

### **Nature and the English Nation from the last third of the 19th century**

In England, the first concerns for nature preservation can be traced back at least as early as the First Industrial Revolution. It is in the writings and actions of the poet Wordsworth in the 1830s-1840s that the first coherent and global environmental approach is visible. I have called his conception of the environment a *sentimental* one, which entwines three points of view, an aesthetic one (nature is a landscape), a patriotic one (this landscape embodies national values) and a spiritual one (nature is a gateway to the divinity or a superior morality). But one has to wait for the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to witness a great environmental awakening, with the creation of the Commons Preservation Society in 1865, and, more importantly, with the Thirlmere controversy in 1877-1878, through which the national importance of the Lake District is recognised by Parliament. This rise of interest is triggered by national uncertainties which develop at the time. Economic and social problems raise doubts as to the relevance of the industrial path chosen half a century before, not without huge debates; should England be defined as the workshop of the world, as an industrial nation, or, on the contrary, is its heart beating in the countryside of an idealised merry and Old England? In the context of this "return to nature" movement, numerous nature preservation associations appear in the 1870s and 1880s, gathered ultimately in 1894 in the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty. As its name indicates, this association was set up to defend a particular vision of the English nation through the preservation of ancient monuments and natural places, thus achieving the movement launched by Wordsworth fifty years before.