

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>

Heidi Thomson  
reads  
*Samuel Taylor Coleridge (The British Library Writers' Lives)*  
(The British Library, 2003)  
By Seamus Perry

---

**T**HE *British Library Writers' Lives* series is designed to showcase the literary treasures of the British Library, and it does so brilliantly. The photographic quality of the reproductions is superb, and browsing through a volume resembles taking a leisurely walk through a well designed exhibition; you can actually read the words on the reproduced manuscripts and you can almost feel the texture of the original paper just from looking at it. These books follow a very similar format: they are about 120 pages long and they largely stick to a linear biographical account of its subjects. When I was at the British Library last year I bought the Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Keats volumes and took them home with me to New Zealand to pass around in my Romantic Literature tutorials, which is about as close as most of my students will ever get to experiencing the British Library.<sup>1</sup> The clear reproduction on page 42 of the Coleridge volume actually enables the students to read the whole of 'Kubla Khan' from the manuscript – so to speak – and they love it. It is a wonderful teaching device and a particularly attractive souvenir of the Coleridge holdings in the British Library. The obvious question remains: is it anything else besides a pretty picture book? In this case it most certainly is, and what follows in the next couple of pages is not so much a summary of Perry's book as an appreciative commentary.

Seamus Perry's *Samuel Taylor Coleridge* does not tell us anything which most Coleridge scholars do not already know. That is not the point of the book. Detailed biographies by Rosemary Ashton, Richard Holmes and others provide all that information and more. But what distinguishes this book from the glossy triviality which so often characterizes a 'life *cum* pictures' book is Seamus Perry's voice. We are very fortunate indeed that a Coleridge reader of this calibre has given his expertise and wit to a project which could easily have deteriorated into something slight and vaguely disappointing despite the wonderful illustrations. Not only is Seamus Perry one of the most prominent Coleridge scholars today, he has, in the Talmudic sense, 'eaten' Coleridge, and it shows. Perry's empathy with his subject is informed by an extraordinarily exhaustive knowledge of Coleridge's own enormous verbal legacy, from his poetry and myriad prose writings to the recorded table talk, supplemented by an astute awareness of what Coleridge's contemporaries made of this mercurial genius. In addition, Perry reads Coleridge with gusto; there is a sense that there is always something new and wonderfully exciting about the subject he has been researching and writing about for decades. In other words, Perry and

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Hebron, *William Wordsworth (The British Library Writers' Lives)* (London: The British Library, 2000) and Stephen Hebron, *John Keats (The British Library Writers' Lives)* (London: The British Library, 2002).

Coleridge are a terrific match.

Perry moves easily between biography and Coleridge's poetry and prose. Biographical experiences are related to feelings which are distilled into the poems; the loneliness at Christ's Hospital for instance is related to 'Frost at Midnight' and the verse letter to Sara Hutchinson. Perry's affirmative, though perhaps over-optimistic readings of 'The Eolian Harp' ('as though the union of their marital love emulated in miniature the divine unity of the created world' (30) and 'Frost at Midnight' ('the only darkness in the poem is the recollected deprivation of Coleridge's own childhood' (51)) illustrate Coleridge's poetical and personal halcyon days. The notes which Coleridge made on board the *Speedwell en route* to Malta about a targeted exhausted hawk hark back to the imagery of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: 'O strange Lust of Murder in Man!—It is not cruelty/ it is mere non-feeling from non-thinking' (78).

Perhaps more strikingly, Perry's superb command of the Coleridge materials allows him to transcend the commonplaces of well trodden biographical ground. I liked, for instance, the brief inclusion of Coleridge's horrific nursing experience of a delirious fellow dragoon during the Silas Tomkyn Comberbache episode (16). It somehow humanizes the almost Monty Python-esque flavour of this episode in Coleridge's life. Equally impressive are Perry's summaries of complex ideas and philosophical trends, and their relevance for Coleridge, in eloquent, plain English. Coleridge's shifting interpretations of Unitarianism is a fine example, and so is Perry's main point about Godwin's *Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793): 'all suffering and crime was due to social inequality, and removing that required the abolition of private property. Godwin's equitable Utopia appealed purely to human reason—and despite the manifest fallibility of human reason, he still managed to suggest that the transformation in affairs he prescribed was somehow excitingly imminent' (17). Perry's sketch of *Biographia Literaria*, the work which originated in 1802 with Coleridge's realization of the 'radical Difference in our [Wordsworth's and his] theoretical opinions respecting poetry' (69), includes a lucid paraphrase of Coleridge's criticism of Wordsworth and of what is 'perhaps the most famous passage of literary theory in English,' the definition of the primary and secondary imagination (105). Characteristically, Perry also manages to summarize the other ingredients in one deft sentence: '(among other things) a rebuttal of the supposed irritability of men of genius, some good advice to young people tempted to take up literature as a trade—which was, *DON'T*—and a survey of the practice of contemporary reviewers' (103-104).

