

Introduction

A landscape in literature is a view, not only of countryside, but of the moral and social attitudes of writer and reader.

[Louis James, in G.E. Mingay (ed.), *The Rural Idyll*]

During the nineteenth century it was taken for granted that real communities could only be found in the English countryside.

[Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class*]

In one sense, the justification for this book is to be found in a remark that Frederick Grice made in 1975 about *Kilvert's Diary*: '[Kilvert's] literary skill . . . has still not been properly evaluated'.¹ This remains the situation today. The literary quality of the *Diary* is, as Grice pointed out, 'independent of the interest it may arouse as a sociological or psychological document. It has the self-sufficiency of good art'.² Inasmuch as it represents Kilvert's effort to tell the story of his own life, as well as to convey a picture of a society, it falls into the category of 'self-writing' that includes autobiography and biography, a literary field which has experienced a revaluation, particularly in the last thirty years. Nadel, writing in 1984, stated that biographies needed to be treated as 'independent literary texts, judged by the criteria of "style, structure or language" rather than by the usual criterion of "accuracy" ' and 'required a critical reading as works of imagination and language if they were to be accepted as works of literature'.³ My analysis of Kilvert's *Diary* traces the literary and religious influences that caused him to write in the way that he did. These influences not only remain very largely unexplored but certain major ones have not even figured in the conventional account of the *Diary's* evolution.

Kilvert's reputation as a writer rests chiefly upon his ability to describe people and landscape. It is a basic premise of this book that, for him, the two were intimately connected and hence the concept of landscape used is a unified one — people and the locations in which they live their lives. Schama noted that the word 'landscape' entered the English language at the end of the sixteenth century, signifying 'a unit of human occupation, indeed a jurisdiction, as much as anything that might be a pleasing depiction'. In other words, 'landscape' from its beginning expressed community, a land and its people. Schama also recognised that many cultures have rich nature and landscape myths which overlay particular places so that landscapes are, or can be, cultural products, with 'veins of myth and memory' lying beneath their surfaces.⁴ The idea of landscape as a repository of meanings informs Matless's understanding of its power: '... the power of landscape resides in its being simultaneously a site of economic, social, political and aesthetic value.' He continued: '... the question of what landscape "is" or "means" can always be subsumed in the question of how it works; as a vehicle of social and self identity. ...' Thus it lies somewhere between nature and culture — a concept involving space, history and memory.⁵ In his book, *Landscape and Western Art*, Malcolm Andrews examined our response to landscape as a cultural product, arguing that to appreciate it in this way involved 'learned rather than innate criteria'. It is:

a concept of a particular entity, "landscape", as distinct from the experience of a random variety of natural phenomena assembled within the view ... an idea and an experience in which we are creatively involved, whether or not we are practising artists ... Our sense of our identity and relationship to our environment is implicated in our response to [landscape images]. Landscape in art tells us, or asks us to think about, where we belong. Important issues of identity and orientation are inseparable from the reading of meanings and the eliciting of pleasure from landscape.⁶

Kilvert can be seen to be involved with landscape in exactly this way in his writing, particularly his writing about the landscape of Radnorshire. Its landscape became for him a symbolic form of an ideal world, his relationship with which

enlarged his conception of himself. He felt himself to be as deeply involved with it as its traditional inhabitants were. Furthermore, his concept of community depended on seeing people's lives as inextricably bound up with their physical surroundings. The concept of landscape is inevitably bound up with the history of land and of the changes in the way it has been conceived over time. The eighteenth-century view of landscape emphasised the ideal, the general, the timeless, whereas the Romantic approach to it was characterised by actual experience, exact detail, subjective response.⁷ The effect of the former was to separate the aesthetic from the practical for, as Williams observed, 'A working country is hardly ever a landscape.'⁸ Wordsworth's poems, which were a dominant influence on the Victorians (and on Kilvert), are, however, concerned with particular figures in landscapes (shepherds, cottagers, pedlars, vagrants), with sense impressions of natural objects, with living and working conditions. All the rural writers Kilvert admired and who influenced his writing – Cowper, Burns, Crabbe, Clare, Kingsley, Barnes, Tennyson and Howitt – reflect this new tradition.

