

The Dawn of Green: Manchester, Thirlmere, and Modern Environmentalism

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Debates, disputes, and even injustice lay just beneath the outward signs of vaunted Victorian technological progress. The ascendancy of the imperatives of industrialization and urbanization over all other considerations was not inevitable or automatic; there were moments when those imperatives were challenged and rival ones championed. There were all kinds of costs associated with new water supply and drainage systems celebrated then and now for blunting typhoid fever and routing cholera in Victorian cities. These are the important conclusions to draw from Professor Harriet Ritvo's close study of a contest between Lake District devotees and Manchester's local government in the 1870s.

In the mid 1870s frock-coated and silver-bearded strangers were observed picking their way around the rough landscape surrounding Thirlmere in the heart of the Lake District. They were rumored to be asking questions about certain properties. They were rumored to employ spies and ringers. Word spread that Manchester was involved, that the famous water engineer J.F. Bateman was involved. By mid 1877, the secret was out: Manchester planned to buy Thirlmere and its environs, embank the lake, and pipe its water 100 miles to the growing and thirsty city.

And thirsty it was. Manchester's population increased from around half a million in 1840 to nearly one million in 1880. Its dyeworks, bleachworks, breweries, and many other industries consumed huge volumes of water. And fire was an ever-present danger. Meanwhile, sanitarians and philanthropists pressed for ever-more street-cleaning, home-cleaning, personal hygiene, and individual consumption of drinking water (as opposed to alcohol) by the working class. Demand was great and growing and Manchester's existing reservoirs in the valley of Longendale would soon prove insufficient.

These are the facts that make Manchester's response seem merely automatic. But the effort to capture Thirlmere was based on a wider, more complicated set of motives. The City Council acted on a vision of a new kind of local government. It pictured a government that took deeper and broader responsibility for its citizens' health and prosperity. It sought to create an urban fabric—infrastructure for water, light, transport, and other amenities – that encouraged order, safety, freedom, industry – in short, it sought to build an environment that nourished and sustained Liberal Victorian society.⁽¹⁾ Its members made a moral argument: it was the duty of modern governors to provide the community with what its individuals could not provide

themselves, to wisely manage the community's resources for the benefit of all classes.

From the moment Manchester revealed its design, opponents mustered. 60 individuals attended the first meeting of the Thirlmere Defence Association in 1877, marshalling no less than 3000 pounds. The Association included John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle. The region's bishop was an active member, as were many Oxford academics. Octavia Hill helped organize the movement in London, where she gathered poets, editors, and other intellectuals and artists. The Association was also comprised of local leaders; its tireless secretary was the heir to an area shoe manufactory. Soon the group was claiming several thousand members. There is no doubt that more modest members of the local community were passionate about preserving Thirlmere, but the documentary evidence preserves an elite and middle class membership profile.

The Association charged that Manchester sought to 'vandalise' a wild and picturesque landscape, the inspiration of Wordsworth and his fellow Romantic poets, and England's common heritage. The group argued that the Lake District offered workingmen a unique respite from the weariness of industrial toil. And sizing up its opponents in Manchester as calculative men of business, the Association also quantified in monetary terms the utility of the Thirlmere left as a wild lake.

Those opponents in Manchester were led by the Water Committee of the Manchester Corporation. They were successful burghers, some venerable urban patriarchs. And there is some evidence that opposition to the Thirlmere Defence Association united Mancusians across class lines, with support for the scheme and ridicule of its opponents appearing in music halls and newspaper cartoons. Local newspapers and churches rallied, too.

Advocates of the project argued that Thirlmere was of far greater value to the laborers of Manchester as pure drink than as part of a picturesque prospect. The most humble town dwellers could have no hope of traveling to the Lake District and enjoying a ramble. The water committee charged that the defenders of Thirlmere were merely sentimental elitists, something like Wordsworth wannabes, guarding their personal playground.

'If Manchester was the icon of the Victorian future', Professor Ritvo writes, 'the Lake District was the icon of nature, poetry, and heritage' (p. 4). And so the battle between rival symbols was fought. Ritvo tells a dramatic story peopled by passionate characters defending Thirlmere and others championing urban improvement and the potential of technology with equal vehemence. She carefully draws these portraits, including compelling and entertaining depictions of property owners who cleverly resisted Manchester in order to squeeze every last penny from the city.

As the fight began, Manchester was caught on its heels. Support for the Thirlmere Defence Association poured in from newspaper editors around the kingdom. The issue was suddenly a national one. To the TDA's delight, Parliament recognized this when it took the extraordinary step of inventing a unique select committee to consider the bill for authorizing the Thirlmere purchase. The committee was charged with considering whether or not the project would affect the national public interest by altering the scenery of the lake.

But though it received a good many unexpected body blows, the Manchester Corporation prevailed in the fight. Manchester's needs were evident, its action purposeful, and focus unwavering; meanwhile, the defenders of Thirlmere included self-interested landowners, local governments, preservationists, and others. The Parliamentary committee was assured that Manchester would properly compensate property owners and would be duly responsible to local governments. And though the final bill included the requirement that Manchester minimize the disruption of local scenery, Parliament was satisfied that transforming the lake did not amount to defacing it.

In the end, Parliament was not prepared to take the drastic step of turning the Lake District into some sort of national park like America's Yellowstone created in 1872. And it was hardly prepared to halt the growth of Manchester, on which the trade of the entire kingdom was partly dependent.

Professor Ritvo argues that the story is part of the deep history of environmentalism because its basic outlines have reappeared in case after case. 'The Thirlmere debate has been replicated in controversies about many other settings threatened with similar transformations during the last century and a quarter' (p. 178). For Ritvo, this was the 'dawn of green', too, because it was the first of many 'noble defeats' suffered by the righteous but ineffective defenders of Hetch Hetchy, and suffered still today.

But the importance of Professor Ritvo's book does not lie in whether or not she has identified the dawn of modern environmentalism. It is in its revelation of details about the battle over Thirlmere. It is in its reminder that dissension went hand-in-hand with Victorian technological triumphalism. It is in its liberating preservation of numerous voices that called into question the transformation of the landscape by those who privileged consumption and productivity above nearly all else.

With its clear prose and argumentation, this book is suitable for undergraduate syllabi. (Indeed, it behooves her colleagues to emulate Professor Ritvo's fine writing.) The book would be a valuable component of history of technology course or an urban history course. And sections of the book could serve a course on the history of environmentalism as an important chapter on the history of early landscape preservation.

Notes

1. On this phenomenon in British and imperial cities, see Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London, 2003); Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800–1910* (Chicago, 2008); John Broich, 'Engineering the Empire: British water supply systems and colonial societies, 1850–1900', *Journal of British Studies* 46 (2007), 346–65. [Back to \(1\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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