

'The surprise hit of the year'
Daily Mail

The Shepherd's Life

A Tale of the Lake District

James
Rebanks



I realized we were different, really different, on a rainy morning in 1987. I was sitting in an assembly in the 1960s-style shoddily built concrete comprehensive in our local town. I was thirteen or so years old, sitting surrounded by a mass of other academic non-achievers, listening to an old battle-weary teacher lecturing us on how we should aim to be more than just farm workers, joiners, brickies, electricians and hairdressers. It felt like a sermon she'd delivered many times before. It was a waste of time and she knew it. We were firmly set, like our fathers and grandfathers, mothers and grandmothers before us, on being what we were, and had always been. Plenty of us were bright enough, but we had no intention of displaying it at school. It would have been dangerous.

There was an abyss of understanding between that teacher and us. The kids who gave a damn had departed the year before to our local grammar school, leaving the 'losers' to fester away over the next three years in a place no one wanted to be. The result was something akin to a guerrilla war between largely disillusioned teachers and some of the most bored and aggressive kids imaginable. We played a 'game' as a class where the object was to smash the greatest value of school equipment in one lesson and pass it off as an 'accident'.

I was good at that kind of thing.

The floor was littered with broken microscopes, biological specimens, crippled stools and torn books. A long dead frog pickled in formaldehyde lay sprawled on the floor doing breaststroke. The gas taps were burning like an oil rig and a window was cracked. The teacher stared at us with tears streaming down her face – destroyed – as a lab technician tried to restore order. One maths lesson was improved for me by a fist-fight between a pupil and the teacher, before the lad ran for it down the stairs and across the muddy playing fields, only to be knocked down by the teacher before he escaped into town. We cheered as if it were a great tackle in a game of rugby. From time to time, someone would try (incompetently) to burn the school down. One boy who we bullied killed himself a few years later in his car. It was like being locked in a Ken Loach movie: if some skinny kid had turned up with a kestrel, no one would have been surprised.

On another occasion, I argued with our dumbfounded headmaster that school was really a prison and 'an infringement of my human rights'. He looked at me strangely, and said, 'But what would you do at home?' As if this was an impossible question to answer. 'I'd work on the farm,' I answered, equally amazed that he couldn't see how simple this was. He shrugged his shoulders hopelessly, told me to stop being ridiculous and go away. When people got into serious trouble, he sent them home. So I thought about putting a brick through his window, but didn't dare.

So in that assembly in 1987, I was daydreaming through the windows into the rain, wondering what the men on our farm were doing, and what I should have been doing, when I realized the assembly was about the valleys of the Lake District, where my grandfather and father farmed. So I switched on. After a few minutes of listening, I realized this bloody teacher woman thought we were too stupid and unimaginative to 'do anything with our lives'. She was taunting us to rise above ourselves. We were too dumb to want to leave this area with its dirty dead-end jobs and its narrow-minded provincial ways. There was nothing here for us, we should open our eyes and see it. In her eyes, to want to leave school early and go and work with sheep was to be more or less an idiot.

The idea that we, our fathers and mothers, might be proud, hard-working and intelligent people doing something worthwhile, or even admirable, seemed to be beyond her. For a woman who saw success as being demonstrated through education, ambition, adventure and conspicuous professional achievement, we must have seemed a poor sample. I don't think anyone ever mentioned 'university' in this school; no one wanted to go anyway – people that went away ceased to belong; they changed and could never really come back, we knew that in our bones. Schooling was a 'way out', but we didn't want it, and we'd made our choice. Later I would understand that modern industrial communities are obsessed with the importance of 'going somewhere' and 'doing something with your life'. The implication is

an idea I have come to hate, that staying local and doing physical work doesn't count for much.

I listened, getting more and more aggravated, as I realized that curiously she knew, and claimed to love, our land. But she talked about it, and thought of it, in terms that were completely alien to my family and me. She loved a 'wild' landscape, full of mountains, lakes, leisure and adventure, lightly peopled with folk I had never met. The Lake District in her monologue was the playground for an itinerant band of climbers, poets, walkers and daydreamers . . . people whom, unlike our parents, or us, had 'really done something'. Occasionally she would utter a name in a reverential tone and look in vain for us to respond with interest. One of the names was 'Alfred Wainwright', another was 'Chris Bonington'; and she kept going on and on about someone called 'Wordsworth'.

I'd never heard of any of them. I don't think anyone in that hall, who wasn't a teacher, had.

~

Sitting in that assembly was the first time I'd encountered this (basically romantic) way of looking at our landscape. I realized then, with some shock, that the landscape I loved, we loved, where we had belonged for centuries, the place known as 'the Lake District', had a claim to ownership submitted by other people, based on principles I barely understood.

Later, I would read books and observe the 'other' Lake District, and begin to understand it better. I'd learn that

until around 1750 no one from the outside world had paid this mountainous corner of north-west England much notice, or, when they had, they found it to be poor, unproductive, primitive, harsh, ugly and backward. I'd be annoyed to discover that no one from outside seems to have thought it was beautiful or a place to visit until then – and yet be fascinated to discover how in a few decades that had all changed. Roads, and later railways, were built, making it much easier to get here. And the Romantic and picturesque movements changed the way many people thought about mountains, lakes and rugged landscapes like ours. Our landscape suddenly became a major focus for writers and artists, particularly when the Napoleonic Wars stopped the early tourists from going to the Alps and forced them instead to discover the mountainous landscapes of Britain.

