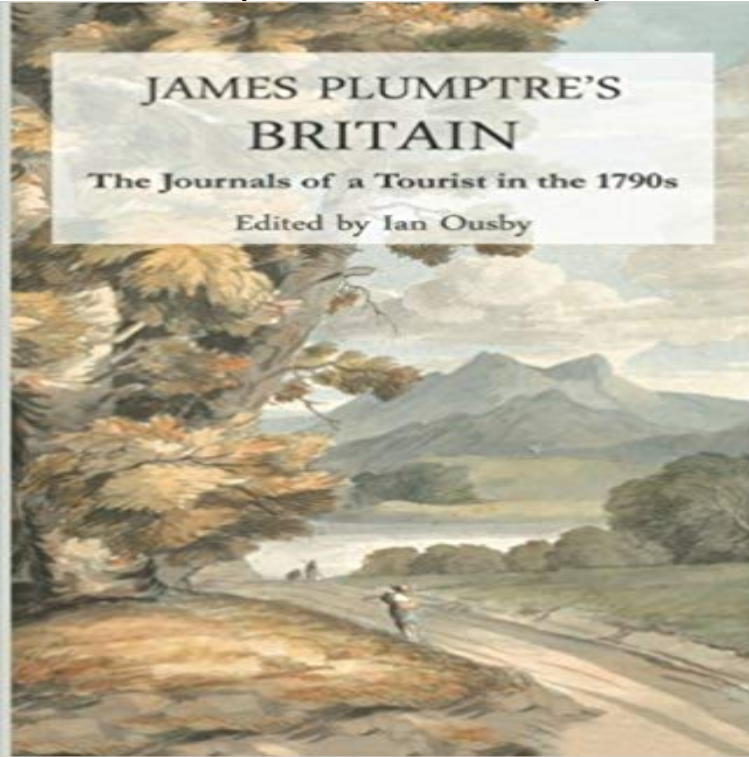


James Plumptre's Britain: The journals of a tourist in the 1790s



I am ashamed to think how much I travelled and to how little advantage to myself and others, James Plumptre wrote in 1811, by then a middle-aged clergyman weighed down by the responsibilities of his rural parish, looking back on his record as a tourist in the 1790s. This characteristically modest, self-doubting judgement is hardly fair on the youthful energy that had made him use every moment he could spare to set off, travelling on foot whenever possible but still managing to explore most corners of mainland Britain. And it slights the journals he kept, full of youthful enthusiasm for the simple life of the open road and the scenery of north Wales or the Lake District, packed with curiosity about ironworks and coalmines, country houses and antiquities, celebrities of the day and chance acquaintances made in local inns, where Plumptre often needed all his natural resilience in coping with the discomforts and accidents to which he was prone. His hasty, sometimes breathless writing provides, quite unintentionally, a portrait of Britain during a restless and often unhappy decade of change, when the middle class worried about the spread of seditious ideas from France, or the threat of invasion by Napoleon, and the rural working class struggled with economic depression and the effects of enclosure. And at the same time it provides, quite as unintentionally, a portrait of the writer himself, in 1790 a Cambridge undergraduate more preoccupied with Romantic poetry and the stage than his studies, who a decade later was a devout Evangelical, doing his best to repress an innate sense of fun and already embarked on his career in the church. Unpublished in his lifetime and then quietly forgotten, Plumptre's journals richly deserve to see the light of day at last in this selected edition published some two hundred years after they were written.

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