

Let William Wordsworth walk you through The Lake District.

*'The garden, in the course of becoming more and more indistinguishable from the surrounding landscape, had become unnecessary. Walpole had said of the landscape architect William Kent that he had 'leapt the fence and saw all nature was a garden'. If a garden was nothing more than a visually pleasing space in which to wander, then gardens could be found rather than made, and the tradition of the garden walk could expand to become the tourist's excursion.'* (Rebecca Solnit, *'Wanderlust: A history of Walking'*, 2001, p 92 - 93)

Eighteenth century England gave birth to scenic tourism when the garden walls came down and the aesthetic qualities of nature were discovered. One of the pioneer regions where landscape tourism flourished was the Lake District, situated in the north-west of Britain. The Lake District was not only a promoted location at that time but is still highly praised in the literature on landscape today. As a photographer and an admirer of nature, I wanted to see it for myself. Aware of my delay (of a couple of centuries), I needed a guide that could take me back to the past and help me find the views that were suggested back then. The Romantic tourist did not travel blindly but was directed by guidebooks with precise instructions on where to walk, stand still and behold the perfect landscape. These travel guides were written by all kinds of people such as a priest named Thomas West, who wrote one of the first publications on the subject, a clergyman called William Gilpin and the poet William Wordsworth.

William Wordsworth's 'Guide to the Lakes', written in 1810, became my personal guide to Cumberland. I chose Wordsworth for several reasons. First, his passion for walking. Most days he walked close to his home in Grasmere, trips ranging from morning walks to short detours after supper, but he also undertook daytrips e.g. across the Vale of Duddon and over the Walna Scar peak and he travelled to Italy and Switzerland to compare his beloved region to the outside world. The poet walked alone or in the company of his friends and sister, he walked to be inspired and always for the pleasure of being surrounded by nature. My second motive is his great taste in landscapes. Throughout the book he comments on numerous elements that shape the landscape and which of these features are desirable to make a composition worthy of the tourist's attention. Wordsworth has high expectations for the reader: *'it is intended as a Guide or Companion for the Minds of Persons of taste, and Feeling for Landscape'* (William Wordsworth, *Guide to the Lakes, 1810, p27*). 'Guide to the Lakes' reflects, and this is my third ground, on the influence and effects of tourism (or culture) on the (natural) beauty of the landscape. It has to be said that Wordsworth surely is a proponent of the pastoral landscape, he supports a harmonious coexistence of nature and culture, but he points out some serious concerns about the evolution of his so called 'bad effects' that people have on nature. I wonder what he would think about The Lake District anno 2012?

It is almost impossible to explore The Lake District by car. There are just a few roads that lead, through the valleys, from one village to another. Most of the other 'roads' are so narrow and steep that one simply must drive at footpace. In this respect we could say that time stood still in northern England and Wordsworth's way of travelling is the only option left. The tourist should consider this as an absolute

advantage because the effort it takes to get somewhere on foot is always rewarded with, for example, a view of a lake or an old church in the countryside. The prospect of finding landscapes that resemble the setting of the Romantic paintings motivates the walker to climb waterfalls and cross small rivers to get there. Despite of my enthusiasm to follow in Wordsworth's footsteps, my attempt was partly unsuccessful because some of the walks and viewing points are no longer accessible due to private property regulations or passes that became simply too dangerous to cross. The dedication of the National Trust to create walking paths, which lead you straight through the meadows of the local farmers, over bridges and even stepping stones, make up for the lost walks of William Wordsworth.

One landscape differs from the other not only because of a change of location but even more so because of the variability of the time of day, the seasons and in particular the weather. The light and the sky vary so often in this region that one walker can witness an entire different landscape than the one who walks along the same path at a thirty-minute interval. Sometimes the distinction is merely made by directing our gaze to the north or to the south. On a sunny day in springtime the blooming vegetation on the mountainsides may be reflected in the numerous lakes, while a foggy fall morning can cause vapours that provide, according to William Wordsworth, a '*visionary character*' to everything around them. In 'Guide to the Lakes' he calls these vapours '*pregnant with imagination for the poet*' (William Wordsworth, *Guide to the Lakes*, 1810, p58). Wordsworth believes that nature has a message for man. He composed his poems using words that came to him through daffodils, nightingales and the green fields. The lines practically wrote themselves, just like my photographs were already there, waiting to be captured.

The Lake District has certain visual advantages that build an ideal setting for the painter or other artists who are inspired by the Romantic landscape. The lakes of Cumberland generate what I have already called a *picturesque* image of the countryside. The shape and size of the lakes are of great importance to the way they are perceived and to the artistic imprint they leave behind. '*It is much more desirable, for the purposes of pleasure, that the lakes should be numerous, and small or middle-sized, than large, not only for communication by walks and rides, but for variety, and of recurrence of similar appearances*', (William Wordsworth, *Guide to the Lakes*, 1810, p50) says Wordsworth in his guide. It is indeed a satisfying experience for the walker to walk around an entire lake, moreover when this walker has a medium to express himself, what a blissful interaction it can become. When both shores can be seen at the same time and the outlook is bound by a mountain chain, a frame comes, as a matter of course, to mind. The union of these natural components form a classic landscape photograph: sky and mountains as background, the lake as center layer and an eye-catching element in the foreground. As I come to think of it, I nearly always use a cultural subject in the forefront of my pictures to set a contrasting element against the otherwise fully natural landscape. In The Lake District I notably favoured the low stone walls, which are erected to define the borders of each meadow. Not only do they act as an interesting foreground but they also create an additional dimension to the landscape as they subdivide the original concept into much more layers than the classic trichotomy. One could think that this linear structure could lead to abstraction, but in my opinion they add more depth to the

whole. William Wordsworth almost worships the aesthetic value of the cottages in the landscape, another sign of his pastoral vision, but personally I preferred the sheep as a pastoral image. In Dutch the literal translation of pastoral is 'herderlijk', meaning 'shepherdly'. A sheep can be considered as the farm animal archetype and farming is the ideal way of establishing a perfect harmony between nature and culture.

I was pleasantly surprised when, after a long climb, I reached Tarn Haws and saw that I was not the only one who is fascinated by the perfect landscape. The National Trust had thought of forming a frame and they have installed a real gold coloured framework on the exact spot where the ideal picture of the tarn could be captured. Of course, tarns, still bodies of water, are grateful subjects to photograph. Here the description of Loughrigg Tarn by Wordsworth: *'It has a margin of green firm meadows, of rocks, and rocky woods, a few reeds here, a little company of water-lilies there, with beds of gravel or stone beyond; a tiny stream issuing neither briskly nor sluggishly out of it; but its feeding rills, from the shortness of their course, so small as to be scarcely visible.'* (William Wordsworth, *Guide to the Lakes*, 1810, p54) Simply the written disquisition is sufficient to vouch for the beauty of such a view.

Along my journey I encountered more than one golden frame, placed by the National Trust. None was so adequate as the framework at Tarn Haws but I decided to continue my search for the perfect Lake District landscape keeping their idea in mind. Every time I pushed the button on my camera, I wanted to make sure that my picture was worthy of a golden frame.