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# 'A Threatening Din and Clamour': Cultural Dissonance in the Lake District's Harmonious Landscape

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## ABSTRACT

The Lake District's inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2017 foregrounded the harmonious relationship between culture and nature in the cultural landscape. Looking at the Lakes from a perspective that problematises both harmony (for Prynne a 'function of money'), and culture (for E.P. Thompson 'a whole way of conflict'), this article considers the landscape in the contexts of farming, tourism, economic growth and finally COVID-19. I argue that visitor activity following the easing of lockdown restrictions in 2020 and 2021 can be understood as offering a challenge to the dominant narrative of harmony underpinning the region with an uncomfortable apocalyptic revelation of a consumer culture that tourist destinations such as the Lakes more often work to conceal.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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In 2017, following three failed attempts, the English Lake District, a mountainous region of Cumbria in the north-west of England, was finally designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site thanks to the region's 'agro-pastoral' and literary heritage and the ways in which these human activities combined with what UNESCO called the 'work of nature' in creating a 'harmonious landscape' (UNESCO 2022). The narrative that constructs the Lake District as a site of harmony is by now, like the pathways up the Lakeland fells themselves, very well-worn. However, according to Karen Lloyd and Charlie Gere, given the anticipated increase in visitor numbers resulting from the region's inscription it is now 'more urgent than ever to consider the narrative structure behind the Lakes' World Heritage designation'. Not to do so, they claim, would be 'an act of abandonment in the face of an increasingly uncertain future' (Gere and Lloyd 2021). Taking Lloyd and Gere at their word, and by way of a journey through history, culture and agriculture, this article considers some of the problems posed by dominant narrative structures that construct an illusion of harmonious nature and culture in the English Lake District.

## 'Hic Incipit Pestis' [Here Begins the Plague]

Accounts of the cultural history of the Lakes generally begin with the remarkable transformation in perception that appears to occur between Defoe's 'unhospitable terror' as he

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passed through the region in the 1720s and ‘the craze for the Picturesque’ that characterised the development of an appetite for scenery in the latter third of the century (Bradshaw 2016, 63; Defoe 1991, 291; Thompson 2010, 2, 19). The Lake Poets, amongst whom are counted Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, generally come next, emerging in the early nineteenth century from a complex interplay between continental Romanticism and the Picturesque, which is now most closely identified with what Penny Bradshaw describes as the ‘deeply influential Wordsworthian construction of place’ associated with the region (Bradshaw 2016, 63). Whilst the English Romantics did not dispense with Defoe’s land of ‘frightful mountains’ (Defoe 1991, 292), seeing this as a necessary ingredient for encounters with the sublime, Wordsworth, drawing upon Rousseau, introduced a sense of an idealised social order in nature which seemed fully realised with the often-cited description in his *Guide to the Lakes* of a ‘perfect Republic of Shepherds and Agriculturalists’ Wordsworth and Coleridge (2013) Wordsworth (1970), 67–68). This idealised harmonious vision, located in a rapidly receding past, was contrasted with the burgeoning industrial towns and cities of the north of England in a binary that placed ‘nature’ in opposition to the ‘dark satanic mills’ of industry. In a profound reversal of society’s understanding of the old antagonists, nature and culture, the wild places outside the city walls where once the devil had lurked, now came to be counted amongst what William Cronon calls ‘those rare places . . . where one had more chance than elsewhere to glimpse the face of God’ (Cronon 1996, 73). Thus, the Lake District, a region previously regarded by some as dark and forbidding, became infused with godliness, and even, as Wordsworth remarked, a place to learn ‘of moral evil and of good’ (Wordsworth 1970, 81). Although recent decades have seen appreciation of the area takes an increasingly secular turn, this sense of a landscape where the spiritual and moral absences generated by contemporary life can be filled by the wholesome presence of nature nevertheless retains its grip. Indeed, Susan Denyer remarks that Lakeland ‘continues to be seen as a spiritual heartland for many visitors from the UK and further afield’ (Denyer 2013, 3).

Just as ideas about nature shifted during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the first half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of new ways of thinking about landscape. One such emerged from the work of geographer Otto Schlüter in 1909, and subsequently Carl Sauer in 1925, whose term ‘cultural landscape’ sought to enrich our understanding of the effects of culture upon the land. The term gained traction in academia as the century drew on, but it wasn’t until 1992 that UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee recognised ‘cultural landscape’ as a ‘category of site’ for the designation of World Heritage status. It was this recognition that paved the way for the Lake District’s inscription in 2017 (Fowler 2003, 8). It is therefore unsurprising that the homepage of UNESCO’s Lake District website should contain seven references to culture and two to the ‘cultural landscape’. What is notable, however, is the number of times the words ‘harmony’ and ‘harmonious’ appear (they appear 10 times), as well as the two occasions when they are collocated with ‘cultural landscape’. It is this construction of the region as a harmonious cultural landscape which is generally dominant in mainstream, and frequently quasi-Wordsworthian, narratives.

