Did late 18th and early 19th century poetry influence the Greg family’s love of nature and landscapes?

By Lauren Ann Davies
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In 1789, Hannah Lightbody married Quarry Bank mill owner Samuel Greg. Hannah was a remarkable woman with many interests in politics, literature and the rights of women. In the archives at Quarry Bank there is a beautiful and rather exquisite book entitled the ‘Family Album.’ The album is dated between 1800 and 1815, and contains an array of short poems and images, created by members of the Greg family. The album is inscribed with Hannah’s name, ‘Mrs S. Greg,’ suggesting she was responsible for the assembly of the album, and it also shows how Hannah’s love for literature and the natural world was instilled into family life.

Before Hannah met her husband, she was educated at Fleetwood House in London. This particular boarding school was built in Queen Elizabeth’s time and had a reputation for educating young women. Writer David Sekers remarks in his novel A Lady of Cotton that Hannah not only learnt basic practice in sewing and dancing, but the curriculum remarkably ‘included French, some mathematics, history, religion, […] English and foreign literature.’¹ After leaving Fleetwood House in 1786, aged twenty, she returned to live with her mother in Liverpool and remained an avid reader. In the following years she wrote a diary where she often expressed her concerns about the roles of women in society, and her philosophical views. Most interestingly the diary reveals her love and admiration for the natural world, and this remained a passion for the rest of her life. This is significant because many Romantic poets of the late 18th and early 19th century were expressing and exploring the sublime and picturesque qualities of rural and natural landscapes. In a letter from her husband, whilst they were courting, it describes that after seeing a late summer scene at Quarry Bank, he understood and shared her love of nature. Hannah continued to inspire and influence her

husband, as in 1790, soon after their marriage, Samuel joined the Manchester Library and Philosophical Society.

The poems in the album tend to focus on the buildings and the natural surroundings of Quarry Bank, and other places that the family had visited. What makes the album particularly interesting is the fact that the poems follow similar themes to the great Romantic poets of the time such as, William Wordsworth (1770-1830) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). Romantic poets tended to focus on the relationship between man and nature; exploring its sublime and picturesque qualities.

For example, in 1798, Coleridge published his renowned poem ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.’ This particular poem argues that ‘Both man and bird and beast’\(^2\) should respect one another. This came about after the mariner, the speaker of the poem, recalls the story of when he shot an albatross out at sea. This fascinating poem shows how Coleridge wanted to express his admiration for the natural world and emphasise the importance of respecting and valuing its presence. Fellow poet William Wordsworth also exemplified his

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appreciation for nature, by illustrating the sublime and picturesque landscapes of his hometown in the Lake District.

In the ‘Family Album’ a musical harp is the subject of one of the poems, and this may be influenced by Coleridge’s poem ‘The Eolian Harp.’ This particular poem was published in 1796 and once again explores the relationship between man and nature. It is believed that Romantic poets, like Coleridge, were drawn to the harp, which is now most commonly known as ‘Aeolian Harp,’ because it was controlled by the forces of nature - as the wind passes through its strings. However, it is unusual to use a harp as a subject for a poem, and with Coleridge being so well-known it suggests that the Greg’s were well read and educated. Similarly, in another poem within the ‘Family Album,’ which is unfortunately without a title, it talks of the craftsmanship of a birds nest. The first couple of lines read: ‘But most of all it wins my admiration/ To view the structure of this little work/ A Birds Nest.’ The poem explores how the writer admires the ‘structure of this little work,’ and how the bird has created a home without the help of mankind. The bird’s skill is praised as it reads: ‘No tool, had he that wrought, no knife to cut/ No nail to fix/ […] his little beak was all.’ The bird is idolised for creating a structure without manmade tools, and nature is celebrated, like the harp, for its natural beauty, power and creativity.

In the Romantic era birds were often used in poetry as a symbol of beauty and liberty. For example, in 1798 Coleridge wrote ‘The Nightingale; A Conversation Poem,’ which emphasised the poet’s love of nature. The bird in Coleridge’s poem is said to have surrendered ‘his whole spirit, of his song,’ into nature. In terms of the poem in the Greg ‘Family Album,’ the speaker also admires the bird’s natural craftsmanship, and relationship with nature. Both poems show nature as tranquil and serene and Hannah Greg shared this

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view, as she preferred her home at Quarry Bank far more than their city house in Manchester.

As a result, it is clear that literature from the late 18th and early 19th century may have influenced the Greg family and their perspectives on the natural world.

One poem within the album is written by Samuel Greg’s son, Robert Hyde. The poem is simply entitled ‘Quarry Bank’ and refers to the birds in the estates gardens. It reads: ‘the blackbird and nightingale mingle their song/ with the sound of the river that murmurs along.’

This is very poetic for a man whose interests will later lie in the cotton industry, and the reference to a nightingale once again has an uncanny resemblance to Coleridge’s work.

Robert Hyde also makes a direct reference to the River Bollin which effectively connects the family business to the gardens. This is because the river is the driving force of the water
wheel for the mill, and as a result the striking image of the industrial mill and the picturesque gardens helps create striking and profound poetry.

Robert Hyde Greg was a fascinating character and it could be argued that his poem ‘Quarry Bank’ is so remarkably tasteful and poetic because he had a great admiration for rural landscapes and gardens. He was also known to be an excellent draughtsman and on his visit to Spain and Portugal in 1814-15, with his cousin Isacc Hodgson, at the young age of nineteen, he drew an array of illustrations of rural landscapes and the Alhambra Palace. This trip was partially for his education and for business opportunities, and although the ‘Quarry Bank’ poem was before his travels, it is clear that Robert Hyde was always motivated by nature and rural landscapes. He was also known for his interest in gardening, and his fascination with exotic rhododendrons - many which can be seen in the gardens at Quarry Bank.
Surprisingly, Thomas Greg, the eldest boy, was strongly influenced by his mother’s passion for literature and poetry. He even had some ambition to become a writer and poet, but unfortunately he never achieved success. His father often saw literature ‘as a dangerous distraction for men about to enter their profession’ and this debate continued between Samuel Greg and Hannah, as she regarded literature as civilised, whereas, Samuel thought cultivating poetry and literature was a damaging diversion for boys.

Samuel Greg’s opinionated view on poetry is interesting in terms of the ‘Family Album.’ This is because within the collection there is a poem written by the Quarry Bank founder himself. The poem is unlike any other in the collection; it is witty and amusing. The poem is about a kitten and the opening line reads: ‘I am a kitten – do not call me –cat.’ The last line repeats this message stating that ‘years shall never make a cat of me’ and this is important, as it may suggest Samuel Greg did not want to considered old like a cat, but young and free like a kitten. This may be a very unconvincing interpretation, however, the poem which is unfortunately not dated, follows after a sketch drawn in 1813; if it is to be assumed that this was around the time Samuel Greg wrote the next poem - then he would be aged fifty-five. However, he did continue to work for a further twenty-one years until his death in 1834. Samuel’s poem is a small contribution to the ‘Family Album,’ yet his involvement suggests he was attentive to his wife’s interests in literature.

Overall, the uncanny resemblances of the poems in the ‘Family Album’ to the poets of the Romantic era, suggests that the Greg family were influenced by Romantic poetry. The poems give an insight into the minds of the Greg family, and emphasises the importance of the gardens at Quarry Bank. Hannah’s admiration of philosophical works and literature, as a whole, has been transferred to her children and reflected in the ‘Family Album.’
Bibliography


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