JAMES REBANKS

– Introduction –

Thirty years after William Wordsworth died, the Reverend Hardwicke Drummond Rawnsley walked around Grasmere chatting to the locals in search of memories of the great poet. To a late nineteenth-century man of letters, Rawnsley, this must have seemed a rich seam to hack into because Wordsworth had by then been lionised as a giant of English poetry for several decades. So, who better to speak to about his legacy than the local working people who had sometimes featured in the poems?

There were a couple of problems with the endeavour: the locals had to be over forty years old to have overlapped, even in their childhood, with the elderly Wordsworth, and they had to have known who he was. Comically, Rawnsley struggled to find any memories of Wordsworth and his friends. It became almost funny because barely anyone he met seemed to give a damn about the greatest of the 'lake poets'. Rawnsley began to sense that there were two cultures in the Lake District, that of the locals, and that of the poets, and latterly their readers and scholars beyond the fells, and, in turn, of the visitors they inspired. These two cultures seemed to exist in parallel, but to be barely aware of each other.

Rawnsley speculated that as Wordsworth became a man of some importance he had stopped mingling much with shepherds and blacksmiths, and the rural people who had peopled his youth and his memories. He never went in their homes, or to the places where they worked, and only rarely talked to them. The few remembered conversations were of an oddball wandering about with his sister in tow, and what he'd said to the locals had seemed strange. He'd said they shouldn't white-wash their houses or that they had built their chimney in the wrong style. The people of Grasmere, it seems, didn't care much for Wordsworth, his writing, or his national fame.

I grew up in such a Lake District farming family, from a valley not far from those that Wordsworth wrote about. My dad would groan every bank holiday at the bad drivers on the roundabouts at Penrith as he went between our flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, and would ask rhetorically, '*Who in God's name encouraged all these idiots to come and clog up our roads?*'

I never heard the great poets' names – Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey or Lamb – come from anyone's mouth, other than at school. I wondered what the fuss was about, these 'great dead white men' who pondered on clouds and daffodils, and mountain walks, and other chocolate-box things that no one I knew ever spoke of. I was, of course,

determined to dislike them, these men who had somehow defined 'our' landscape for others.

As a young writer I wanted to seize my dad's frustration and run with it, tearing up the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century 'discovery of the Lake District' narrative. I'd tell everyone that this was the kind of 'cultural imperialism' that posh white people could no longer get away with anywhere else. I saw no reason why it should go unchallenged in our landscape. And I was in my thirties before I paid enough attention to their work to begin to see that I was not being entirely fair and that they represented a complex bundle of legacies, some of which benefitted and shaped my world and my family.

We tend to sift through literature for the age we live in, raiding it quite mercilessly for the bits we want, that comfort or speak to us, and ignore the rest. In the age of growing affluence, post World War II, with many families getting cars and paid holidays for the first time, we took the elements we wanted from the lake poets about being in nature, of escaping to the hills, and feeling it deeply like it was there for us. And we found a sense of ownership in Wordsworth's claim that the Lake District should belong to everyone with a heart to feel and eyes to see it. Millions of us could cultivate the right sensibility, owning whole landscapes simply by looking down on these valleys from the mountains and loving what we saw. Romanticism fed this. We