Taking the terms culture and harmony at face value as defining terms for the properties of the landscape appears simple enough on the surface. However, it is worth recalling Raymond Williams’ well-known remark that culture is ‘one of the two or three most

complicated words in the English language', in part because of its 'intricate historical development' but also because it has come to mean different things in different contexts (Williams 1976, 87). The concept of culture that grew up around the liberal humanism of people like Matthew Arnold, for example, saw culture as part of a natural human order which carried the universal human values of 'sweetness and light' in 'the best which had been thought and said in the world' (Arnold 1869, vii, xvii). Casting these values in apolitical terms as those of a universal human nature – which by no small coincidence happened to reflect the values of a particular gendered, racialised, western class-fraction – had a profound influence not only upon our ideas about culture but also in *naturalising* western ideas about what was proper for human beings. The word became more clearly politicised in the middle of the twentieth century, so that whilst T.S. Eliot envisaged culture as a harmonious melange of lived experience consisting of pleasant things like 'Henley Regatta, Cowes ... Wensleydale cheese ... nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar' (Eliot 1948, 29), something Williams called a 'whole way of life', others, such as E. P. Thompson, and later Stuart Hall, preferred to characterise it as a 'whole way of *conflict* [original emphasis]' (Williams 1989, 4; Hall 1981, 228). For both Thompson and Hall, culture was less about lists of the nice things people do, which in Thompson's opinion erased the 'problems of power and conflict' (Winslow 2014, 203), than it was about processes whereby 'some cultural forms and practices are driven out of the centre of popular life' (Hall 1981, 443). To see culture as a harmonious inscription upon the landscape is therefore, from this perspective, to erase the processes of conflict underlying culture itself. As with culture, harmony, according to J.H. Prynne, 'is not a principle of nature, it is a function of money' and is 'either a coded term for other implicit claims', or 'a token of middle-class satisfaction'. The 'unquestioned concept of harmony' he continues, 'can conceal from clear view many implicit reversions to a socially divided social process' (Prynne 2006, 2). The unquestioned image of cultural harmony that illuminates the narrative supporting the Lake District's inscription as a World Heritage Site conceals many of the region's cultural conflicts by effectively erasing divided social processes that make possible the cultural landscape's existence.

The most prominent human interaction with the landscape cited by UNESCO is the 'distinctive agro-pastoral tradition' of sheep farming, and it is this aspect that Cumbria's best-known celebrity shepherd, consultant and writer, James Rebanks, is keen to promote. His first book, *A Shepherd's Life* (2015), a pean to the Lake District shepherd, and its 'sequel', *English Pastoral* (2021a), are both concerned with bringing to the fore the lives of a farming community he believes, ironically in view of their centrality in the UNESCO bid, have been marginalised in mainstream narratives 'created by an urbanised and increasingly industrial society' (Rebanks 2015, xvi). He aims to rewrite these narratives, describing an early realisation that 'if books define places ... we needed books by us and about us' (xvi).

However, Rebanks' books, particularly his first, are about more than reinstating a lost people in the grand narrative of Lakeland, they are also about creating contentious grand narratives of their own in which Lakeland farming life represents 'the real history and culture of the Lake District' (Rebanks 2015, 276). Despite Rebanks' gestures towards a harmonious whole way of farming life, his texts are nevertheless shot through with conflict. The central point of friction in both of his books reveals itself in the conflict between the often-idealised agricultural past, exemplified by his

paternal grandfather, and the pressures industrial farming methods bring to bear on a way of life that 'has roots deeper than 5000 years into the soil of this landscape' (2). For Rebanks, the value of these roots lies beyond the production of sheep with a form of indigenous knowledge that took 'traditional communities often thousands of years to learn'. It would be 'foolish' he writes, 'to allow [this] knowledge to fall out of use. In a future without fossil fuels and with a changing climate, we may need [them] again' (228). By connecting the local with the global Rebanks suggests that not only is his way of life valuable for the region but also for the world. This isn't the first time he makes a gesture of this kind. In his foreword, he elicits a similar continuity by explaining that 'if we want to understand the people in the foothills of Afghanistan, then perhaps we need to try to understand the people in the foothills of England first' (xviii). This duality in Rebanks' work which manifests as a tension between the local and the global the metropolitan consumer culture of 'shop-bought things' decried by his grandfather (Rebanks 2021a, 84) and the rural authenticity of a culture rooted in the soil ('my shoes should be mucky' (Rebanks 2015, 229)), attempts to resolve itself in this sense of universal applicability.

