

Talk for The Borrowdale Story, 16 May 2023, Grange Chapel, Borrowdale

What a pleasure to be invited to come and talk to you here, in the very midst of Borrowdale which was so close to the heart of my great-grandfather Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley, whose extended biography my colleague Dr. Michael Allen and I have recently published.

(Copies available at the back of the hall!)

As I wrote recently for the Borrowdale News, one of the last acts of Rawnsley's life was to buy, and present to the National Trust, the tranquil little eminence behind this hall, which he named Peace Howe as a memorial to the fallen of the Great War. From that peaceful spot visitors may contemplate the majesty of the Jaws of Borrowdale and reflect upon the sacrifice made by those from Lakeland who gave their lives in the cause of peace.

Rawnsley was a many-sided character — once convinced of the worthiness of any cause he was asked to espouse, he would not spare himself (or others come to that!) in his efforts to further its aims, always leading from the front. How he found the time to chair those countless committees, organise fund-raising — he was a world-class effective fund-raiser — pen articles and letters to the press and lobby the powers-that-be, while running his parish of Crosthwaite, lecturing, writing countless sonnets and more than three dozen books, is anybody's guess, but I suspect that his family life suffered in consequence.

His first wife Edith Fletcher, a talented artist and designer, with whom he founded the Keswick School of Industrial Arts, was his full-time helpmeet and can therefore have found little time for their only son Noel, my grandfather. I suspect, from the few photographs of Noel that I have seen, that he was a lonely little boy. I have a mental picture of him, as a rather a faded old man, when we stayed with my grandparents in 1951 on the island of Capri. That was the only time I ever met him I think, as he died the following year.

Choleric on occasions, particularly with those who did not share his forcefully expressed views (he was once apostrophised as 'the most

active volcano in Europe), Canon Rawnsley inevitably made enemies as well as friends. He was a man of his time, intensely patriotic and something of a snob, while at the same time being hail-fellow-well-met with his parishioners and others of all classes. Nonetheless, he certainly would have found nothing offensive in the verse in Mrs. Alexander's well-known hymn, All Things Bright and Beautiful:

The Rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate,
God made them high and lowly, and ordered their estate.

A verse almost certainly omitted from the hymnaries of today!

He got on well with people from every background, from Dukes (he was on good terms with the first Duke of Westminster whose support he enlisted in the early years of the National Trust) to dalesmen. He was happy to hob-nob with the great-and good whose purse-strings he would loosen in support of his varied good causes, but at the same time liked nothing better than to attend the shepherds' meetings at which he would converse with the locals in the Cumberland dialect, which he spoke fluently.

He became something of an expert on Herdwick sheep, an interest he passed on to Beatrix Potter, the children's writer, who in turn after her marriage to William Heelis reinvented herself as a farmer and countrywoman, becoming an expert breeder and judge of Herdwicks. Indeed, towards the end of her life Mrs. Heelis had the signal honour of being the first woman to be elected President of the Herdwick Sheep Breeders' Association, although, sadly, she died before she could officially take up the post.

In *Months at the Lakes*, published in 1911, one of the dozen books Rawnsley wrote to publicise Lakeland, Rawnsley gives a graphic account of the famous annual shepherds' meet at the Dun Bull pub in Mardale, near Haweswater, an event which he tried always to attend. Being unable, to his dismay, to be accommodated at the pub where all the guest rooms had already been booked by a party of gentlemen from Manchester, he found lodging at a nearby farmhouse. The next day, the

Manchester contingent duly appeared, clad in shooting jackets and knickerbockers which they considered appropriate dress for the occasion. After the business of returning to their rightful owners the sheep which had been gathered and brought to the village the previous day, the traditional clay-pigeon shooting and merry-making got under way. To the Canon's evident disapproval, the sportsmen from Manchester muscled in on these festivities with enthusiasm. Times were changing, Rawnsley reflected, and in his book, he deprecated the fact that the age-old customs of that 'time-out-of-mind shepherds' meeting in the wilderness had been lost, never to return'.

Fortunately, as it would have broken his heart, he did not live long enough to see the village of Mardale, pub and all, disappear beneath the waters of the lake when the level of Haweswater was raised by a dam in the 1930's to provide additional water to supply the city of Manchester. He might though have appreciated the irony!

Returning to Borrowdale, in *By Fell & Dale*, published in 1911, Rawnsley wrote of King's Howe:

"It is satisfactory to know that the most beautiful part of Borrowdale is now in the hands of the National Trust... and will remain safe for the enjoyment of the people, unharmed by the speculating builder and free from the restrictions which land preserved for sporting rights must necessarily involve.

"Except for a single hour in the day, when the coaches that leave Keswick at 10 o'clock pass up to Seatoller, or the unwieldy traction engine brings its huge wagons of slates down the valley from Honister, 'Borrowdale is a vale of rest, though each year the motor car encroaches on its tranquillity during the season.'"

A prescient remark.

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During the pandemic lockdown period three years ago, how the residents of Borrowdale, except perhaps those needing to earn their living from tourism, must have appreciated the return of that long-lost tranquillity!