From the start, this obsession was – for visitors – a landscape of the imagination, an idealized landscape of the mind. It became a counterpoint to other things, such as the Industrial Revolution, which was born less than a hundred miles to the south, or a place that could be used to illustrate philosophies or ideologies. For many, it was, from its 'discovery', a place of escape, where the rugged landscape and nature would stimulate feelings and sentiments that other places could not. For many people, it exists to walk over, to look at, or climb, or paint, or write about, or simply dream about. It is a place many aspire to visit or live in.

But, above all, I would learn that our landscape changed the rest of the world. It is where the idea that

all of us have a direct sense of 'ownership' (regardless of property rights) of some places or things because they are beautiful, or stimulating, or just special was first put into words. The Lake District Romantic poet William Wordsworth proposed in 1810 that it should be 'a sort of national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy'. Arguments were formulated here that now shape conservation around the world. Every protected landscape on earth, every National Trust property, every National Park, and every UNESCO World Heritage Site, has a little bit of those words in their DNA.

Above all, in the years after I left school and grew up, I learnt that we are not the only ones that love this place. It is, for better or worse, a scenic playground for the rest of Britain, and for countless other people from around the world. I simply have to travel over the fell to Ullswater to see the cars streaming past on the roads, or the crowds milling around the shore of the lake, to see what this means. There are good outcomes and less good ones. Today, 16 million people a year come here (to an area with 43,000 residents). They spend more than a billion pounds every year here. More than half the employment in the area is reliant upon tourism – and many of the farms depend upon it for their income by running B&Bs or other businesses. But in some valleys 60 to 70 per cent of the houses are second homes or holiday cottages, so that many local people cannot afford to live in their own communities. The locals speak begrudgingly of being 'outnumbered', and all of us

know that we are in every way a tiny minority in this landscape. There are places where it doesn't feel like it's ours any more, as if the guests have taken over the guest-house.

So that teacher's idea of the Lake District was created by an urbanized and increasingly industrialized society, over the past two hundred years. It was a dream of a place for a wider society that was full of people disconnected from the land.

That dream was never for us, the people who work this land. We were already here doing what we do.

I wanted to tell that teacher that she had it all wrong – tell her that she didn't really know this place or its people at all. These thoughts took years to become clear, but in a rough childish form I think they were there from the start. I also knew in a crude way that if books define places, then writing books was important, and that we needed books by us and about us. But in that assembly in 1987 I was dumb and thirteen, so I just made a farting noise on my hand. Everyone laughed. She finished and left the stage fuming.

~

If Wordsworth and friends 'invented' or 'discovered' the Lake District, it didn't touch our family until 1987 when I went home and started asking questions about what the teacher had said. From the start, this other story felt wrong. How come the story of our landscape wasn't about us? It seemed to me an imposition, a classic

case of what I would later learn historians call 'cultural imperialism'.

What I didn't know was that Wordsworth believed that the community of shepherds and small farmers of the Lake District formed a political and social ideal of much wider significance and value. People here governed themselves, free of the aristocratic elites that dominated people's lives elsewhere, and in Wordsworth's eyes this provided a model for a good society. Wordsworth thought we mattered as a counterpoint to the commercial, urban and increasingly industrial England emerging elsewhere. It was an idealistic view even then, but the poet's Lake District was a place peopled with its own culture and history. He believed that with the growing wider appreciation of this landscape came a great responsibility for visitors to really understand the local culture, or else tourism would be a bludgeoning force erasing much that made this place special. He also recognized in these discarded lines from a draft of 'Michael, a Pastoral Poem' (written in 1800) that a shepherd's view of this place was different and of interest in its own right, a remarkably modern observation:

No doubt if you in terms direct had ask'd
Whether he lov'd the mountains, true it is
That with blunt repetition of your words
He might have stared at you, and said that they
Were frightful to behold, but had you then
Discours'd with him in some particular sort
Of his own business, and the goings on

Of earth and sky, then truly had you seen
That in his thoughts were obscurities,
Wonders and admirations, things that wrought
Not less than a religion in his heart.

But for a long time I knew none of this, and blamed Wordsworth for the failure to see us here and for making this a place of romantic wandering for other people.

We are all influenced, directly or indirectly, whether we are aware of it or not, by ideas and attitudes to the environment from cultural sources. My idea of this landscape is not from books, but from another source: it is an older idea, inherited from the people who came before me here.

What follows is partly an explanation of our work through the course of the year; partly a memoir of growing up in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s and the people around me at that time, like my father and grandfather; and partly a retelling of the history of the Lake District – from the perspective of the people who live there, and have done for hundreds of years.

It is the story of a family and a farm, but it also tells a wider story about the people who get forgotten in the modern world. It is about how we need to open our eyes and see the forgotten people who live in our midst, whose lives are often deeply traditional and rooted in the distant past. If we want to understand the people in the foothills of Afghanistan, we may need to try and understand the people in the foothills of England first.