Further evidence of tension is found in Catherine Parry's often wryly amusing article, 'Herwick tales: Breed and belonging in the English Lake District', in which she makes the astute observation that Rebanks characterises hill farmers as representing 'a historic and contemporary resistance to cultural and ideological pressures from the rest of England' (Parry 2020, 413). Rebanks' farmers, says Parry, 'reject an English culture focussed on maximising productivity' in favour of a 'rough northern form of egalitarianism' and 'a community-based relationship with the land' (413). Whilst we might draw a connection here between Rebanks' northern rebel farmers and the Taliban tillers of Afghanistan, the world he evokes perhaps owes more to the golden age of an imaginary Leavisite organic community than it does that of war-torn poppy farmers in the Hindu Kush. If northern hill farmers reject the rapacious capitalism of an alien English culture, Parry shows that in Rebanks' account they also embrace an apparently organic unity with the Lakeland landscape. However, she also suggests that Rebanks' claim that both sheep and shepherd are connected by a 'rightness' of belonging with the land, is 'high-intensity PR' (411). Certainly, his books do at times read like an exercise in public relations, dispelling any residual illusions that the Lake District is an untouched 'natural' landscape by bringing into focus the way the landscape has been 'crafted by a largely forgotten working people' (Rebanks 2015, 4). Deftly side-stepping the labours of the sheep, whose craftwork on the fellsides is not universally admired (on which more in just a moment), he leaves us under no illusions who these people are; 'we shaped this landscape' he tells us, 'and we were shaped by it in turn. My people lived, worked and died down there for generations. It is what it is because of them and people like them' (3). For Parry, this portrayal of the Lake District as a landscape 'marked by the material formations of a distinctive farming method' means that with their 'rightness' of belonging Rebanks' farming methods can be 'claimed as an ecologically sound land management system' (Parry 2020, 415).

The drive behind Rebanks' determined PR campaign seems to derive from a sense he identifies in the '1990s and 2000s' whereby 'his people' under 'prevailing thinking' became 'yesterday's people' and where 'the future of our landscapes would be tourism and wildlife and trees and wilding [sic]' (Rebanks 2015, 120). Rebanks' books should therefore be read as part of a campaign in a wider battle

over the (agri)culture of the Lake District in which he aims to show his ‘whole way of life’ as the most fitting; firstly, in order to take on the dual threats of tourism and ‘wilding’, and secondly in order to secure the centrality of farming in the narrative of the Lakes.

However, Rebanks’ position in the debate over upland management, as he seeks to reconcile local tradition with global realities, is complex. In this context, the importance of his contribution to the wider debate surrounding the organisation and practice of agriculture should not be underestimated. *English Pastoral* brings a much broader perspective to bear than that found in *The Shepherd’s Life*, the breadth of which belies the title. Whilst the critique offered of modern farming methods and of the demands placed upon farmers by a ruinously refined system of production and consumption deserves a wide audience, another valuable aspect of his contribution is the clear connection he makes between agriculture and culture, and more specifically between farming and literature. He attributes his agricultural epiphany (‘new farming technologies and practices were not benign tools of progress’) to reading Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (Rebanks 2021a, 149), and later indicates that just as contemporary culture lacks an understanding of farming, contemporary farming lacks an understanding of culture, lamenting that young farmers in agricultural colleges are taught to ‘think of the land like economists’ and nothing of ‘tradition, community or ecological limits’ (229). He concludes with the damning observation that ‘Rachel Carson isn’t on the curriculum’ (229). Seeking to draw Carson’s text, one that combines elements of both science and literature (Garrard 2012, 3), into the culture of agriculture through his own literary endeavours should be regarded as a deeply important element in Rebanks’ complex position. Latterly, in what seems to be a coming to terms with the painful realities of contemporary upland farming, he has come to reflect upon the necessity of diversification for Lakeland farmers. However, he recently cautioned that, should farming become ‘no more than a balanced-budget hobby’ then “‘we’re going to end up with affluent uplands full of professional people that are quite wealthy” (Bateman 2022, 24).

