Uvedale Price. Wordsworth's guidebook to the Lakes, first published in 1810, went through many editions, and Uvedale Price (1820) thought it should be the manual for improvers 'in every part of the kingdom'. Thomas De Quincey saw the Lake District as 'a paradise of virgin beauty' where 'even the rare works of man... were hoar with the gray tints of an antique picturesque' (p. 12). The Lake District was forged as a symbol of wildness and nature at the very time when Britain's industrializing was at its most intense.

Thirlmere was not the most famous of lakes, but it was included in most guides, especially as it was on the main turnpike road developed in the 1760s between the principal towns of Keswick and Kendal.

Ritvo argues that because Thirlmere was in a steep and narrow valley it provided a 'less genial view' than the larger lakes such as Windermere and Ullswater and that it 'functioned as a kind of aesthetic litmus test'. Thomas Gray had noted the 'gloom of the vast crags, that scowl over it' and William Gilpin argued that the descent into the valley of Thirlmere from the south was 'very strongly marked with the sublime' and the lake itself was 'suited to the ideas of desolation' which surrounded it (p. 13). Harriet Ritvo carefully evokes the ways in which the scheme to modernize this 'natural' lake and valley in the 1870s to provide fresh water to Manchester became a *cause célèbre* which opened up a wide-ranging debate over notions of the public ownership of nature and landscape. She does this in five chapters: the first two, 'The Unspoiled Lake' and 'The Dynamic City', set the scene, while the third chapter 'The Struggle for Possession' assiduously documents and traces the public debate, through careful readings of pamphlets and newspapers, between the Thirlmere Defence Association and Manchester Corporation. The Manchester Corporation Water Bill, a private bill, eventually reached the House of Commons in 1878; it was referred to a special committee which decided in favour of the scheme in April 1878, and eventually became law in 1879.

The final two chapters consider the construction of the reservoir and the lengthy pipeline to Manchester, and the management of the lands surrounding the reservoir including the establishment of plantations. The formal opening ceremonies at Thirlmere and in Manchester itself were held on successive days in October 1894 and the 'first jet of Thirlmere water, fresh from its long journey... from its mountain cradle, shot gaily and resolutely aloft' in a temporary fountain in Albert Square in front of the town hall (p. 142). Subsequent controversies developed about the management of the watershed surrounding the reservoir, the aesthetic effect of the extensive coniferous afforestation and the impact of land management on nature conservation. In this lucidly written book, Ritvo brings to life many aspects of the debate between modernizers and preservationists in the Lake District in the late nineteenth century and successfully demonstrates the relevance of the story to environmental advocates today.

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