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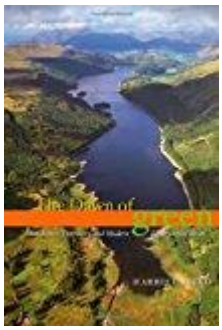
Harriet Ritvo. *The Dawn of Green: Manchester, Thirlmere, and Modern Environmentalism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 237 pp. $26.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-72082-1.



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Romantic Landscape vs. Urban Dynamo, 1878

Where should we look for the origin of modern environmentalism? In recent years, Donald Worster, Richard Grove, Gregory Barton, William Beinart, and T. C. Smout, among others, have offered a variety of contending answers to this question. Problems of water and forestry loom large in much of the literature. But their geographic and ecological range is enormous, from the African veldt and Scottish peat moors to tropical islands and Indian forests. Conceptually, the field is split between those who favor a focus on metropolitan developments and those who look to the colonial periphery. To this burgeoning research, Harriet Ritvo now adds a major new perspective. *The Dawn of Green* revisits the romantic roots of environmentalism by way of a detailed case study of water politics in northern England. Between 1877 and 1894, the lake of Thirlmere became the stage for a dramatic struggle between preservationists and industrialists. Should the lake be turned into a reservoir to serve the surging demand of Manchester or should it be protected from exploitation as an essential part of the national heritage? According to Ritvo, this battle introduced the “basic structure” and “template for subsequent environmental struggles” not just in Britain but across the modern world (pp. 178, 3).

Ritvo’s account balances country and city carefully. She begins with the story of how Victorian Manchester outgrew its water supply. When private companies proved unable to deliver a viable remedy, the municipal authorities took control of this vital sector of the infrastructure and established a reservoir at Longdendale in 1851. Yet within a generation, the engineer John Bateman warned that a crisis was once again imminent. His prediction pushed the city council to search for new sources further afield. They settled on a plan to dam Thirlmere and channel its water through a pipeline to the city. But when news of this scheme reached the public, it provoked a furious response by local residents, such as John Ruskin and H. D.

Rawnsley. By the late nineteenth century if not earlier, the lake district had achieved an iconic status among English regional landscapes thanks to its association with the romantic poets and a long standing tradition of tourism. For this reason, the opposition to the reservoir scheme quickly grew into a national movement rather than just a regional concern. The expression of outrage free of interest was perhaps the greatest strength of the preservation lobby. The Thirlmere Defense Association (TDA) claimed "neither a legal right ... nor a direct financial stake in the outcome of the debate" (p. 80). Its main ambition was to serve as a custodian and protector of a unique landscape on behalf of the nation. Somewhat paradoxically, Ritvo goes on to argue that the Thirlmere "template" for modern environmentalism developed before an "ecological perspective" became scientifically and politically available (p. 160). The plea for preservation stemmed from the poetic value attributed to the landscape rather than the biological significance of a particular ecosystem.

Because "all large municipal improvement projects" had to be vetted in Parliament , the raison d'être of the Thirlmere reservoir became a matter of national politics (p. 95). But almost as soon as the issue entered Parliament, the politicians turned the battle over to barristers and scientific experts. A special committee was constituted to submit the project to what "strongly resembled a legal trial" (p. 96). During the hearings, chemists, engineers, and geologists were brought in for cross-examinations to "corroborate [the] technical assertions" of the Manchester Corporation (p. 99). For Ritvo, the legal conflict exposed a fundamental difference of ends and means between the defenders of the city and the country. The spokesmen for the reservoir preferred to make their argument in terms of numbers and utility whereas the TDA "resisted quantification" in favor of a "nebulous sense of ownership--a sense that the citizens of a nation should have some say in the disposition of significant landscapes even if they held no formal title to the property in question" (p. 104). In the short term, the battle was won by the urban interest and the scientists. The parliamentary politicians appreciated much more readily the familiar rhetoric of political economy and scientific expertise. Yet the cultural critique of the Thirlmere reservoir proved increasingly influential over the long run. The argument that certain landscapes ought to be protected in the name of the nation won widespread public acceptance within the following decades, marked by the establishment of the National Trust and the postwar system of national parks.

Ritvo wears her learning lightly. She is a delightful storyteller with a sharp eye for illuminating details. The conflict between city and country is set forth without simplistic allegiances. For Ritvo, both sides had legitimate claims to make on the common good. She castigates the high-minded preservationist who worships a "pristine wilderness" framed in a "static and pure" vision of the past (p. 179). But she also recognizes that scholarly nuance will carry little force in political life: "Absolute positions are more compelling than nuanced or intermediate ones" (p. 179). ***The Dawn of Green*** therefore ends on a dark note. Preservationists have become adept at a peculiar form of sentimental rhetoric but have not developed a politically successful and historically honest strategy.

One may wish to quibble here with Ritvo about the merits of her pessimism. Is it really fair to reduce the "template" of modern environmentalism to a strain of romantic preservationism? This narrow approach is possibly reinforced by the historiographical vacuum of her argument. While the title of the book promises a major intervention, Ritvo is remarkably quiet on the question of how her work relates to that of other major interpretations of the origins of environmentalism. This polemical modesty allows Ritvo to overlook fundamental tensions with other models of explanation. For example, the dichotomy between utilitarian quantification and preservationist sen-

timent seems overdrawn when we remember the central role of natural history and scientific expertise in rival accounts of the origins of environmentalism put forward by Grove, Barton, and Worster, among others. At least one of the central figures in Ritvo's story--John Ruskin--in fact combined a strong interest in natural history with an idiosyncratic grasp of political economy. This last point is perhaps worth dwelling on further. It may be that the time is ripe to assess and acknowledge fully the debt of environmental thought to the canon of classical political economy, from Thomas Robert Malthus's population theory to John Stuart Mill's stationary state and William Stanley Jevons's work on peak coal. Maybe we must look for at least one strain of the environmental critique of industrial society in the techniques of quantification and prediction developed by engineers, economists, and urban administrators?

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