"There is something incongruous", Rawnsley goes on, "between the modernity of the motor car and the ancientry of Borrowdale. Hardly a farm-house in the valley but is still held by yeomen who can trace their lineage and their time of residence for three hundred years. Though the Threlkelds of Grange came thither from Patterdale only one hundred and eighty-six years ago, the Wilsons of Watendlath have been in the dale more than three hundred years, and the Birketts can trace their property for at least four hundred years. The families of Fisher, Youdale, Jopson and Braithwaite are of equal antiquity.

"The Great Deed of Borrowdale, which came into existence in the year 1615, gives us a list of the freeholders of that date. Thirty-seven tenements were then enfranchised and bought free; most of the names exist and many of the families mentioned therein still hold their property."

How many of those families still live in the Vale a century later, I wonder?

"A great deal of fun is made", Hardwicke goes on, "out of the story of the Borrowdale people, who, having heard the cuckoo or 'gowk', determined to build a wall across the valley to prevent its escape; but those who poke fun at the Borrowdale people and would have you believe that they are simpletons, should come and do business with them, and they would find that they are as honest as the day, they are as wide-awake as any folk in Great Britain. An independent race of estatesmen, reserved in speech, refined in manner, they certainly impress all visitors who come to stay at their farms with their alertness and their energy."

Rawnsley then writes about the various industries which had been active in the vale since the Derwentwaters gave a portion of Borrowdale to the Abbey of Furness, apparently against the wishes of the monks of Fountains, who were then in possession of the rest of the valley.

“ . . . charcoal burners were hither sent who burnt charcoal for the Furness mines or bloomaries, and still on the hillsides above

Stonethwaite the marks of these charcoal burners' huts can be seen. Saltmakers were also sent into the valley to evaporate the salt water that was pumped up from the salt wells near Manisty."

Thereafter, during the reign of Elizabeth I the German miners, in search of copper, silver and gold, stumbled upon veins of wadd or plumbago, known as 'black gold', more valuable even than gold, because of its rarity. In the 18th century a large quantity of black lead was found on the shores of Vicar's Island in Derwentwater, which according to one Hutchinson writing in his Excursion to the Lakes in 1783, was considered so valuable that an inquiry was set up to look into the feasibility of draining the whole of the lake in search of this most valuable mineral, which was in due course to provide the raw material for the Keswick pencil trade. A tall order to say the least!

The remainder of the chapter on Borrowdale is a fascinating glimpse of the valley a century ago, but it is noteworthy that Rawnsley, while deprecating the motor car, does not mention the narrow-gauge railway which had been proposed in 1865 from Buttermere to Braithwaite to carry slate from the quarries at Honister. Had it gone ahead, this line would have run from end to end of the Borrowdale valley. The campaign against this line, though Rawnsley was not the original instigator of it, was to prove the one on which he cut his conservation teeth as you might say, and is a topic discussed at greater length in our new biography. Perhaps the denizens of Borrowdale should have considered building a wall across the valley to block the proposed railway?

At this point, before we run out of time, perhaps I should read you a brief extract from the Introduction to An Extraordinary Life:

"Rawnsley's role in the National Trust was only a part, albeit an important part, of his life's work. Newspaper and magazine articles,

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pamphlets and publications of all kinds bear witness to the breadth of his interests and achievements far beyond the foundation of the National Trust. He became a spokesman for everything that the Lake District represented, one newspaper maintaining that the verdict of those

fortunate enough to have known him in his prime was that he was not only a blessing, but perhaps 'the greatest Lakelander of the twentieth century.' His approach to conservation, particularly in the Lake District, was holistic and multi-faceted. He wanted to preserve not just the landscape, but also the culture, the way of life of the people, the vernacular buildings, the history, the customs and the language, all in danger of disappearing for ever....

"From its inception until his death, he was Chairman of Governors of Keswick School, which had been one of the earliest to embrace coeducation, and acted as governor of many other schools, both primary and secondary, not only in the Lake District but also further afield. He supported vocational training in Technical Colleges and was instrumental in the expansion of Newton Rigg Farm School in the early twentieth century. At a time when the inculcation of the 3R's and the Classics were considered the paramount subjects in schooling, Rawnsley was ahead of his time in advocating not just the 3R's but also, by insisting on the importance of nature study, he added a fourth R — Reverence for Nature. Going well beyond 'object lessons,' which hitherto had been the staple of elementary schooling, he insisted that true education should encompass training in the use not just of the mind, but also of the hand and eye by practical instruction in the arts and crafts."

Canon Rawnsley, a gifted self-publicist, was certainly a legend by the end of his life, though once his voice and pen were silenced, his memory faded from the general consciousness, except here in Lakeland where he is still commemorated. Though he was probably a sharp torn in the flesh of those who disagreed with his views, in his lifetime he was much appreciated by far more.

Here is an extract from an unsolicited testimonial from one of those ordinary people for whom he wanted to make Lakeland more accessible:

Reverend Sir,

You may not be [aware] of the fact that I, a humble layman, owe you a deep debt of gratitude. Nevertheless, such is the case.

