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Kilve Study Weekend, September 2005

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ENRICHMENT (for able children) promised the posters displayed at Kilve as we assembled for the 2005 Study Weekend. If we ever were, able children we no longer are, but enriched we certainly were as we learned more about Coleridge's Conversation Poems.

At our welcome gathering we remembered Francis à Court and Chris Rubinstein, who had died since we last met, and who had both contributed in different ways to the unique atmosphere of these weekends. We also congratulated Seamus and Nicola on the birth of Hester Jane—a very young friend.

After dinner, David Fairer set the stage for our exploration of the idea of the Conversation Poem with the title “Converse and Chit-chat: Eighteenth Century Contexts.” David spoke of successive changes of emphasis in re-workings of ‘The Nightingale’: was Coleridge writing a Conversation Poem or a Conversational Poem? All sorts of characters contribute to the conversation... Mary Leapor, Cowper, Swift, De Quincey, Thelwall (of whom more anon). Coleridge may have had an ideal of a conversation but perhaps he found it difficult to live up to this ideal.

On Saturday, an early morning walk for some; for others, a short stroll to the village shop for reports of the England/ Australia Ashes match at the Oval. (A pity Hazlitt wasn't around to do justice to the contest. I doubt if Coleridge was really a cricket devotee).

Felicity James opened our morning session with ‘Agreement, Dissonance, Dissent: The Many Conversations in ‘This Lime-tree Bower’. Her lecture reminded us of the ideals the romantics brought to Somerset and the cracks appearing (religious differences, literary rivalries, new idols). Coleridge's ‘Friends whom never more may meet again’ corresponds to Lamb's ‘All, all are gone the old familiar faces’—they were only 25 and 21 years old! Felicity's was a very perceptive lecture which I hope to read in the Bulletin and that others will be able to share her empathy with Coleridge, Lamb and their circle. (Your hope is realized – ed!)

Peter Larkin's subject was ‘Frost at Midnight; Some Coleridgean Intertwinings’. Intertwinings, certainly, from the cottage and its surroundings, the countryside beyond, back in time to his childhood home and schooldays in London, mingled with thoughts on the infant Hartley's future, before reverting to the ‘silent icicles quietly shining to the quiet moon.’ I found some of the philosophy daunting. Having checked the spelling and meaning of ‘epistemological’ and ‘phenomenology’ I thought I should have read *Sophie's World* more carefully. No matter, this is a poem which can be enjoyed at so many levels.

In the afternoon most enjoyed a five mile walk, while some, following in the footsteps of Defoe some 280 years previously, visited Watchet to admire

the fine bronze statue of the Mariner on the esplanade and the painting of the harbour before the enlargement in 1860, as it must have looked to Coleridge:

‘The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,
Merrily did we drop...’

In the evening Nigel Dodd welcomed us to a magical evening of words and music, beginning with his settings of four Anglo-Saxon riddles beautifully sung by Tom Mayberry. During the interval we heard the tape-recorded voice of our beloved Reggie Watters, recorded in Bristol on Saturday 14th October 1995, celebrating the first meeting, in Bristol, two hundred years earlier, of Coleridge and Wordsworth. Nigel played Haydn variations. Finally Tom sang Nigel’s settings for voice and piano of the Lucy poems. A lovely end to the day.

On Sunday morning our first talk was by Richard Gravid, entitled ‘The Somerset Sound.’ Here John Thelwall, whom we met earlier, really came into his own. I had only remembered him (vaguely) as an agitator and pamphleteer, acquitted in the 1795 treason trial. By 1805 he is Professor of the Science and Practice of Elocution at Liverpool! We learned more about Thelwall the poet (in quest of a peaceful retreat) with his idyll of *Wisdom and Refinement and Rustic Plainness*. Richard also evoked the voices of W B Yeats and Ted Hughes, and gave us his idea of what Coleridge might have sounded like.

Our final talk and our third Conversation poem was by Matthew Scott, “‘The heart doth need a language’”: *Birdsong and the Beauty of the Ordinary* in Coleridge’s ‘The Nightingale’—a poem which faces some stiff competition from many other nightingale and other bird-inspired poems.

Before dispersing—some for walks, some to visit Coleridge’s cottage, we expressed our thanks to Shirley, her Committee and to the speakers, to Celia and all the staff at Kilve who make this a not-to-be-missed date in our diaries.