



Mary Robinson - The Maid of Buttermere

The Fish Hotel, Buttermere, must now be regarded as one of the oldest Inns in the Lake District. Known at first simply as the inn at Buttermere, a family named Robinson kept it, in the 1790's. Situated between the two lakes of Buttermere and Crummock Water, the Inn became known as a good centre for char and trout fishing. By the last decade of the eighteenth century, the Lake District had begun to attract tourists in increasing numbers. This process was undoubtedly helped along by the attention given to its great natural beauty by many of the poets and writers of national standing who visited or actually lived in the area - Wordsworth, Southey, Coleridge and others.

Although most of the roads were rough and sometimes dangerous, the hardheaded Cumbrian statesmen and farmers saw it in their interest to improve transport to the different beauty spots. So it was that Buttermere, a small village, reached only by the difficult passes of Newlands and Honister or through a detour of many miles via Cockermouth, came to the tourists' attention.

For a short period in its history, the Fish Hotel, Buttermere, achieved national fame (and possibly notoriety) during the Robinson's tenancy. The innkeeper's daughter, Mary, was about fifteen years old when she was first noticed by a visitor, one Joseph Palmer, who stayed at the inn in 1792, and later wrote in one of the very first guide books, "A Fortnight's Ramble in the Lake District", of his encounter with the fair maid of Buttermere.

Her hair was thick and long, of a dark brown, unadorned with ringlets, did not seem to want them. Her face was a fine oval, with full eyes and lips as red as vermilion. Her cheeks had more of the lily than the rose.

The publication of this book brought many tourists to see this paragon of beauty. She is mentioned in some of the travelers' diaries of the time and also in writings of the "Lake Poets" - including lasting recognition in Wordsworth's "The Prelude".

By the turn of the century, Mary, still unmarried, became the innocent pawn in a melodramatic episode, which brought her to the notice of a public far beyond Buttermere and ensured her place in Lake District story and legend. In 1802 a gentleman passing himself off as "Colonel Alexander Hope", member for Linlithgow and brother to the Earl of Hopetoun, stayed at the inn. In no time at all he had

courted and won Mary, at the same time ingratiating himself with her parents. They were married at Lorton church on October 2nd 1802.

It is possible that Mary would have enjoyed married bliss for some time, but for the fact that the event got into the London papers on October 11th, through their Keswick correspondent - Samuel Taylor Coleridge. No less, who obviously deemed the marriage of 'the beauty of Buttermere' a newsworthy item. By November 6th, 1802, the London "Sun" had discovered that the real Colonel Hope was actually abroad at the time and that Mary's 'husband' the imposter was also married to a lady in Tiverton, Devon, and his real name was John Hatfield; he was also an undischarged bankrupt. Hatfield was, if nothing else, a 'smooth operator'. He managed to borrow money from several people in the Keswick area with which to effect an escape worthy of the most adventurous fiction; first to Ravenglass to hide on a ship and then into Wales, via Chester, to be finally arrested near Swansea by the Bow Street Runners. He was taken to London and examined before magistrates, who sent him up to Carlisle to be tried at the local Court of Assize. His trial lasted eight hours, and he was sentenced to death by hanging.

The story goes that Hatfield expected a reprieve, but nothing arrived and he paid the final penalty. Opinion held that the reason was the double crime of bigamy and of false pretenses; the latter, sometimes known as 'Personation', was considered a very serious crime at the time.

According to one account, the executioner was inexperienced and at the gallows, sited on a sandbank between two of the Eden bridges, it was necessary for Hatfield to show the man where to place the rope round his neck to ensure a quick send-off.

For a while Mary became a national figure, which, if nothing else, would certainly help trade at the inn. Since she passed into legend it is possible that the mixture of criticism and sympathy, which was shown to her, may well, have mellowed her story through the years. She married Richard Harrison of Caldbeck. Who helped her to run the inn when her parents became too infirm. Later, husband and wife moved to Caldbeck, where Mary died on February 7th, 1837 - much respected.