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Harriet Ritvo, *The Dawn of Green: Manchester, Thirlmere, and Modern Environmentalism*

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A Review by James C. McKusick

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The Lake District served as a crucible for characteristically Romantic ideas of nature and landscape. From the early 19th century to the present day, readers of Wordsworth have eagerly sought out the picturesque scenery depicted in his poems. In the course of their rambles, many visitors to the Lake District have cast their gaze upon the quiet waters of Thirlmere, located in a narrow valley just north of Grasmere, tucked beneath the mighty flanks of Helvellyn. The pristine clarity of the waters and the forested crags surrounding it might seem to represent a Romantic ideal of unspoiled natural beauty. Perhaps few modern visitors are aware of Thirlmere's troubled historical legacy. In *The Dawn of Green: Manchester, Thirlmere, and Modern Environmentalism*, Harriet Ritvo describes how this placid lake became a site of major conflict between the forces of industrial progress and the advocates of natural preservation.

Beginning in 1876, residents of the Lake District gradually became aware that Thirlmere was threatened by industrial development. The City of Manchester was quietly buying up all of the land surrounding the lake and planned to convert it into a reservoir by building a massive dam and raising the waters by fifty feet, thereby inundating most of the cottages and farmsteads on the narrow shores. This vast reservoir was intended to provide drinking water to the citizens of Manchester, a major industrial city whose population was rapidly outstripping the capacity of the local water supply. By 1871, the population of Greater Manchester exceeded 1.5 million, having tripled in fifty years, making it one of the fastest-growing cities in England (38). Moreover, as a center of textile production, Manchester required fresh water as an essential raw material for industry. Faced with these urgent needs, the Manchester Corporation projected a bold scheme to build a hundred-mile aqueduct to bring water from Thirlmere. Nothing on this scale had ever been attempted before; when completed, the aqueduct was expected to carry fifty million gallons of water per day (69).

If the scale of this project was unprecedented in British history, so was the public response to it. As details of the Thirlmere Scheme became known, a tenacious grass-roots movement rose in opposition. In 1877, a dedicated group of sixty people gathered in Grasmere to organize resistance to the project. Those attending this meeting contributed nearly £3,000 and formally constituted themselves as the Thirlmere Defence Association (82). Over the next few years, this fledgling association grew into a widespread national movement, publishing numerous pamphlets and newspaper articles, in a to defeat the Act of Parliament that would authorize

the construction of the Manchester Waterworks project. John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle added their voices to the emerging discourse of environmental preservation (85). Through a careful reading of the publications of this association, Ritvo demonstrates that the proponents articulated a new and radical argument, founded upon the proposition that "the one mountain region in England . . . is the property of all Englishmen" (104). Fundamentally this argument derives from Wordsworth's assertion (in his *Guide to the Lakes*) that the Lake District constitutes "a sort of national property" (171). In presenting such an argument before a select committee of Parliament, the defenders of Thirlmere were on new legal ground by invoking "a nebulous new sense of ownership—a sense that the 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" (104). This novel argument, in Ritvo's view, marks the emergence of the modern environmental movement.

Ultimately these advocates for environmental preservation did not succeed. Thirlmere was dammed, the aqueduct was constructed, and the pristine waters of the Lake District flowed into the industries of Manchester. But that is not the end of the story. Partly in consequence of the national outcry against the damming of Thirlmere, the project was carried out in a manner that sought to conserve and enhance the surrounding scenery. The Manchester Corporation assumed management of the watershed according to best practices of Victorian landscape engineering; these included the construction of a scenic carriageway (the present-day A591 highway), the maintenance of water quality by exclusion of livestock, and the planting of evergreen forests along the lakeshore (153). Although each of these measures might seem questionable to a modern-day environmentalist, in historical context they did represent a good-faith effort by the dam-builders to accommodate public concern for the preservation of natural and aesthetic values. In this way, the Thirlmere Defence Association eventually did achieve some of its fundamental objectives.

In a final chapter, *The Dawn of Green* reflects upon the enduring historical significance of the Thirlmere Scheme and the national movement that emerged in opposition to it. Ritvo demonstrates that the stark debate between its proponents and detractors served as "a kind of template for those embroiled in similar struggles" (161). For example, in the early 20th century, the city of San Francisco planned to dam Hetch Hetchy Valley, in Yosemite National Park, for its water supply. Fierce opposition to this project was led by the Sierra

Club and its founding president, John Muir. Seeking an effective response, the consulting engineer for the city, John Freeman, traveled to Manchester in 1910 to examine the Thirlmere aqueduct and learn how to market such a project to the public. In his final published report, Freeman lauded the romantic image of Thirlmere by moonlight, much "improved" by its conversion into a reservoir, and he promised a similar scenic outcome for Hetch Hetchy Valley. Once again, these arguments in favor of industrial development ultimately prevailed (163), but the modern American environmental movement was also born out of the crucible of this ferocious conflict.

The Dawn of Green ends on a somber note. Over the last two centuries, proponents of industrial watershed develop-

ment have generally prevailed, from the Thirlmere Scheme through the Aswan Dam (in Egypt) and the Three Gorges Dam (in China). Although the modern environmental movement has become truly international in scope, Ritvo suggests that it has also remained relatively feeble in its efforts to preserve places of wild and scenic beauty (179). There is no simple solution to this problem, but a more thorough understanding of environmental history may nonetheless prove useful to future preservationists, if only to help them avoid the mistakes of the past. *The Dawn of Green* offers many provocative insights into the historical origins of environmental advocacy.