## The white plague

Whilst the problem of gentrification is real, the threat of tourism to which Rebanks alludes in *The Shepherd’s Life* is a red herring; the real threat for upland sheep farmers is the increasingly popular narrative surrounding the practice of ‘rewilding’ a term popularised by Earth First! founder Dave Foreman in the early 1990s. Foreman’s initial conception of rewilding, minimising and even removing human influence from land management, has evolved as it has gained in popularity and can now mean many different things. With regards to the Lake District, largely due to the work of George Monbiot, rewilding has come to signify clearing the fells of sheep whose destructive appetites have rendered the Lakes as ‘a wildlife desert’ (Monbiot 2013a). It was Monbiot who in 2013 first introduced the concept of ‘sheepwrecked’ to the British lexicon, declaring in a partly tongue-in-cheek article that the ‘woolly maggots ... trash the countryside’ and that:

[T]he white plague has done more extensive environmental damage than all the building that has ever taken place here, but to identify it as an agent of destruction is little short of blasphemy. Britain is being shagged by sheep, but hardly anyone dares say so. (Monbiot 2013b)

Whilst others had for some time been raising the alarm with regards to overgrazing (not to forget the sheep in Thomas Moore's *Utopia* who became 'so great devourers they ate up 'the very men themselves' (Moore [1516] 1997, 33)), it was Monbiot with the platform delivered by his regular column in *The Guardian* whose voice was loudest (see King 2017). Again in 2013, getting wind of the UNESCO bid, he refocused on the Lake District pointing out that two of the bid's central aims, 'supporting sheep farmers and defending the ecosystem' were in conflict. He suggested that the failure to recognise this contradiction ultimately produced a situation whereby the concept of a 'cultural landscape' in the context of the Lake District looked like 'an expression of cultural hegemony' (Monbiot 2013a). Indeed, placing sheep farming centre-stage in the Lake District's cultural landscape, and situating it within a misleading narrative of harmony, World Heritage Status works to deny alternative accounts suggesting the region could or should be any different.

In *Wild Fell*, Lee Schofield gives an account of the RSPB's rewilding project at Haweswater, in the east of the Lake District, that exposes elements of this cultural hegemony. For Schofield, a naturalist and the Haweswater project manager, the experience of attempting to do farming differently in order to redress a perceived imbalance brought about by overgrazing reveals the deep and often bitter conflicts underpinning Lakeland's (agri)culture. Early in the book he recounts that the project is viewed as being 'close to criminal' (Schofield 2022, 16), and of facing 'open hostility' from some in the farming community (17). For Schofield the attempt to restore a sense of 'harmony between nature and farming that has become discordant' leads to several bruising encounters with farmers and even his local MP (54). Later, he recounts how, when visited by a delegation from the World Heritage Site Steering Group, his project is described as a 'wart' on the face of the harmonious landscape (114). As Schofield rightly asks: 'beauty and harmony to who?' (115).

Monbiot asked similar questions when he returned to the topic in 2017. Leaning into his original point about hegemony, he asked: if UNESCO 'wants to preserve the Lake District as a 'cultural landscape', then 'whose culture' and 'whose landscape' is it?' (Monbiot 2017). The reply seems to be that UNESCO recognises a specific kind of land use as being of cultural value. This grants Lake District farmers a cultural importance that goes beyond the implicit neutrality in Rebanks' claim that 'sheep farming is just another form of culture, no dafter than anything else, and as interesting as being into Picassos or Rembrandts or 1970s punk music' (Moss 2015). In a general sense, sheep farming is just another form of culture; however, in the context of the Lake District, sheep farming, thanks to its centrality in the region's World Heritage Status, has a good deal more cultural capital than the urban fury found in 1970s punk rock.

Cultural capital is one thing, but ultimately it's pecuniary capital that runs the show. A 2009 report into the potential economic benefits of World Heritage Status, produced by the now defunct Trends Business Research Ltd. and another organisation called Rebanks Consulting Ltd., headed unsurprisingly by James Rebanks, was initially equivocal. The



report indicated that the evidence for ‘tourism and economic development’ impact was limited (Rebanks 2009, 1). Nevertheless, the report concluded that:

There is a powerful economic argument for using WHS status ... as a tool for the development of a high quality, high value, tourism product to attract higher spending international and domestic cultural visitors. (28)

