

From

The Coleridge Bulletin

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge
New Series 26 (NS) Winter 2005

© 2005 Contributor all rights reserved

<http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm>

Chris Rubinstein (1929-2005)

Peter Larkin

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED Chris with his wife Betty on a walking holiday in the Auvergne in the early eighties. Not only was he a tireless hill-walker, it was impossible to miss being drawn into his passion for the Romantic poets, particularly Blake. A working solicitor, Chris had in fact given himself a year's unpaid sabbatical in which to write a book on Blake, though it was never taken up by a publisher. As Chris and Betty lived not far from my father on the fringes of the New Forest, further walks and a closer friendship soon ensued. This was cemented when Chris became my father's solicitor, and his quiet expertise and support were much in evidence some years later at the time of my father's death. It was during a New Forest walk which the two of us took that Chris first became afflicted by the breathlessness which was to remain with him for the rest of his life and curtailed all but the gentlest activity, but which Chris endured with characteristic lightness of spirit, or, in actual fact, considerable fortitude.

Chris's long involvement with the William Blake Society will certainly be recorded elsewhere, so I will focus on his contribution to the Friends of Coleridge. He spoke (from notes only) on Blake at the inaugural Coleridge Conference in 1988 and was thereafter to become a regular paper-giver, on topics ranging from Blake's 'Mental Traveller' to Coleridge's 'Christabel', or Coleridge's involvement with Rousseau, with Charles Lloyd, and with contemporary Jewish culture. To all this he brought an encyclopaedic knowledge of the cultural history of the 1790's acquired from years of reading in often recondite sources, to which he added his own passionate radical politics. In two areas he made his most original contribution to Coleridge studies: his paper on 'A New Identity for the Mariner?' remains among the earliest explorations of the submerged theme of slavery in Coleridge's *Rime*, and has rightly been taken up into the literature on that topic; more poignantly, Chris struggled for years to throw further light on the 'person from Porlock' episode, on which there has been little recent fresh thinking, other than to dismiss the whole thing as an opium fantasy. While researching in the PRO, Chris stumbled on documents which revealed that one John Chester, a Bristol druggist, had been undergoing bankruptcy proceedings at just the time 'Kubla Khan' is most likely to have been composed. Could this have been Coleridge's own John Chester, whose companionship with STC in Germany most biographers do not even attempt to account for? If so, the 'person from Porlock' Chris realised, might well have been a local attorney given the task of tracking down Chester's debtors. Chris even got so far as tracing one or two names of attorneys working in the Porlock area during the period. He could not, in the event, draw the two Chesters finally together (Chester is a common Bristol name) and the needed documentation may simply no longer be extant, but Chris (in an essay published in *The Wordsworth Circle*) has left us an intriguing set of questions, and has been the only scholar to throw light on the

sort of events which might have underlain the untimely interruption of 'Kubla Khan', however much that famous curtailment then became part of the mythology of the poem itself. Chris's speculations must for the present remain only hypothetical, but they are typical of his preparedness to take risks in perplexing or unpromising areas.

At both Cannington and Kilve Chris was a lively participant in the discussion periods, and if his comments sometimes seemed oblique to the main trend, they were frequently bestrewn with extraordinary nuggets of minute knowledge and daring linkages, which some of those who also participated in these sessions have since acknowledged. Chris loved to pursue a contentious idea like a terrier, shaking from it many an over-looked or under-valued insight. Though well aware that some of his views were regarded as wayward, he never harboured a hint of resentment. He simply assumed that everyone else shared his own insatiable intellectual curiosity and directness of opinion. In that regard, Chris possessed a lovable innocence, a sort of unquenchable invulnerability which stemmed from his deep humanity and selfless ethical commitment which had informed every aspect of his personal and professional life. If he did feel a private sense of disappointment or frustration, they left no discernible marks on the generous affability which he shared with all around him. He was just the sort of person to remind us of the vital relevance of the Romantic poets. Chris lived his engagement with them, and contributed that idealism to the life of the Friends of Coleridge. As such, all he did avowed the true *raison d'être* of the Friends, and he will be greatly missed by us all.

From: *The Coleridge Bulletin*
New Series 26 (NS) Winter 2005
www.friendsofcoleridge.com

