



A TOUR IN THE LAKES

1797

by

William Gell

*edited and introduced by*

*William Rollinson*

with an afterword by

Melvyn Bragg

SMITH SETTLE



*Buttermere Hawse. '... the road became nothing more than a morass ...'*

A short time before we arrived at the top of the fell the road became nothing more than a morass, and it is curious to relate that a dispute ensued, whether a loose line of stones on which we stood was intended for a road or the



bed of a torrent at the time when a considerable fall of rain, or the dissolution of winter snows, produces frequent floods in this mountainous region. At length we saw buttermere; at the head of the lake stand two or three houses, called Gatesgarth, where we learnt from a man who answered our question from his bed, that we only wanted two miles of the village. We entered the village at eleven, and at the door of the inn, known only by the name of Joseph Robinsons,<sup>40</sup> for there is no sign, we were received by the

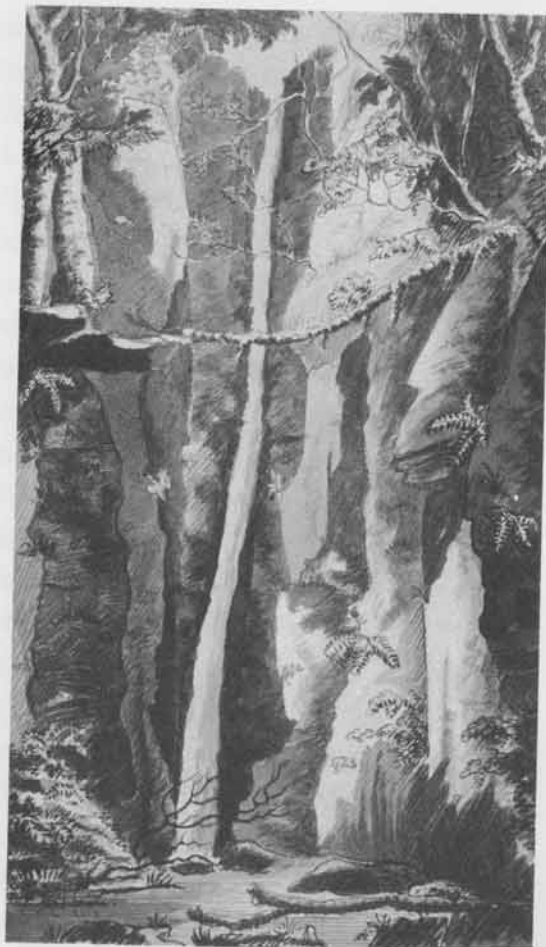
*The Fish Inn, Buttermere. 'We entered the village at eleven, and at the door of the inn, known only by the name of Joseph Robinsons, for there is no sign, we were received by the landlord, the celebrated of those parts.'*

<sup>40</sup> The inn was the Fish.



41. Mary Robinson, 'the Beauty of Buttermere' (pictured above). After Joseph Budworth first drew attention to Mary's charm and good looks in his book *A Fortnight's Tour to the Lakes* of 1792, the tourists began to arrive from Keswick to see this famed beauty for themselves — Gell and his party included. In 1802, Mary married the 'Hon Colonel Hope', but alas he was neither honourable nor a colonel, for he was John Hatfield, a notorious forger and bigamist. He was hanged in Carlisle the following year and Mary became a *cause célèbre*. Fortunately the story had a happy ending, for Mary Robinson married again and went with her husband to live at Caldbeck. See Melvyn Bragg's novel *The Maid of Buttermere*, 1987.

landlords daughter, the celebrated beauty of those parts.<sup>41</sup> While our good old hostess, prepared our beds the lovely daughter waited on us at supper, with that good nature and attention which soon determined us as much in favour of her disposition, as we were before captivated by the charms of her person. Indeed so much attention was paid us, that we all agreed to remain at Buttermere some days, though our original intention was to have left it the day after our arrival. We saw the amazing fall of Scale force in the course of the next day, and it is indeed worthy of notice, falling precipitately from the summit of the hill into a chasm scarce six yards wide enclosed on every side but the outlet, by rocks which in some places start up in perpendicular masses and in others hang over in a manner that joined to the height of one hundred and fifty feet perpendicular render the whole tremendous and unrivalled. It is indeed worthy the pencil of a Rosa, the trees covered with moss, the fern starting up in the angles of the rock, and the dashing of the water are highly finished much in his stile. There are two falls, the lower not more than twelve feet in height, nature has left a kind of staircase by the side of it which seems to have been improved by art



A sketch of Scale Force ... in notice, falling from the summit of the hill into a chasm scarce six yards wide enclosed on every side but the outlet, by

in order to give a full view of the higher fall, which otherwise could not have been obtained.