However, the report was in no doubt about what high-spending visitors wanted: in the foreword, Lord Clarke of Windermere writes that it is the shape of a landscape created by ‘generations of farming families’ that ‘millions enjoy today’ (1). The updated 2013 report is less circumspect about the economic benefits, stating that the growth of ‘cultural tourism’ across Europe, and the emergence of a long-haul market ‘as people become more affluent in the developing world’ meant the case for the benefits of World Heritage status had increased (Rebanks 2013, 9). ‘This World Heritage thing is a no-brainer, it’s the only big idea in town’ comments one excited stakeholder (16). The LDNPA added their voice to the chorus, by adding that: ‘a one per cent switch to cultural visitors who spend more on accommodation, leisure and food and drink could boost our economy by about £20 m per year’ (Lake District National Park Authority 2022). The updated report is similarly unequivocal about the role that farming will play in attracting these big spenders. With the report’s third ‘bottom line’ Rebanks explains that farming currently realises an ‘insufficient market return’, but that this doesn’t adequately reflect their unique position producing goods and ‘sustaining the cultural landscape’ (Rebanks 2013, 15). To reinforce the importance of farming’s sustenance of the cultural landscape, the report continues with a quote drawn from the LDNPA’s Intention Statement for Agriculture in the Lake District, which:

[I]s clear about the importance of agriculture to the National Park: ‘Farming is the most critical economic, social, environmental and cultural activity in the Lake District. It is the key human activity that gives the Lake District its sense of place and its distinctive and iconic landscape character, and it is central to the identity of many Lake District communities. Its plays a critical underpinning role for both tourism and the food and drink sector’. (15)

This goes beyond implication: farming is ‘critical’ to the region. Without farming, tourists, including the big spenders from the international market, would have little reason to visit, thereby driving the sector into contraction. No longer the folk of yesteryear, by combining (agri)culture and capital, at a swoop Rebanks’ report remakes Lake District farmers as the tomorrow people.

## Conflict in numbers

The irony lurking behind a project clearly intended to promote economic growth is that by inscribing the Lakes as a site of world heritage, shifting the local into a global arena, the local becomes more deeply implicated in global problems. For example, car ownership has long been a determinant for the region’s visitor economy (Urry 1995, 196); by 2018, 83% of the Lakeland’s 20 million visitors made their journeys by car (Friends of the Lake District 2022). In their favour, the LDNPA do have plans to reduce car usage with the goal of 64% of the visitors travelling by car by 2040. However, it is difficult to understand how this admirable aim to encourage sustainable travel sits alongside the enthusiastic



development of a long-haul market. Attracting yet more high-spending international visitors will swell some bank balances, but it will also add a substantial debit to the planet's carbon account.

Growth in tourist numbers under a capitalist system that looks to exploit every opportunity inevitably leads to growth in the number of people participating in an ever-expanding range of activities. However, in contrast with the dominant narrative of harmony, not all cultural practices sit comfortably alongside one and other: farmers come into conflict with walkers, walkers with mountain bikers and so on. But conflicts over usage and access are nothing new: Ian Whyte explains that access to the landscape of the Lakes has been contested for many years, particularly between lords and their tenants (Whyte 2002, 2). Such conflicts extended into disputes over rights of way as landowners sought to impose private boundaries upon the fells, often meeting with fierce resistance. In 1887, for example, the Spedding family's attempt to bar access to Latrigg, a hill on the outskirts of Keswick, prompted a series of protests culminating in the gathering of over 2000 protestors on 1 October, which ultimately resulted in the restoration of the public right of way ('Keswick Footpath Disputes' 2022). John Bainbridge, writing for his blog 'Walking the Old Ways', remarks that although 'there are some interesting information boards' on the way up Latrigg none of them mention 'that the fell was the site of one of the biggest access protests in British history' (Bainbridge 2020). Whilst the well-at heel resistance to the usage conflict surrounding the construction of the Thirlmere dam is an increasingly popular element in the narrative about the formation of the National Trust, basic access narratives are often overlooked.

In recent times, land conflicts have tended to centre upon modes of usage rather than basic access. Valleys such as Little Langdale have seen long-running conflicts over the rights of way between walkers and 'off-roaders' who wish to drive 4 × 4s on tracks that have retained public vehicular rights (B.B.C News 2020b). There are also conflicts over large-scale tourist developments, such as that surrounding Tree Top Trek's controversial and ultimately unsuccessful proposal for a zipline over the Thirlmere reservoir in 2017, a suggested alpine-style gondola into Whinlatter forest, and more recently a proposed theme park in Elterwater Quarry (B.B.C News 2017; Friends of the Lake District 2021). Developments of this kind go beyond basic rights of access and are aimed squarely at growing the Lake District's visitor economy in a model of continuous expansion which, according to Lloyd and Gere amongst many others, 'is simply unsustainable' (Kirkby 2019; Lloyd and Gere 2020). Certainly, it is difficult to see how the Lakes might absorb ever greater numbers of visitors, not least given the increasing problems related to both parking and congestion, especially when those numbers are sustained by a car-based economy.