Keith stressed that William Howitt was very representative of Victorian attitudes towards the countryside.⁹ The view that Kilvert held of it shows clear signs of shaping by Howitt's books.¹⁰ In his *Rural Life of England* (1838), Howitt triumphantly recorded what he saw as the characteristically English 'yearning after the loveliness of nature' that came in with the Romantic poets.¹¹ He also paid tribute to Bewick's engravings for developing those poets' concern with actual experience of rural life. A 'great increase in country delight' was, he said, owed to his pictures of rural scenery because of their 'sacred fidelity to Nature.' 'See in what a small space he gives you a whole landscape. . . . He is the very Burns of wood-engraving,' by which he meant that his pictures told stories.¹² During the illness of his daughter, Annie, Darwin borrowed from the London Library Howitt's *The Book of the Seasons* and *The Boy's Country Book* to read to her for their account of plant and animal life and of country pursuits.¹³ Precise details of natural forms are found in *Kilvert's Diary* but even more characteristic of Howitt's influence is its frequent use of imaginative stories. Thus, the picture that the latter presented of English rural life was intensely patriotic and romantic in tone; it 'purified the spirit and ennobled the heart;' it reflected 'national glory' and,

as he walked it, he was aware of a land 'filled . . . with glorious reminiscences.'¹⁴ Of English country houses, he wrote: 'A thousand endearing associations gather about them'¹⁵ and he gave a highly romantic account of Annesley Hall (Notts.), home of Mary Chaworth, 'a spot, where every sod, and stone, and tree . . . is rife with the most strange and touching memories. . . .'¹⁶ Kilvert's tendency to write in this vein is illustrated in subsequent chapters. It may also be assumed that his love of Byron's poem, *The Dream*, which tells the story of Mary Chaworth's doomed affair with the poet, stemmed in part from reading Howitt's account of Annesley.¹⁷ Kilvert's attitude to country houses was, like Howitt's, ambivalent. Both men saw them as institutions of great beauty and power, often overshadowed by the pride and self-indulgence of their owners.

Howitt's vision of landscape was, like Kilvert's, an imaginative one; the sub-title of his *Visits to Remarkable Places* (1842) – 'scenes illustrative of striking passages in history and poetry' – bears this out. The book deals with his walking tours of Durham and Northumberland, chosen for the 'Legend, ballad – song and faithful story' that surround them: 'a twilight of antiquity seems to linger there.'¹⁸ As with Kilvert, Howitt's descriptions of landscape are everywhere informed by his reading. He praised Surtees's history of the county of Durham because its author 'became an antiquary because he was a poet' and poets were the only men who genuinely felt the 'heroic past'.¹⁹ And the outstanding example of such antiquaries was Sir Walter Scott. Kilvert shared this view of Scott, revelling in romantic ruins, tales of noble knights and holy men. Howitt's presentation of Mitford, near Morpeth, which boasted ruins of both a castle and a manor house, typifies his stance: 'To the eye of the poet and the lover of nature, it presents . . . a rich bit of English landscape poetry. . . . To that of the historian and antiquary it offers objects of equal interest.' To the cultivated, imaginative man, the scene 'was rich with all the colours of memory and poetry'.²⁰ Howitt's love of the stirring exploits of famous families is counter-poised by the deepest respect for ordinary men and women who lived worthy, moral lives or achieved great things from modest beginnings; it is another characteristic that links him to Kilvert and one relished by Victorians in general. Howitt honoured genius that could flower in the humble cottage and cited Chatterton, Burns and Hogg as examples of it.²¹

Archaeology and antiquarianism figured strongly in the life of the Kilvert family in Bath. Kilvert's father recounted how at his grandmother's house he was drawn to Britton's *Beauties of England and Wales*, a book he extracted with difficulty from the lowest drawer of the bookcase (he was only five and the drawer's handle kept coming off). The narrative of his early years reveals other traces of archaeological interest. For example, his grandmother showed him the monuments in Bath Abbey. When he mentioned the church the family attended, he made a point of emphasising its antiquity – 'the old Early English church . . . five or six hundred years old'.²² His daughter, Emily, acquired her archaeological interest from him and from her uncle Francis, who was 'loved and revered' by all his nieces and nephews.²³ She said that for all the Kilvert children the volumes of *Old England. A Pictorial Museum of Regal, Ecclesiastical, Municipal, Baronial, and Popular Antiquities* were 'a never failing source of pleasure'.²⁴ A poem written by her uncle Francis, dedicated to 'the father of British Archaeology', is the clue to an influence pushing the Kilvert children towards the buildings, landscapes and annals of the past. Francis's dedication was to John Britton, who was, in terms of archaeology, *the* local hero. Born in 1771, the son of a small farmer and shopkeeper in Kington St Michael, he had a very basic education and went to London where he worked as a cellarman in various pubs. He nevertheless managed to read widely in his limited leisure time. He was asked by a publisher to contribute entries to a topographical work called *The Beauties of Wiltshire*, which appeared in 1801. He was then invited to work on a bigger enterprise, the first number of which came out also in 1801; this was *The Beauties of England and Wales*.