Perry's evocation of Coleridge within 120 short pages, many of them taken up by pictures, is necessarily selective; it is not so much a 'life' as a series of snapshots organized in eight short chapters. Many of his chapter headings indicate the changing guises of Coleridge's identity in conjunction with the covered timeframe: 'The Youngest Son 1772-1794,' 'The Pantisocrat 1784-1797,' 'The Man of Letters 1810-1816' and 'The Sage of Highgate 1816-1834'.

The sixty pages in the middle (36-96) are dominated by Wordsworth's colossal presence in Coleridge's life: 'Wordsworth 1797-1799,' 'The Lakes 1799-1804,' 'Malta 1804-1806,' 'London and the Lakes' (1806-1810). The initial fruitful collaboration, the intense and later guarded friendship with the Wordsworths figures prominently throughout the volume and some overlap with Stephen Hebron's *Wordsworth* in the same series is inevitable but, because of the radically different styles of both books, minimal all the same. The Montagu incident which drove Coleridge to distraction and which Perry finely relates to Coleridge's overall state of mind and health does not figure prominently in the *Wordsworth* volume (86), largely because Hebron focuses far more on the public figure of Wordsworth.

Perry's account confirms that the story of Coleridge's adult social life is driven by a frustrating search, greatly exacerbated by his opium addiction, for the ideal surrogate family which would nurture his literary and philosophical endeavours, and this quest dwindles in scope from the dreams of a pantisocratic community on the banks of the Susquehanna, to the *annus mirabilis* with the Wordsworths, to the reality of the Gilmans' therapeutic hospitality in Highgate. The same principle which informs Rosemary Ashton's excellent biography, namely that '[i]n his lifetime Coleridge alienated many who had begun by loving him', also informs Perry's account.<sup>2</sup> The absolutist quality of Coleridge's high-minded conceptions of friendship, love and community could not be translated into an everyday human reality. Perry's choice of Coleridge's own self-righteous words to Southey in a letter of November 1795 which signalled the demise of his intense pantisocratic friendship makes the point: 'You are *lost* to *me*, because you are lost to Virtue' (29). Over and over again Coleridge would 'hopefully invest his personal relationships with a power to redeem him for his own inadequacies, a burden of expectation which inevitably put his friendships under great strains' (12). The unrealistic expectations of friendships turned into an inability to live with his own wife and children. Coleridge's infatuation with Sara Hutchinson put a particular strain on his household; even that relationship should be read in the context of Coleridge's desire to be part of the Wordsworth household. The shifts in addressees in the changing versions of 'Dejection' illustrate the interchangeability of Sara with Wordsworth. This section has a minor mistake in it (no doubt already picked up by the author) which could easily be corrected in further editions. Perry writes: 'On 4 October 1802, Coleridge published a version of the poem in the *Morning Post* as 'Dejection: An Ode', pruned of its more explicit references to his discordant home life, and with "Sara" discreetly replaced by "Lady" ' (67). The 'Lady' does not appear until much later; the addressee in the *Morning Post* is 'Edmund,' a thinly disguised Wordsworth who is also identified by references to 'Peter Bell' and 'Lucy Gray.' The substitution of Sara with Edmund/Wordsworth is doubly loaded because 4 October 1802 was the day of Wordsworth's wedding to Mary Hutchinson, Sara's sister.

<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Ashton, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) 3.

Southey described Coleridge's desire to separate from Sara upon his return from Malta in terms of his longing to be part of the Wordsworth family: 'His present scheme is to live with the Wordsworths—it is from his idolatry of that family that this has begun' (87). Life with an addict proved too much for the Wordsworths, and the break-up of that friendship, so momentously constructed by Coleridge himself and yet so trivial in the details of the actual event, centres, not surprisingly, on the possible exclusion from yet another surrogate family. Wordsworth's warning about Coleridge's addictive behaviour to Basil Montagu comes in the wake of long, intermittent and ultimately exasperating stays with the Wordsworth family. Coleridge's most important relationship was with his own addiction, and it is not surprising that he ended up most happily with a family which had taken him in *because* of his addiction.

Yet many if not most of Coleridge's friendships started with him making a tremendous verbal impression on those he met. Talk is what the generation immediately after Coleridge remembered him for: 'Of all Coleridge's books it was *Table Talk*, posthumously assembled from records of the great man speaking made by his nephew Henry Nelson Coleridge, that did most to establish his reputation in the nineteenth century' (115). Perry starts his excellent contribution on 'The Talker' in *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* with Dorothy Wordsworth's portrayal of him as an embodied voice; upon listing Coleridge's unflattering physical attributes she adds: 'But, if you hear him speak for five minutes you think no more of them.'<sup>3</sup> In this book Perry considers Coleridge's talk with as much emphasis as his poetry and prose, rightly so for it was Coleridge's preferred mental and social medium. Talking was both the glue and the poison of Coleridge's social relationships: his talk was brilliant but endless, startlingly articulate but compulsively digressive, aimed at articulating high ideals of truth but deviously mendacious both to himself and others as his opium addiction took over. Talk was a great device for sorting out his thoughts in a dialogue with himself or in an exchange of a shared poetic vision with like minded spirits. Unfortunately, the more mundane speech interactions of the 'give and take', 'talk and listen' variety which make or break human relationships proved to be a far greater challenge for Coleridge than the intricacies of poetics and philosophy. Perry's beautifully balanced view of Coleridge the Talker includes Madame de Staël's famous words, 'he is very great in monologue, but he has no idea of dialogue' (7), but also a picture of Coleridge's heavily annotated copy of Shakespeare's plays (100), an instance of Coleridge in dialogue with great literature, the passion for and merits of which he managed to convey in his wildly popular, often improvised and digressive 1812-1813 lectures.