The car is only one way that tourist growth is embedded within wider structures of production and consumption. This embeddedness is evident in the preponderance of cheap mass-produced hiking and camping gear, as well as with the introduction of increasingly specialised equipment with which people can enjoy the outdoors in ever more complex ways. In Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel *Brave New World* the ruling class, keen to promote consumption at every possible opportunity, condition workers to hate nature and the country on the grounds that 'a love of nature keeps no factories busy'. However, they are also conditioned to love country sports and 'see to it that all country sports ... entail the use of elaborate apparatus' thereby ensuring that the population

‘consume manufactured articles as well as transport’ (Huxley 2007, 18). A walk through the centre of Keswick, where traditional shops have been almost entirely displaced by retail outlets catering to the outdoor leisure market, and where every available space is occupied by a car, does little to dispel Huxley’s vision: although they cannot be seen from the top of Catbells, the factories have surely been kept busy. From this perspective, whilst the Lake District is sold to consumers as a way of escaping the ills of industrial and post-industrial urban life, much contemporary engagement with the outdoors in being embedded in wider cycles of production and consumption only serves to perpetuate those same ills.

## La peste

Around the time that the LDNPA’s Richard Leafe was giving interviews stating that ‘we need to be able to sell the national park to everybody in Britain’ (Lake District National Park Authority 2020), news of a strange new virus was beginning to emerge from China. SARS-CoV-2, when it arrived, changed everything, at least for a while, and in the Lake District the narrative of eternal growth ground to a halt under national lockdowns and international travel restrictions. On Easter Monday, 13 April 2020, at the height of the UK’s first lockdown, a friend who lives in the Lakes reported visiting Surprise View, a beauty spot perched above the head of Derwentwater. This is a location normally teeming with tourists, particularly on a Bank Holiday. However, on this occasion, the viewpoint was free of sightseers and absent the customary hum of traffic emanating from the valley below. It was, he said, an extraordinary, even revelatory experience. Subsequent tales of the joy of the Lakeland fells denuded of their human irritants abounded, tales that were repeated and multiplied at different locations around the country. With the marked decline in road traffic some suggested birdsong was louder, whilst others, pointing to the conspicuous absence of air traffic, claimed the skies were a deeper shade of blue (Briggs 2020). It seemed that the world, thanks to the paradoxical worldview that sees human absence as an index of nature, had become more natural.

Part of the appeal of the Lake District is generated using the same index, with the potential for an absence of people satisfying the appetite of what John Urry calls ‘the romantic gaze’ whereby the landscape constitutes ‘a positional good, a shrine to nature that individuals wish to enjoy in solitude’ (Urry 1995, 197). Accordingly, the Lake District’s ‘official website’, proclaims that in the Lakes you will find ‘shimmering lakes and hushed mountains’ set in a ‘timeless landscape . . . designed to challenge the imagination’. It is ‘a world apart, but so easy to get to’ (Visit Lake District 2022). Constructing the Lakes as an idealised escape from the teeming masses of industrial society, easy to get to as long as you have access to a car, constitutes part of what Urry, drawing on Shields, calls the region’s ‘place myth’. However, as he points out, this myth, due in no small measure to this world apart being ‘so easy to get to’, is largely undone by ‘huge numbers of visitors’ creating a ‘sense that many small urban centres are periodically overwhelmed’ (Urry 1995, 197).

In some cases, the literary imaginations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have tried to recreate elements of this collapsing ‘myth’ by imagining a Lakeland that extends beyond the refuges found in Romantic recollections of a tranquil country retreat. Both John Christopher’s *The Death of Grass* ([1956] (Christopher 2009)), and Sarah Hall’s

*The Carhullan Army* (Hall 2009), imagine the Cumbrian fells as a haven from apocalyptic events, caused respectively by a virus that kills all grasses and a climate emergency threatening to collapse British society. Whilst Norman Nicholson worried that the region was becoming 'a convalescent home for a sick civilisation' (Nicholson 1964, 184), in these novels the Lake District becomes an intensive care unit, or a kind of Noah's Ark, offering a final sanctuary to environmental refugees from where they can out-float the diluvian and biological disasters befalling the rest of civilisation. Both novels, in failing to imagine successful alternatives, go some way towards proving Mark Fisher's observation that 'it's easier to imagine the end of the world than it is the end of capitalism'; but in the Lake District, we should add that it is also more alluring to imagine an apocalyptic end to the people (Fisher 2009, 1).

