

Wordsworth's successor as... *King of* controversy

If William Wordsworth was around today it would be interesting to know what he thought of artist Conrad Atkinson, writes Adrian Mullen.

Both radicals in their own right, they would probably get on like a house on fire.

Conrad's a Cleator Moor lad who these days orbits in the glittering circles of America's rich and famous from his Californian home, but whose conscience demands he keeps his feet firmly on Cumbrian soil - in between jobs anyway.

Born in 1940, he's one of the most talked about and controversial painters of the modern world, mixing art with politics, as his artwork — printed on our next page — confirms.

He's also one of the most likeable painters as he chats about rubbing shoulders with the Douglas's and McCartney's at a fundraiser for victims of landmines at the Beverley Hills Hotel. Conrad donated one of his ceramic landmines and got a pat-on-the-back from 87-year-old Hollywood legend Mickey Rooney on the same night.

A Champagne socialist he certainly isn't but it must have been a tough call to leave British shores in 1992 to become a professor of art at the University of California in

Davis: "They made me an offer I couldn't refuse," he quips.

Having Conrad produce a piece of art for this newspaper is a real coup — and a whacking slice of culture for any publication to undertake.

So why produce a page for the Gazette?

"Firstly, the editor invited me after seeing the paintings of the *Sun Newspaper* in my current show at the Wordsworth Trust and saw the page I did for *The Guardian* in the eighties.

"I was excited to accept the invitation because culture is clearly central to the future of the region, and the silver lining in the horrific cloud that was foot-and-mouth was that this became very clear.

"If we want industries and people to move into the region and create a vibrant, creative future then culture and tourism are central issues both in terms of quality of life and economics.

"Secondly, Wordsworth was interested in the economics and politics of the region and its effects. As Wordsworth is overloaded with invitations and projects right now he asked me if I was interested and I gladly complied."

Conrad feels an affinity with the great Lakeland poet, mainly due to Wordsworth's honesty and directness, he tells me. And it's a timely addition with the 200th celebration coming up of Wordsworth's best-known poem *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*.

A daffodil plays a significant part of Conrad's Gazette page of contemporary lyricism, as does Conrad's interpretation of a pin-stripe suit he suggests Wordsworth could have worn on that pivotal and poetic day in Grasmere in 1802, when the Romantic walked with his sister Dorothy among a windswept sea of daffodils.

Conrad's own story is very rags to riches, having grown up in poverty in Cleator, but he's too concerned with worldly-wrongdoings to bask in his own glory.

As well as being official artist of the US campaign to ban landmines, he has many other social concerns, which have been the focus of his work over the years. The plight of workers in his native West Cumbria, the Thalidomide scandal, the troubles in Northern Ireland and industrial disease, just to name a few.

Conrad was unbearably bright and got the chance to be trained at London's Royal Academy of Art.

Conrad says there was one outstanding thing about childhood in Cleator — coming across L.S. Lowry, who would stay in the Midland Bank building and watch Conrad and other Catholic kids queue up at Cowles Fish and Chip Shop.

Film, television and radio have all charted the rise of Conrad. He has had bucketsfuls of exhibitions across the globe and penned several essays.

These days he sits on North West Arts: Arts Council of England's board and has advised on the finer points of contemporary creativity for panels and advisory groups left, right and centre, including the Kurt Schwitters Working Group in 2003. And, in 2002, he was distinguished visiting professor/artist in residence at London University's Courtauld Institute.

In the 1980s he recreated a page of the *Wall Street Journal* in a silk-screen print.

Conrad's art tells it as he sees it and his Gazette page leaves the reader under no illusions as to what drives him.

Pointed and irreverent, it's a satirical take on a selection of serious and contentious subjects.

Wordsworth himself would be proud!



● CONRAD ATKINSON, left and above — with his version of William Wordsworth's suit, *Images of Wordsworth*. The Cleator Moor-born artist believes culture is central to the future of the region and was, in fact, the silver lining in the horrific cloud of foot-and-mouth disease.