Some days after we climbed the steep hill above the village of Buttermere and saw the lakes of Loweswater Crummock and Buttermere on one side with Pocklington island and Derwentwater, Newlands vale, and the rudest assemblage of hills, and rocks, I ever beheld on the other.

We even imagined we saw the sea over Mell break, an hill on the side of Crummock. Buttermere is two miles, Crummock about three, and Loweswater just one mile in length, where the hills are softened to rising grounds and the tameness of the scene cannot please, when the eye has been accustomed to the wildness of Buttermere.

On Sunday the second of July we went to church and were reconciled to our miserable situation with damp walls and wet soil, for there is no floor,<sup>42</sup> by the sight of a large number of attendants for the size of the place, and the appearance of a respectable preacher. The daughter of our host was our conductress. In the night it rained so hard that every little rill became a torrent or waterfall, we wished to re-visit scale force but fishing or other amusements prevented us for sometime.

42. The poverty of the dale churches is not really surprising. As late as 1845, the floor of Wasdale Head chapel was covered with bracken, and there were only two pews, the rest of the seats being sheep forms on trestles.

On Tuesday the fourth of July we gave a dance to the villagers of Buttermere, our company consisted of five and thirty persons and if it be a pleasure to see merry faces and good humour we had them here in perfection. We regaled the ladies with queen cakes and punch the rest with ale and porter and for the little expence of perhaps half a guinea on each of us we gave an entertainment unequalled in the annals of Buttermere. We danced from eight in the evening till two the next morning between each country dance, the customary gigs of the country took place for it is usual for every one to ask each of the females to dance a gig though there be thirty in company. We saw scale force again some days after, my companions thought it improved, by the addition of a considerable flood, for my own part I thought the height appeared so much diminished, as to take away greatly from the effect.

We went to Cockermouth on the seventh, saw the castle a small and never apparently a strong building, founded by Waltheof son to Gospatric, lord of Allerdale. Over the gate are the arms of Molton, Humfraville Lucy and Percy as Camden says but he forgets to mention the fifth shield, the coat of the Nevill's who married the heiress of Gospatric



*Cockermouth Castle, from William Gell's journal. '... a small and never apparently a strong building ...'*

43. A Roman altar is built into the north side of the gatehouse. (See Collingwood, W G, *The Lake Counties*, 1932.)

Earl of Northumberland during the reign of the Conqueror, or soon after. This Castle is reported to have been built from the ruins of the Roman Papcastle, a short distance from Cockermouth.<sup>43</sup>

The town itself is not large, and has little to recommend

## COCKERMOUTH

it. The name is taken from the situation, standing on the conflux of the Rivers Cocker, and Derwent. The site of this castle, is now the property of the Earl of Egremont who derives his title, from another castle in this county, founded by William de Meschines Earl of Chester, whose daughter married William fitz Duncan, of the blood Royal of Scotland, from whom the title passed through the families of Lucy, Molton, and Fitzwalter, till it came to the Radcliff's Earls of Sussex. Thos. Percy in the reign of Henry the sixth, was first Lord of Egremont, of that family, and I believe the present possessor of Cockermouth is his descendant.

We returned to Buttermere the next day, passing through Lorton, where is perhaps the largest school in the county, if that of St. Bees be excepted, which is situated on the coast, and so called from St. Bega one of those ladies who came to seek their fortunes here from Ireland, which indeed was much the fashion of those days, for we read of St. Winifred and at least a dozen others from that country, doing the same. This virgin is said to have tamed a wild bull, by her piety, and to have covered the hills and vallies of Cumberland with snow, in the midst of summer<sup>44</sup> but

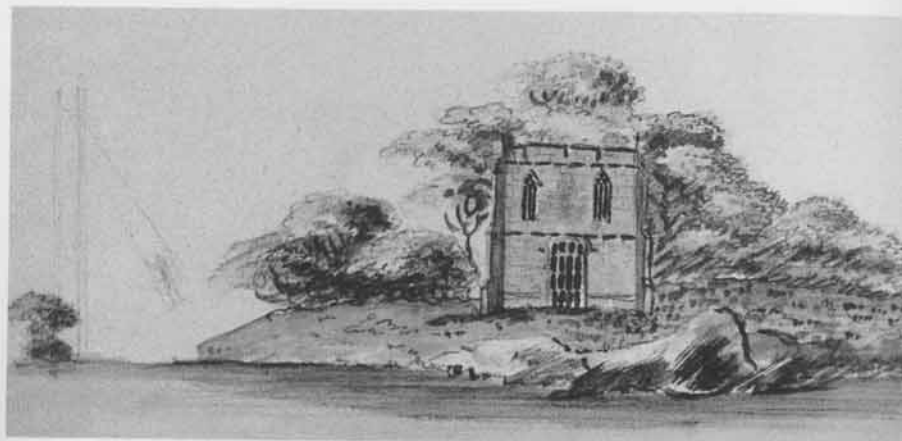
44. The medieval certain Celtic saint landed on the shore, begged the lord of the land as the snow course snow fell on can be no doubt to a pre-Norman church Kirkby Begog, a name Christianised North Bragg's novel *Cro*