Perry's descriptions of situations and events, and his choice of illustrations and captions, attest of a subtlety, immediacy, and sense of humour which is often lacking in publications of this kind. At a most basic level he knows what he's talking about: he's heard an Eolian harp ('rather a dreary noise, truth be

<sup>3</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 103.

told' (30); he's familiar with the walk Coleridge would have undertaken from Greta Hall ('some thirteen miles away from Grasmere, a stiff but magnificent walk over the mountain range that looks down upon Thirlmere' (61). But it is the way in which he lets Coleridge do the talking that Perry conveys the interaction of his subject with his environment most convincingly. The extreme cold during Coleridge's stay in Ratzeburg—the worst winter for a century—is fittingly captured in Coleridge's own observation about how the arctic frost almost seemed to paralyse the wings of the kingfisher, 'its slow short flight permitting you to observe all its colours, almost as if it had been a flower' (54). Small anecdotes which sometimes rely on a shared view of picture and caption effectively illustrate dynamics and personalities; Charles Lamb's delightful nature is aptly captured in the reproduction of his very rudimentary cartoon of Joseph Cottle, Coleridge's publisher, which included the comment: 'The lips should be a little thicker & perhaps the left eye has hardly justice done it but I should only spoil it by tampering with it' (34). And what better way to illustrate Coleridge's notorious habit of not delivering promised good than by making great use of the treasure trove of Coleridge ephemera in the British Library: a 1795 prospectus for a course of political lectures which were never delivered (27) and pictures of manuscripts with outlines of projects which never materialized (40). Some of my favourite passages in this book involve Coleridge's own lively evocations of his children: the anecdote of Hartley and the Moon, '& his eyes & the tears in them, how they glittered in the Moonlight' (50) with a picture of the manuscript notebook passage on the same page; three year old Hartley's response to sulphurous treatment for scabies ('I be a funny Fellow, and my name is Brimstonello' (56); baby Derwent making a noise 'exactly like the Creeking of a door which is being shut very slowly to prevent its creeking' (63); a letter to Southey: 'To morrow Sara & I dine at Mister Gobwin's as Hartley calls him—who gave the philosopher such a Rap on the shins with a ninepin that Gobwin in huge pain *lectured* Sara on his boisterousness' (59). Rather movingly, Perry concludes the chapter which culminates in the 1810 alienation from Wordsworth by registering the children's reaction as reported by their mother. Early in 1812, Coleridge rode through Grasmere without visiting the Wordsworths: 'Poor Hartley sat in speechless [*sic*] astonishment as the Chaise passed the turning to the Vicarage where W. lives, but he dared not hazard one remark, and Derwent fixed his eyes full of tears upon his father, who turned his head away to conceal his own emotions' (96).

Above all, this book stands out for its pictures. I am green with envy at the thought of the fantastic time Seamus Perry must have had sifting through the Coleridge documents and ephemera in the British Library in order to come up with a suitable selection for this beautiful book. In contrast with Hebron's *Wordsworth* and *Keats* volumes, there are no up to date photographs of sites or buildings in Perry's volume. I like the decision to give priority to older sources. Photographs are relatively easily found in other printed forms or even

online, but it is far more difficult to gain access to rare collections of prints, paintings, engravings, and manuscripts.<sup>4</sup> In some ways Hebron's *Wordsworth* volume provides a fine companion piece here; in it we may admire, for instance, a recent photograph of Coleridge's cottage in Nether Stowey (41) while Perry's volume contains a 1913 engraving by Edmund H. New of the same building (35). Both the *Coleridge* and the *Wordsworth* volumes feature useful maps of the Lake District and of South-West England, but I particularly enjoyed Perry's inclusion of Coleridge's own sketch-map of the Lake District in the notebook which detailed his 1802 tour (69). Considering the beautifully illustrated evocation of the British landscape (Turner's Llangollen, Constable's 1806 Helvellyn and his 1822 'View over London') I was disappointed at the complete absence of any illustrations of Malta or Sicily during Coleridge's time. It would have been enlightening (for a book of this kind) to have some visual prompt of the setting in which Coleridge, strangely cast in a public servant role, did so much agonised thinking. Still, that is a very minor quibble with an otherwise marvellous achievement.

Perry has responded creatively and masterfully to a standardised brief (a life, the works, pictures, 120 pages), which demonstrates his respect for the general reader. In doing so he has produced an indispensable introduction to the life and work of Coleridge. It is a most convincing evocation of, in Wordsworth's words, this 'most wonderful man.'

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

<sup>4</sup> Greta Hall, for instance, which Perry refers to as 'a private residence which you can peer at through iron gates' (61), has its own website (<http://www.gretahall.net/>) with many pictures to advertise its holiday cottage business.