Lately I have been reading your 'Life & Nature at the Lakes', and for the beautiful simple language; the vivid descriptions of Lakeland scenery and fellside customs, and for the pure pleasure I have obtained by mentally tramping over crag and scree and wild hill top; you have made me eternally your willing debtor.

I would like to see the shepherds meet on wild Helvellyn; I would like to see the sun rise over the 'yellow mountain's crest'. The 'Borrowdale Four' I shall never see, though it would have been life itself to have beheld them, for beneath trees the Lord seems nearer and that depth of mystery, the far sky means the rest of spirit found only in beauty ideal and pure, comes there because the distance seems within touch of thought.

I would give a whole month out of my life to behold the 'Rainbow Beauties of Windermere'. It would be real life to see; only once, those giant hills dressed in royal ermine. The hills are always most lovely in winter.

I must thank you for the noble work you have done in preserving for us so many of the natural beauties of Lakeland, and wresting from the hands of the builder the sweetest parts of the lake shores.

In writing to you I take up an attitude I have never assumed before. But I will honestly show you my heart. Never before have I read a book that has so stirred me. I have read and re-read my Jefferies

hundreds of times, but the most virile lives never sent the same thrill through me as did the simple cry of the shepherd to his dog to 'get awa' hint, theer'.

And the debt I owe you, I must do all I can to repay... In the first place I will endeavour to pay a trifle of the amount by visiting Lakeland whenever opportunity permits; and by persuading others to do likewise.

On each visit I will use by eye, brain, heart and soul, and come back with my mind stored with colours, shapes and sentiments and a heart filled with thankfulness that I am able to see, know and appreciate all glorious and lovely things....

If I have intruded, I sincerely crave your pardon.
Believe me to be, yours very respectfully, Joe Bates

A heart-warming testimonial indeed.

Unfortunately, though Rawnsley no doubt wrote many sonnets about Borrowdale, a place so close to his heart, he does not appear to have included any of them in his published volumes of verse. However, we have found handwritten in the Rawnsley Archive this lament for the Borrowdale Yews, broken by the gales of 11th December 1883, which may or may not have appeared in a local paper or the Crosthwaite parish magazine.

Alas for The Yews of Borrowdale
Broken by the gales of Dec 11th 1883.

(The reference to "the trees St. Patrick knew" is to the Patrick's Dale Yew in Patterdale, blown down in that same storm.)

Ill could he spare the trees St Patrick knew
When first for Christ to these rude bales he spoke
And better far had fallen the Rydal oak
Or Time 's blest hollow monument the Yew
Which stands in sight of Wetherlam: Ah few
The souls who then had felt the tempest's stroke
So many bonds about the heart had broke
Had I wept so many memories from view
For to this grove in storm by fragments hurled And
Glaramara down the centuries seen

Awe and mute prayer and love & mystery throng
And since our Wordsworth murmured out his song
The dark four pillared vault of evergreen
Was temple for the music of the world.

Hardly Wordsworth, who was his inspiration and muse, and for whom he felt an almost religious reverence, but perhaps a glimpse of Hardwicke Rawnsley's great sensitivity and awe of nature as a gift from God.

And here for comparison is part of Wordsworth's Yew Trees which had inspired Rawnsley's sonnet :

After praising the solitary yew tree of Lorton, followed by somewhat fanciful references to the yew-wood bows used by the English archers at the battles of Crecy and Agincourt, he goes on:

But worthier still of note
Are those fraternal Four of Borrowdale,
Joined in one solemn and capacious grove;
Huge trunks! -and each particular trunk a growth Of
intertwisted fibres serpentine
Up-coiling, and inveterately convolved, Nor
uninformed with Fantasy, and looks
That threaten the profane; -a pillared shade,
Upon whose grassless floor of red-brown hue,
By sheddings from the pining umbrage tinged
Perennially beneath whose sable roof Of
boughs, as if for festal purpose decked
With unrejoicing berries - ghostly Shapes
May meet at noontide: Fear and trembling Hope, Silence
and Foresight, Death the Skeleton
And Time the Shadow; there to celebrate,
As in a natural temple scattered o'er
With altars undisturbed of mossy stone,
United worship; or in mute repose

To lie, and listen to the mountain flood
Murmuring from Glaramara's inmost caves.
Not perhaps Wordsworth at his best either...

ENDS

Spotted by RR at The George Hotel, Keswick (almost next door to the
Royal oak) 2022:

"To the Hostess of the Royal Oak.

When all the world is starving fast
And Keswick full of hungry folk
Come nail your colours to the mast
You'll still find acorns on this oak."

Verse in HDR's hand, attached to a framed copy of the Herbert Bell
portrait of the Canon, published by Mayson, Keswick. (The original is
now in the Herbert Bell collection at the Armitage Museum in
Ambleside.)

A note in a different, modern, hand placed alongside: "Rev.

H.D. Rawnsley M.A. 1851-1920

Canon of Carlisle — Chaplain to the King

Founder of the National Trust

Vicar of Crosthwaite, Keswick 1883-1917

Poet and Author

A Regular Patron of this Hotel.

(Original Poem left at the Royal Oak in 1918 (War Year) after a
satisfactory meal.)"

3080 words