A post-apocalyptic world without humans is a surprisingly common fantasy that seems to be embroiled to some extent in the legacy of Romanticism (Washington 2019). If there is a degree of romance in the apocalyptic visions of a world wiped 'clean', there's also a sense in which the Romantic construction of the Lake District as a haven from a world which is 'too much with us' encourages fantasises of this kind. In his short treatise on Cumbria and the north of England, *I Hate the Lake District*, Charlie Gere succumbs to just these fantasies. Indeed, for Gere their allure is sufficient for him to include them twice as he tours the region in his car, explaining that 'I was haunted, or perhaps beguiled by a fantasy of the North-West of England somehow becoming deserted' (Gere 2019, 23). Later, when discussing *The Death of Grass*, he recounts that 'I imagine the land made desolate by some catastrophe' (11). He didn't have long to wait; less than a year after his book was published the spring of 2020 made fact what had previously only existed as Romantic fancy. Although the land was not made desolate for a time, it was almost apocalyptically deserted.

The revelatory quality of the silent motorways, deserted roads and empty skies that accompanied the first wave of the COVID virus is a key component in narratives of the apocalypse (apocalypse takes its root from the Greek 'to uncover'). Jaqueline Rose explains that in Albert Camus' novel, *The Plague* (1947), 'pestilence is at once blight and revelation' and that the 'revelation' in *The Plague* is that the virus 'brings the hidden truth of a corrupt world to the surface' (Rose 2020). 'It was as if' Camus writes in a vivid passage evoking not just a cultural landscape, but what we might call a viral landscape, 'the earth on which our houses were planted was being purged of its secreted humours, thrusting up to the surface the abscesses and pus-clots that, up till then, had been doing their work internally' (Camus 1947, 17). The viral landscape evoked by Camus, with its 'maisons plantées', recalls Wordsworth's Lakeland houses 'clothed in part with a vegetable garb ... in the bosom of the living principle' (Wordsworth 1810, 63); but whereas Wordsworth's vision was one of the Romantic harmony, the erupting interiority of the 'abscesses' and 'pus-clots' in Camus' viral geology gestures towards a submerged cultural conflict rendered visible by apocalyptic revelation.

It is tempting to describe the revelatory apocalyptic emptiness of the lockdown Lake District as uncanny, particularly when considering the neurotic doubling of a depopulated landscape in both fantasy and tourist narratives. However, in Freud's terms, that a sense of the uncanny 'proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed', the term doesn't work (Freud 1919, 247). This is because a landscape devoid of people, whilst familiar, isn't something we generally repress; witness, for example, Gere's fantasies

above, Urry's solitary tourist or the success of numerous tv programmes, films and novels representing post-human futures (Dobraszczyk 2021). Given their preponderance in fictional, fantasy and tourist narratives, rather than repressing scenes of emptiness, many of us seem actively to seek them out. In this instance, it is a desire to engage with a 'nature' denuded of the worst excesses of modernity that is perhaps more closely related to repression, a repression of the social means of our existence. From this perspective, the Lake District comes to resemble less a harmonious cultural landscape than it does Marx's concept of a fetish object, an object that conceals the social realities of its construction. It is remarkably easy when gazing down Borrowdale to forget the culture of road surfaces that bore you, the factories that constructed the cars you rode in, the rainforests destroyed in order to breed the animals whose skins protect your feet, or the megacities providing cheap labour to stitch together your goretex jacket and your rucksack; the reader, as T. S. Eliot would say, 'can make his [sic] own list' (Eliot 1948, 29). For Wordsworth 'The world [was] too much with us' (Wordsworth 1807, 122): in the twenty-first century rather than turning away from a world too much with us, our gaze upon the world should be unflinching. If the Anthropocene teaches us anything it is perhaps that some of us are too much with the world.

In Freud's terms the properly uncanny scenes, those that had been repressed, arrived following the easing of restrictions on movement during May and June of 2020. Visitor numbers to the UK's national parks and regional beauty spots increased dramatically during this period with some areas reporting up to double their usual numbers as a population debarred from international travel sought respite from the claustrophobic grind of confinement by reconnecting with local nature. In the Lakes, this dramatic increase was most apparent with the manifestation of 'non-traditional visitors' whose reconnection was initially welcomed by journalists such as Olivia Utley. Writing for *The Sun*, Utley celebrated our enforced 'staycations', claiming that Britain's 'spoilt' youth would now have to visit the English countryside where, 'reconnected to their roots at last, they might begin to feel the first stirring of patriotism running through their British veins' (Utley 2020). However, many brave new patriots instead reconnected with the dominant culture of consumption and left a trail of destruction in their wake. Recalling the Victorian critic John Ruskin's fears that the Lakes might become 'nothing but [pools] of drainage, with a beach of broken ginger beer bottles' (see Somervell 1876, 6), campsites were closed due to antisocial behaviour, 'fly camping' (the practice of camping and leaving behind all your equipment) became endemic, beauty spots were transformed into toilet stops, and the shores and islands of several lakes saw numerous instances of late-night parties the detritus from which was rarely, if ever, cleared away by the revellers (B.B.C News 2020a). Rather than stirring with a reinvigorated 'blood and soil' cultural nationalism, the veins of these visitors appeared to be flowing with Dionysian abandon. The lakes and rivers of Cumbria offered not a reengagement with a sense of mythic national identity, but instead with the consumer hedonism of lost Mediterranean beaches. It is difficult here not to recall Stuart Hall's comments about eighteenth century popular culture, in which he maintains that whilst excluded from the broader stage of cultural life, like the eruption of Camus' hidden truths, "the people' threatened constantly to erupt; and, when they did so, they broke on to the stage of patronage and power with a threatening din and clamour – with fife and drum, cockade and effigy, proclamation and ritual' (Hall 1981, 229). However, the key difference between Hall's eighteenth-century

