



WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR

JOHN SANSOM

(Note: this is the last article that John Sansom wrote for the Beacon before his untimely death in June 2006)

During the 19th century Walter Savage Landor was a celebrated man of letters. The estate he recklessly purchased at Llanthony remained in his family for a century beyond his death. Today he is little known and very seldom read. To tell the truth he was little read in his own day but was much admired by a discerning circle of friends that included Southey, Dickens and the Brownings.

PLANTING

His contact with Llanthony lasted from 1807 to 1814 during which time he was more often absent. In 1814 he fled the country to escape paying crippling libel damages and to escape his creditors. His family then tended the estate. Despite his short stay his impact on the valley from Llanthony southward is significant and can still be experienced. He planted very many sweet chestnut trees and larches and some of former remain to this day and it is likely that the roadside larches, known locally as 'Landor Larches' were part of his work.

Several years ago a roadside sweet chestnut had to be cut down and my wife and I happened to walk past the exposed stump of the trunk. We counted the tree rings. It took some time because there were so many. I can't recall the final total but it was enough for us to conclude that it was part of Landor's planting. A passing cyclist who we later saw asked us for the final score and we were bewildered for a moment until he said he had seen us very preoccupied by a tree stump and had guessed our purpose. Landor also planted, if his word is to be believed, thousands of cedars but all

of these must have been harvested. In 1812 he wrote in a letter to the poet Robert Southey

*Homeward I turn; o'er Hatterils (sic) rocks
I see my trees, I hear my flocks.
Where alders mourned their fruitless bed
Ten thousand cedars raise their head.
And from Segovia's hills remote
My sheep enrich my neighbour's cote
The wide and easy road I lead
Where never paced the harnessed
steed.....*

BUILDING A HOUSE AND DAYLIGHT ROBBERY

He built a house for himself of which but little remains, in Cwm Siarpal, half a mile north of the priory. The house was to be approached by a magnificent avenue starting from a bridge he commissioned at Lower Henllan. If this avenue was ever built there is no evidence of its existence today although the bridge (to which there is no public access) is still there. His time at Llanthony was not happy. He was ill served by lawyers and builders alike. A deadly combination to be sure. He summed up his opinion of his lawyers in the following outburst of doggerel:

*If the devil, a mighty old omnibus driver
Saw an omnibus driving downhill to a river
And saved any couple to share his own
cab
I really do think t'would be Gabell & Gabb.*

Guess the name of his solicitors!
He described his house building
problems in a letter of the 25th June
1812:

*'My house here has once been taken
down and once fallen down of its own
accord. I am building it again and hope to
complete it before the end of September.
It is situated on the edge of a dingle in
which there is a little rill of water
overshadowed by a vast variety of trees. I
have a dining room 28x22 and 14 feet
high, drawing room and library 18 square.
6 family bedrooms and 6 servants; but in
the Abbey which is a quarter of a mile off
however – I can make up a few more beds
and there I intend to have my offices. I
shall live on very little – I should even if I
were not obliged. – I planted last year 300
acres (of woodland) and shall plant as
many this.'*

Apparently the house was not taken
down by his consent. Thieves pillaged
the stone during the protracted
building process. In 1831 the major
part of the house was demolished and
it is reported that the stone was
salvaged to carry out work at
Alltynys in the Monnow valley just
north of Pandy.

PROBLEMS WITH THE NATIVES

The 'agent' he appointed on the advice
and recommendation of his good
friend Robert Southey turned against
him. His plans to introduce a school to
the valley based at the priory were
thwarted by the bishop of St David's in
whose See Llanthony then fell. The
bishop's reasons for not allowing it (it
would have been on consecrated
ground) were plainly specious and

absurd and reflected the view that it
was safer not to educate the peasants.
A letter written to the Bishop in 1809 is
worth quoting for the quality of its
invective.

*'If drunkenness, idleness mischief and
revenge are the principle characteristics of
the savage state, what nation.....in the
world is so singularly tattooed with them
as the Welsh. While Scotland and Ireland
have been producing in every generation
historians, philosophers and poets the
wretched welsh repeat their idle legends
from 1st to 2nd childhood, bring forward a
thousand attestations to the existence of
witches and fairies, boast of their
illustrious ancestors and of the bards more
illustrious who have recorded them, and
convert the tomb of Taliesin into a gate
post.'*

As for the peasantry, the tenant
farmers, they did not warm to this
English gentleman. The estate had
been ill managed for many years and
they clearly objected to his new
management plans. A familiar story to
this day.

In a letter of 1809 he complains: 'My
people are idle and drunken. Idleness
gives them time and drunkenness
gives them spirit for mischief.'
And again in 1813:

*'These rascals have as great a hatred of a
Saxon as their runaway forefathers had. I
never shall cease to wish Julius Caesar
had utterly exterminated the whole race of
Britons. I am convinced they are as
irreclaimable as Gypsies and Malays.'*

Although at loggerheads with them he
was not unsympathetic to their
impoverished condition. In 1812 he
writes:

'...3 pounds of miserable bread cost 2

shillings at Abergavenny. The poor barbarous creatures in my parish have actually ceased to be mischievous they are so miserable. We can find them employment at present at 4 (shillings) and 6 pence a day. Yet nothing can solace them for their difficulty in procuring bread. The poor devils are to be pitied.....it is their moulting time and they cannot crow.'