*Gell's depiction of Crummock Water. 'We rowed that evening on the lake of Crummock, a most delightfully glowing sunset, tinged the water, and the surrounding mountains, with the finest purple we had ever seen.'*

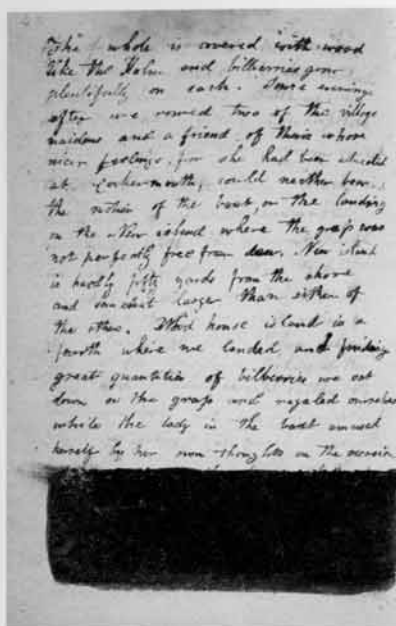
the question whether she deserved to be canonized for the latter piece of mischief, if left to the good people whose land she injured, would more probably have been determined, in favour of burning her for a witch, than raising her to the skies. From Lorton to Buttermere is about seven miles, the road tolerable to Buttermere hawse,

## CRUMMOCK WATER



a rock jutting out a little way into Crummock, and we were happy to find that our arrival at Buttermere was as pleasing as it was unexpected to the inhabitants of the village. We rowed that evening on the lake of Crummock, a most delightfully glowing sunset, tinged the water, and the surrounding mountains, with the finest purple we had ever seen. We landed at Holme island, and afterwards at Bowmans island where we sat some time building aerial castles on the rock, while we enjoyed the scene. It was one of the finest evenings we had seen since the commencement of our tour. The island we found to be about forty four yards

*Bowmans Island and its imaginary William Gell. '... we sat some time building aerial castles on the rock, scene. It was one of the finest evenings we had seen since the commencement of our tour.'*



45. Here, several sentences have been obliterated by black ink or paint (see above). Although in some places the surface of the paper has been removed, it is possible to decipher the following using ultra-violet light: '... little were they acquainted with the name of vice that the very circumstances of staying behind in the other served to show off in greater lustre the purity of the daughter of our land lord and her companion'. Following these words is the pencilled comment 'ha ha ha, W.G.'

long, perhaps twenty in breadth. The whole is covered with wood like the Holme and bilberries grow plentifully on each. Some evenings after we rowed two of the village maidens and a friend of theirs whose nicer feelings, for she had been educated at Cockermouth, could neither bear the motion of the boat, or the landing on the New island where the grass was not perfectly free from dew. New island is hardly fifty yards from the shore and somewhat larger than either of the others. Wood house island is a fourth where we landed, and finding great quantities of bilberries we sat down on the grass and regaled ourselves while the lady in the boat amused herself by her own thoughts on the occasion ...<sup>45</sup>

The day after we visited Ennerdale water over five miles of fells and bogs. A mist prevented us from seeing the lake for some time but on clearing up a fine piece of water and a rude fell on the opposite shore rewarded us for our trouble. There is one small island situated about the middle of the lake. We left this retired spot on the ..... of July, I believe we may without vanity assert that all to whom we were known were not a little sorry at our departure, nor were we on our part insensible to the kindness



Ennerdale Water  
'A mist prevented us from seeing the lake for some time but on clearing up a fine piece of water and a rude fell on the opposite shore rewarded us for our trouble.'

and hospitality of these our rustic friends. We passed the lofty Grassmire on the left, scarce ten yards are wanting to make this mountain, equal to Skiddaw in height,<sup>46</sup> its colour is remarkable being of a tawny hue, without any covering except here and there a speck of heath to diversify its appearance. On the right just below Robinsons Crag and exactly at the head of Newlands vale is a waterfall, the height of the rock we did not recollect to observe.

The author of the guide to the lakes found a beauty and wildness in the valley of Newlands which I believe others will scarce imagine with the assistance of the most romantic

46. Grassmire is 1000 feet.