One of the key features of Howitt's books, in terms of their influence on Victorians, was that they stimulated 'popular tourism by foot and rail'.²⁵ Thus, as a result of improved communications, Victorians became familiar with 'a series of different countrysides with their own physical features, history, customs, dialects, and ways of living'.²⁶ It was, of course, the spread of railways and increased prosperity that enabled people to visit attractive parts of the country, with the result that 'the Victorian reader became increasingly interested in regional characteristics'.²⁷ Howitt's own note on the explosion of tourism is ambivalent: 'One of the singular features of English life at the present moment is the swarming of summer

tourists in all interesting quarters.²⁸ Wordsworth, too, objected to the building of a railway line that would bring tourists into his beloved Lakeland. Kilvert's own hatred of tourists was extreme.²⁹ Resentment of forces threatening the beauty of landscape was but one aspect of the realism informing Victorian attitudes towards it. Howitt's nostalgia for the past of song and story he saw reflected in landscape was balanced by awareness of the poverty, squalor and ignorance of many peasants' lives. Although 'Victorian novelists of the country were largely out of touch with the realities of rural life . . . it is also true that [they] were often aware of what they were doing when they portrayed idyllic country scenes.'³⁰ Keith also denied that Victorian literature as a whole presented 'an excessively rosy picture' of rural life and that novelists often set out to show it realistically.³¹ In this respect again Kilvert mirrored a general Victorian tendency, for his diary contains sentimentalised pictures of the countryside juxtaposed with the grimmest scenes. The range of 'country house' novels he read showed the same balance.³² According to Treble, Victorians also recognised that cottage life showing happy peasant children, seen at its best in the paintings of Myles Birket Foster (1825-99), was 'mythical,' even though it was 'one of the most powerful images of the Victorian countryside.'³³

The image of a rural Arcadia that Victorians treasured while knowing it to be false was related to the advent of industrialism and urban living. It was linked also to the concept of domesticity. Just as the home became increasingly seen, from the 1820s, as the ideal setting for women, so the village community came to be seen as the ideal setting for relations in the wider society. Together, the two themes became 'the very core of the ideal [which] was home *in* a rural community,' because 'the home, like the village, was ideally sheltered and separated from the public life of power.'³⁴ *Kilvert's Diary* is centrally concerned with community and in this regard, as in so many others, was affected by Wordsworth's exalting of the virtues of the country as opposed to those of the town.³⁵ Howitt had the same understanding: 'The state of morals and manners amongst the working population of our great towns is terrible' and when the country population came into contact with towns' 'contagion,' it 'suffers in person and mind.' Thus, 'dwellers of cities . . . long for the quietness and beauty of the country.'³⁶ Kilvert was glad he was not a city-dweller; after a visit to London he wrote: 'I do loathe London.

How delicious to get into the country again.³⁷ The change to life in town and work in factories and offices, with the consequent severing of the ties that bound people to each other and to their ancestral village, produced for Victorians 'a nostalgia for a lost world of peace and companionship, of healthy bodies and quiet minds,' according to Houghton. In his view, we should remember this when we read the nature writing of Victorians or look at their landscapes. In his observation that for many Victorians 'the countryside represented the "spiritual values" being destroyed in the unspiritual city,' Houghton came close to Kilvert.³⁸ We have seen the various ways in which Kilvert's attitudes to the countryside were typically Victorian; the spiritual dimension in his view of landscape is perhaps its most distinctive element. In this, he was like William Howitt. When the latter wanted to explain why the Romantic poets differed from the ancients in their 'more passionate, intense . . . elevated love of Nature,' he found only one cause – Christianity.³⁹ Kilvert would have agreed.