He created jobs for them in the expectation that the feeding hand would be bitten.

TROUBLE WITH ROYAL RUSTLERS?

When putting together this article I recalled the following incident from Landor's travails at Llanthony. The problem has been that in my reading around the subject I could find no record of this event. If my memory is at fault please let me know of my mistake. The story has a curious ring of truth about it.

Perhaps the most (to us) amusing frustration to be suffered by Landor was the theft of a flock of merino sheep by Prince William's agents. One of Landor's absences from the valley occurred when he left for the Peninsular War and raised a regiment, with his own cash, to aid the expulsion of Napoleon. The Spanish Royal Family showed their gratitude by presenting him with a flock of merino sheep with which to populate his valley and produce a high quality fleece. They duly arrived along with gifts for the English Royal Family. They were probably taken in error but there was no recovering them and no legal action could be taken against the Crown which refused to recognise the theft. It was not until the death of Prinny, then George the Fourth, that Landor extracted his revenge in his much-anthologised epitaph on the Georges.

*George the First was always reckoned Vile, but viler George the Second.
And what mortal ever heard
A good word of George the Third,
But when from earth the Fourth descended
God be praised the Georges ended.*

LOVE AND MARRIAGE – MISTRESS AND WIFE

As a young man he had a mistress, Nancy Jones, a working class girl he had met at Tenby, who bore him a daughter. Friends wondered what it was that so drew Landor to West Wales. Marriage would have been out of the question but he remained faithful to his true love until both the daughter and child had died, both very young. When Landor came to marry, rather than seeking out a suitable heiress (he had already carelessly lost one who was very fond of him) he chose instead a woman of a suitable class but without a dowry and therefore without expectations. Such creatures abound in Jane Austen's novels. The honeymoon couple visited Llanthony before Siarpal was complete. Commendable though this may seem the reality was somewhat different. Landor chose such a partner because he was convinced that such a woman would feel forever grateful for being rescued from a genteel poverty and therefore be of no trouble to him. An heiress was likely to have a will of her own. However the worm turned and some years later, supported by her son and daughter, she expelled Landor from their Florentine home for good.

PROBLEM CHILD AND LOUTISH YOUTH

Landor had always been difficult to deal with, even as a child. His bad

behaviour may have been caused by parental rejection at the early age of 41/2 when he was first sent away to school. As a young man he was expelled from Rugby for impertinence and rusticated for two terms from Oxford for firing a shotgun at the closed casement windows of a fellow student. When asked why he had committed such an outrage he said he had performed the deed for the very good reason that the fellow was a Tory. They took politics very seriously those days. He never returned to Oxford to complete his studies.

AN ANTI-BLOODSPORTS MAN

By contrast Landor was not greatly enamoured of field sports. He professed such slaughter to be barbarous. His brother claimed that was not it at all. The real reasons for this posture of humane concern were that he couldn't shoot and performed badly on a horse. Landor did not like to be bettered.

A BIG SPENDER

Even before the disastrous libel case that lead that lead up to the first of his two periods of exile from Britain, Landor was in severe financial difficulties. He had inherited a great fortune but irresponsibly frittered it away partly on the Llanthony Estate but also on other 'noble' pursuits. He left Llanthony to escape a lawsuit and his creditors, for he was much in debt. He fled first to Jersey then to France and travelled on to Italy. Despite all this he was able to pursue the life of a gentleman and collector, for a time

living in some style in Florence (and elsewhere) until dispatched in 1835 from the home he had made by his wife and children.

AVOIDING COMPETITION

When Landor began to write he chose to write in Latin rather than English and have these writings published at his own expense without the hope of ever seeing a return on his investment. By writing for such an elite audience he hoped to avoid the embarrassments of poor reviews and disapprobation. He was not totally confident about his English verse until 1820 when a letter from Wordsworth dissuaded him for some time from Latin verse composition. Wordsworth had written in response to a letter from Landor 'it could not be but grateful to me to be praised by a poet who has written verses of which I would rather have been the author than any produced in our time'. At university, though accomplished in the writing of Latin verse, he never entered any competition for fear of losing. He was always convinced of his great intellectual superiority and managed to convince others of it too. To enter a competition and not win would have been too embarrassing. Indeed the first line of the epitaph he wrote for himself blatantly describes this character defect.

FINIS

I strove with none for none was worth my strife:

Nature I loved and next to Nature Art.

I warmed both hands before the fire of life:

It sinks, and I am ready to depart.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It is impossible to do justice in 2000 words to a long life so rich in action, dispute and creativity. A very good biography exists which describes Landor's life in great depth and also quotes freely from his letters and literary work. It is by Malcolm Elwin entitled LANDOR: A REPLEVIN. It is the basis for this article. There is currently a copy in the Abergavenny Public library.