



Mysterious Wisdom

Rachel Campbell-Johnston

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Mysterious Wisdom is a biography of the painter Samuel Palmer whose world of slumbering shepherds and tumbling blossoms, mystical cornfields and bright sickle moons, has enchanted admirers since the nineteenth century. The lynchpin of the first British art movement, Palmer dreamed of creating a new rural ideal. Leading a band of fellow artists - the brotherhood of Ancients - from London to live in the village of Shoreham in Kent, he pursued his vision. If English tradition had ever encompassed the making of icons they would not have been so different from Palmer's enraptured landscapes. Samuel Palmer, however, was more than a reclusive eccentric. He lived during a century of great social upheaval and his works, at their finest, reflect its hopes and its fears. They capture a world in which the concerns of politics, religion and culture are inscribed onto the contours of our native landscapes. In his day, Palmer was much neglected. He did not attempt the grand dramas of J. M. W. Turner or follow John Constable's profoundly naturalistic path. But he belongs in their Romantic pantheon; as much for the numinous visions that are embodied in his loveliest paintings as for the vagaries of a life story in which so often he failed. Mysterious Wisdom offers a vividly intimate account of a man who has been as much misunderstood as admired; who was as sensual as he was spiritual, as dreamy as determined, as playful as profound. This is a portrait of a great British Romantic. It is a picture of a life shaped by passionate conviction, lit by enthusiasm, irony, and a captivating charm.

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