Kilvert's Diary and Landscape breaks new ground, not only by undertaking the first thorough examination of Kilvert's writing, but also a complete reevaluation of the writer himself, which is long overdue. Sixty years ago the Kilvert Society (founded in 1948) set out admirable targets for further research into Kilvert and his *Diary*⁴⁰ but little progress has been made towards them, with the result that our picture of the diarist has solidified, even petrified. It is all too common now to find the traditional unexamined responses to him being reiterated. It is generally acknowledged that Kilvert was deeply religious but the nature of his beliefs has not so far been illuminated. Equally well recognised is his love of Nature but that too remains largely unexamined. It is accepted that his literary knowledge, especially of poetry, was the product of his uncle Francis's teaching, yet understanding of that teaching has remained limited because little has been made known of the teacher. There has been a steady tendency to devalue Kilvert's reading — apart from Wordsworth, Tennyson and a few other poets. Thus, we have been told 'he enjoys a great number of ephemeral novels but makes no mention of Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës, George Eliot — or even Fielding, Richardson or Smollett'.⁴¹ Another commentator insisted that his choice of books was 'casual and random' and that he read ephemeral literature.⁴² Yet another stated that his 'taste in books was . . .

undiscriminating'.⁴³ Disinclination to examine what Kilvert actually read and to look for patterns in it inevitably led to the conclusion that it was 'casual and random'. Misconceptions about his reading stem partly from failure to give adequate weight to the fact that he was an Evangelical. Evangelicals were extremely punctilious about what they read and 'casual and random' reading was anathema to them. Kilvert had a very good reason for avoiding novels by the major nineteenth-century novelists: they consistently portrayed Evangelicalism (and religion generally) in a poor light. The commentator who designated Kilvert's reading 'casual and random' went so far as to assert that the first instinct of this highly literary man was 'not to reach for a book'. Kilvert of course cared a great deal about what he read and his choices reveal the clearest of patterns, which are themselves a guide to his personality, beliefs, and the way he wrote about landscape.⁴⁴

The undervaluing of Kilvert's literary taste is an aspect of the general disparagement of his intellect. According to Lockwood, he was 'not a profound man' and 'his mind was not academic or critical'.⁴⁵ He was of 'third-rate intelligence'⁴⁶ and had 'a completely unacademic mind'⁴⁷ in the opinion of Le Quesne. A.L. Rowse, though he characterised walking, at which he knew Kilvert excelled, as 'that favourite pursuit of the intellectually-minded,' felt constrained to add: 'Not that he was an intellectual'.⁴⁸ Another commentator keen to impugn Kilvert's intellect is Meic Stephens: 'No intellectual himself, Kilvert is often unacceptably sentimental in the eyes of modern intellectuals'.⁴⁹ Sentimentality is a crucial concept with regard to Kilvert and his writing but a good deal of misunderstanding surrounds it in Kilvert studies because of a failure to note the part it played in Victorian sensibility: 'Most Victorians believed that the human community was one of shared moral feelings and that sentimentality was a desirable way of feeling and expressing ourselves morally'.⁵⁰ It was in fact a way of defining human nature and one's self. It has been assumed that it was Kilvert's sentimentality that led him to choose 'easy', undemanding fiction, whereas the truth is that he favoured books which gave a prominent place to the ethic of mutual kindness. An important consequence of the steady harping on his sentimentality is that he himself has been sentimentalised, described as a saint, as a man who wouldn't say boo to a goose, who was a bit soft in the head as well as in the heart.

Frederick William Robertson

It has always seemed probable that Kilvert must have had an outstanding example of Christian ministry in his mind that he followed. Several clerical models — e.g. Henry Moule, Charles Kingsley and William Barnes — have suggested themselves, but we have lacked one whose *specific* influence could be convincingly



demonstrated. That clergyman was Frederick Robertson. His name occurs only once in the *Diary* in Kilvert's brief note: 'Lent Miss Dew Robertson's Lectures on Corinthians',⁵¹ but behind it lies a major influence on his life, his piety, his ministry, and his writing that has gone unrecognised. Robertson (1816-1853), described in the *DNB* as 'not only a man of genius but a man of unique genius', achieved national fame as preacher, writer and religious thinker so that it was inevitable that Kilvert would have heard of him.⁵² Proof that he knew not only Robertson's *Lectures on Corinthians* but also Brooke's *Life and Letters of the Rev Frederick William Robertson* (1865) is to be found in echoes and borrowings from the latter work that surface in the *Diary* and in his poetry, the most important of which is the passage in the poem *Honest Work* where Kilvert talked of recognising 'How hearts are linked to hearts by God, — / And prove themselves the sons to be / Of Heaven-descended Charity'. Brooke quoted a passage from one of Robertson's *unpublished* sermons (thus Kilvert could only have seen it in Brooke's *Life*) in which he said, referring to the origin of friendship: 'Hearts are linked to hearts by God'.⁵³ The notion of 'hearts' linked to each other by a chain of sympathy was much cherished by Evangelicals.⁵⁴ It is important to underline the fact that the publication of Brooke's *Life* in 1865 ('to great acclaim', according to the *DNB*) coincided with Kilvert's arrival in Clyro, Radnorshire, and can be assumed to have played a significant part in shaping both

his conception of Christian ministry and his aspiration to be a writer.