'eruptions', the Latrigg protests of the nineteenth century, and the events of summer 2020 is that whereas 'the people' of the past came armed with the instruments, symbols and practises of protest, their present-day analogues came armed with disposable tents, canned goods and deckchairs, fully embedded in the growth culture of consumption. The vision of a national cultural landscape that emerged from 2020's encounter between the national park and modern urban society represents a very different image of the land to Uteley's intravenous infusion of nationalism or the 'harmonious cultural landscape' peopled by happy shepherds described by UNESCO. This landscape exposed the unpleasant realities of a consumer culture that is too often swept under the carpet; the rubbish and detritus that we all produce and that we all throw away was suddenly made manifest in a place we go to pretend none of it exists.

In the UNESCO account, the intersection of human culture with nature produces a scene where 'grand houses, gardens and parks have been purposely created to enhance the landscape's beauty' (UNESCO). The suggestion that these constructions make for a harmonious landscape conceals the price of this harmony which, as Prynne noted, was exacted elsewhere: from the lives of the industrial working class, from the lives of those enslaved in the colonies and finally with the extraction and burning of fossil fuels. Raymond Williams points out that the men he calls 'the great improvers' who came to build the grand houses, gardens and parks away from the industrial centres were exactly those people who were most embedded in 'the new extractive and industrial processes' based upon coal (Williams 1980, 80). This meant, Williams explains, that those who drew the most profit from the destructive exploitation of the earth used those same profits to escape the inhospitable environments they helped create. Therefore, those responsible for creating the conditions in the cities from which people needed to escape were also those who were busy creating the illusion of a harmonious cultural landscape, the foundations for which were discovered underground in the form of coal and exploited labour (80–81). In stark contrast to Wordsworth's republic where the 'constitution had been imposed and regulated by the mountains which protected it', the geology governing the heritage of much of this cultural landscape is one that, like the imagery of Camus' viral landscape, came from underground. The real costs of the coal extracted, the factories operated and of the fortunes derived from the suffering of hundreds of thousands of workers are repressed by the aesthetic sleight of hand that conceals the truth of human and environmental exploitation behind beauty.

One revelation of the twenty-first century's first plague was that the Lake District, for a short while at least, was revealed as a landscape that finally represented the repressed truth of our wider culture. The people who arrived in a region Wordsworth suggested ought to be considered a 'sort of national property' behaved in ways not considered 'proper'; and yet for all that these behaviours ought not to be considered proper to any region, let alone the Lakes, they are nevertheless one of the properties of the nation. However, to remain at the point of national characteristics would be to fall into the kind of parochialism that sits at the heart of the conflict about the Lake District. The late capitalist culture within which we are all entangled is one predicated upon economic growth underpinned by enormous levels of consumption and it is a global culture. In a global setting, it is easier to sweep unwanted aspects of this culture under the carpet, but in a viral setting of restrictions and limited options, elements that remained buried, or better, repressed, were bound to return.

The current 'idea' of the Lake District is one that constructs it as a region separate from the rest of the country, and indeed much of its appeal is based upon the properties of that distinction. But the narrative of a harmonious cultural landscape that sits at the heart of the region's UNESCO status cannot be separated from the conflicts that underpin the wider world within which the Lake District is embedded. Rebanks gets this: reflecting on the Chernobyl disaster, which brought a global problem to the heart of the fells, he realises 'the wider world [is] stupendously fucked up' (Rebanks 2015, 90). Framing the Lake District as a landscape embodying cultural harmony does not help us to more clearly see the wider calamities threatening to engulf the human race.

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## Notes on contributor

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