

Thomas Clarkson – Abolitionist and Smallholder! 1760-1846

Thomas Clarkson the abolitionist who his friend, the poet Coleridge described as a "moral steam engine" and a "giant with one idea" was born in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire on 28th March 1760. Throughout his adult life he worked tirelessly on the cause of ending slavery, and was even helping the campaign in America in the months before his death in 1846. He was the main researcher, travelling the length and breadth of England collecting evidence on the atrocities of the slave trade and slavery to put before the government inquiry and to marshal support for William Wilberforce's political campaigning. However, it is a less publicised fact that for a time, when the campaign was in its infancy and giving no indication that it would be a struggle over many years, Thomas bought a plot of land in the Lake District, on the banks of Lake Ullswater, designed and built a house there and planned to retire there when the campaign was over.

After 10 years of intensive campaigning Thomas had gone to the Lake District to stay with Quaker friends and recover from exhaustion when he fell in love with the place. He used all of his capital to purchase a 34 acre estate, from which 14 acres would be leased and on which he had a right of common to procure stone and slate and there was woodland to crop. On the remaining 20 acres he planned to build a house of rough cast stone, roofed in local slate, with large casement windows framing views across the water to the majestic peak of Helvellyn. The house was to be called 'Eusemere' and Thomas even chose the bushes and trees to plant in the garden, 'cheerful' ones not yews and cypresses. The project soon took his attention away from the campaigning, much to the concern of the others on the committee. But things went from bad to worse. Thomas married in 1796 and after a disastrous defeat in Parliament, when many of the MPs who should have been voting against the slave trade, chose instead to go to a new comic opera, he practically retired to his new cottage.

Thomas and Catherine, his wife loved their new home, which was situated near a brook that ran down to the lake. Affluent friends who visited the couple remarked that they seemed to lead a rather bohemian 'peasant life'. Their son, who was born there grew up on 'oatmeal porridge' and ran about 'without cap or hat, without shoes or stockings and with very few clothes'. Clarkson pastured sheep and Scotch bullocks and grew wheat, barley, oats, red clover, tares and turnips. He kept hens and a cock and recorded all the details of his life in a journal in which he used the most idyllic terms –

'The bud and the blossom, the rising and the falling leaf, the blade of corn and the ear, the seed-time and the harvest, the sun that warms and ripens, the cloud that cools and emits the fruitful shower – these and a hundred objects afford daily food for... the mind'

Catherine helped with planting and also ran the dairy, churning butter and making cheese. She also studied botany and even made salve for the sheep. She told her family in a letter that 'the life we lead here suits me perfectly'. But bad times were ahead. There were poor harvests and bad weather throughout the country at the end of the century. In 1799 Catherine Clarkson wrote that 'there is hardly a blade of grass to be seen...the hay is all consumed and the cattle are dying everywhere of hunger...we don't expect to have above half our quantity of lambs. The old ewes do pretty well but the two year old sheep have no milk for their lambs and the nights are so cold that they perish as soon as they are dropt.'

However the winter of 1799 was not all bad. In December the Wordsworth's, the poet William, his sister Dorothy and later his wife Mary, moved to the area. Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere journal gives testimony to the lifelong friendship that developed between them. They frequently went to visit each other and it is said that it is whilst on one of these visits that Wordsworth saw the 'host of golden daffodil'. Coleridge also became part of their circle of friends and he had nothing but good to say about the Clarkson's, particularly

Catherine, whom he loved *'even as my very own sister, whose love for me with that of Wordsworth's sister, wife, and wife's sister, form almost the only happiness I have on earth'*.

But the Clarkson's could not remain in their dream home for much longer. In 1803 Catherine became ill, possibly with a liver disorder. She travelled to the Hot Wells in Bristol to see a doctor, who was reputed to be the 'best in England'. The doctor advised that she should not live in the cold climate of the Lake District, and after the sudden death of her mother, she moved to stay with her father in Suffolk. Thomas stayed on at the cottage for a little longer as he was finishing the writing of a book on Quakerism, then he sold Eusemere and travelled south to be with his wife. The slavery issue had never been far from his mind, as Coleridge commented, when asked if he ever thought about man's fate in the next world, Thomas Clarkson had replied, "How can I? I think only of the slaves in Barbados". Coleridge had also said of Clarkson that he *'listened exclusively to his conscience, and obeyed its voice'*.

Thomas rejoined the abolition committee in 1804 to work again towards the abolition of the slave trade, which finally took place in the early hours of 24 February 1807. The vote was a resounding 283 in favour to 16 against. But there was more work to be done and it was not until 1833 that the law was passed for the emancipation of slaves in the British colonies. Thomas, who spent the rest of his life living at Playford Hall, near Ipswich in Suffolk, became president of the first world anti-slavery convention and the head office of Anti-slavery International still bears his name.

For more information on Eusemere (which I have not yet had the pleasure to visit!) see the website <http://www.thecumbriadirectory.com> – follow links to Pooley Bridge

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