Robertson was a man who attracted devoted followers and Kilvert became one of them. Kaplan wrote that Victorians needed to *love* the writers they admired, not just their books,⁵⁵ and the evidence suggests that Kilvert's love for the Brighton preacher was intense. This seems to be the explanation for what he did in the summer of 1869 — he undertook a holiday on the Continent, as Robertson had done in the summer of 1841 and also in September 1846, times when he was facing a crisis in his spiritual life. It is significant that both men's journeys took them to the Alps, where experiences of particular power, far removed from those provided by the pastoral landscapes of *Kilvert's Diary*, could be had: 'a man ought to go [to Switzerland] to feel intensely at least once in his life,' Robertson advised, and Kilvert followed his advice. Robertson found the experience of being alone amid the immensity of the Alps helpful in conquering his spiritual doubts. One evening, the 'wild, savage scenery' produced a moment — 'so solemn, so awful, almost holy' — when 'nature, in all its mystery, is felt'.⁵⁶ Kilvert's responses to landscape are consistently informed by this perception: he dedicated himself to the search for Nature's *mystery*, to 'holy' moments which he habitually labelled 'solemn'. Mountains provided some of his deepest religious experiences too, when he felt nearer to God, more sure of his faith. One of the best known in his *Diary* is the view he had of a snow ridge on the Black Mountains, which prompted the reflection, 'I never saw anything to equal it I think, even among the high Alps'.⁵⁷ In having Robertson as inspiration and mentor, Kilvert was modelling himself on a highly exceptional man. He is generally acknowledged to be a most profound religious thinker and a brilliant interpreter of spiritual truths. He was also a perceptive critic: 'His literary criticisms, as displayed in his lectures upon Tennyson and Wordsworth . . . were first-rate. . . .'⁵⁸ Kilvert's love of Wordsworth was doubtless reinforced by the fact that he knew Robertson was devoted to him.

The accepted view of Kilvert is bedevilled by polarisations — for example, that his literary taste extended only to 'easy' writers, a category encompassing (absurdly) Wordsworth and Tennyson, and couldn't cope with 'hard' ones, such as Dickens and George Eliot. Linked to this polarisation is another one — that Kilvert's literary sensibility was entirely separate from

his religion. To him, as to other Victorians, Wordsworth was essentially a religious poet. There has been too much stress on the idea that Wordsworth and Kilvert were involved together in a vague, pantheistic view of Nature that could not be reconciled with orthodox Christianity.⁵⁹ Thus, the conventional view of Kilvert's personality commonly pictures a Romantic sensuousness and emotionality in conflict with a strict piety, whereas he steadily endorsed the example of the Christian poet who combined poetry with piety.

Kilvert's uncle Francis wrote a poem, *Je Pense Plus*, in which he outlined the chief traits of his own personality; the similarity between that personality and Kilvert's has often been noted. The *Diary* entry in which he stated 'I hate arguing' has been linked by commentators to the poem's third verse, which reads:

Though indisposed to speak my mind,
 Little to argument inclined,
 In range of general lore confined,
 I think the more.

It is true that Kilvert was 'Little to argument inclined' but it seems that this disinclination arose from his awareness that dispute often led nowhere, except to bad feeling among the disputants, which he deplored. It should not be taken to mean that he was a man without ideas or principles. He was in fact showing his Evangelicalism for Henry Venn, mentor of the Clapham Evangelicals, had urged: 'Never on any account, dispute. Debate is the work of the flesh.' Of the personality traits in *Je Pense Plus* belonging to uncle Francis, the one that is never applied to Kilvert is that which represents the poem's theme — 'I think the more'. He was not a profound thinker, as Robertson was, but he *was* a thinker: the books he read, including Brooke's biography of Robertson, which ranges in its 650 pages over a very large number of ideas — literary, philosophical, religious, moral, aesthetic, political — and a very large number of writers, prove this to be true.⁶⁰ In the chapters that follow, the range of ideas and writers which informed Kilvert's general moral outlook will become apparent. On occasion, the complexity of his mind and personality has been glimpsed by commentators. It is hoped that this study of Kilvert and landscape, which may be regarded as the second part of a reevaluation of the diarist that began with my *Kilvert: The Homeless Heart* (2001), contributes to our appreciation of his complexity.