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Savage Grandeur and Noblest Thoughts: Discovering the Lake District 1750-1820

(The Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere 2010)

by Cecilia Powell and Stephen Hebron

THE CATALOGUE, together with an exhibition held in the Wordsworth Museum, Grasmere, from July 2010 to June 2011, marks the bicentenary of Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes*, which is commonly seen as an important milestone in the discovery of the Lake District as "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" as Wordsworth puts it in his letters to *The Morning Post* (added as an appendix to his *Guide*). This "completely original proposition", as Michael Broughton, the chairman of the W. W. Spooner Charitable Trust, presents it in his short preface, has not only firmly connected Wordsworth to 'his' landscape in the public consciousness, but also led to his frequent invocation as a spiritual forebear of today's most influential British institution of communal heritage, the National Trust. By beginning their survey of the discovery of the Lake District with the rising interest in mountainous scenery in the middle of the eighteenth century, the authors of *Savage Grandeur and Noblest Thoughts* put this 'myth of origin' into the context of its gestation while certainly retaining the place of honor for the *Guide* as "in a class of its own amongst Lake District literature" (32).

The items in the lavishly illustrated catalogue range from maps and travelogues to numerous depictions of the landscape in diverse techniques, and the widely disseminated prints and copies 'after' those original works, to the rare portrayal of artists in landscape with Thomas Hearne's *Sir George Beaumont and Joseph Farington painting a Waterfall* of 1777 (cat. 15 & 16). They illustrate not only the growing popularity and development of the *sujet* and the means of its dissemination, but also the formation of touristic practices where "[w]riting, like amateur sketching, […] became part of the lakes experience" (30). Early entrepreneurs in "picturesque tourism" are portrayed as well as early reactions against it, e. g. the long-running satirical serial of *The Tour of Doctor Syntax* in the *Poetical Magazine* (1809-11; cat. 58, 59).

The correlations of diverse media in the establishment of the Lakes as an outstandingly desirable natural space, exemplified by the exhibits, is further reflected on in the two introductory essays. Cecilia Powell's "Lamps after an Illumination" gives a general outline of the region as perceived and depicted through tastes developed on earlier continental landscape painting and the establishment and dissemination of the genre in Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century. The essay convincingly sketches "an intricate series of relationships [underpinning] the activities of the writers and artists in the exhibition" (9) in the development of networks in the north and south and a

flourishing international print trade. This aspect is further supplemented by Powell in a series of short biographical sketches of all painters whose work the catalogue covers in the section "The Artists and the Lakes" (141-172). Her remarks on the novelty of an interest in the natural (sublime) are, at least in parts, less clear. When she claims, with reference to the 1755 poem providing the title, that "'noble thoughts' – let alone 'noblest thoughts' – were customarily aroused by the deeds of men, not by scenery" (2) she omits a longstanding tradition to which Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* contributes in 1757 – a tradition in which the natural sublime usually inspires the mind with great thoughts and passions, especially of 'God and His Greatness' (see e. g. Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, 1684-90). The categories of the sublime, which may well be paraphrased as 'savage grandeur', and the picturesque beauty of the Lake District, which is perceived as "calm, beautiful and serene" (7) in the tradition of Claude, seem not consistently distinguished. A woodcut showing a topographical rather than threateningly dramatic outline of 'Mount Skiddow' (Fig. 6, *Gentleman's Magazine*, July 1748) is, a little surprisingly, termed "Rosa-esque" (i.e. reminiscent of Salvator Rosa's landscapes; 3). For the early enthusiasts of the Lakes the coexistence of these, quite diverse, aesthetic phenomena in one landscape appears to have been one of the specific attractions of the area (see the quotation from Brown's *Description of the Lake at Keswick* below).

The second introductory essay by Stephen Hebron, "A Practiced Pencil, and an Eloquent Pen", offers a concise and clear overview from the early writings with regard to the Lake District in the mid-eighteenth century to the revised edition of Wordsworth's *A Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes, in the North of England* in 1820. Just like the timeline offered towards the end of the publication, it serves to contextualize the canonical publications and events in connection with the developing interest in the Lakes. As his title promises, Hebron pays special attention to intermedial strategies and traditions in the attempts to impart the individual experience of landscape – as well as to the almost habitually proclaimed failure to do this experience justice in any medial depiction. Interestingly, the texts' appeal to the reader and potential tourist are only increased by these failures, since the promise that 'the thing itself' will certainly surpass all expectations is ubiquitous. As William Mason, the editor of Gray's famous journal, puts it in a passage quoted by Hebron, it is not in the least problematic to form an alluring, if pale or incorrect, preconception:

> In the meanwhile my mind is flattered by thinking it has acquired some conception of the place, and rests contented in an innocent error, which nothing but ocular proof can detect, and which, when detected, does not diminish the pleasure I had before received, but augments it by superadding the charms of comparison and verification (28).

The landscape is not only judged according to tastes developed on diverse traditions of continental European landscape painting, it promises to embody their charms in a spatially concentrated form on 'native ground' by offering a wealth of picturesque beauties and sublime horrors. As John Brown formulates it in his 1766 *Description of the Lake at Keswick*,

> to give […] a complete idea of these […] perfections, as they are joined in Keswick, would require the united powers of Claude, Salvator and Poussin. The first should throw his delicate sunshine over the cultivated vales, the scattered cots, the groves, the lake, the wooded islands. The second should dash out the horror of the rugged cliffs, the steeps, the hanging woods, the foaming waterfalls; while the grand pencil of Poussin should crown the whole with the majesty of the impending mountains. (qtd. 25)

Judging from the items the catalogue introduces, the invocation of a trinity of celebrated artists which would be needed to even attempt and do justice to an actual experience of the Lakes, uttered in 1766, reflects manifold and fascinating attempts at conveying something of what it means to encounter the medially constructed landscape of the Lake District where, if one is lucky, the mediations always stand a chance of being exceeded by 'ocular proof'.