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Coleridge and Wordsworth in the South-East of England

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IN THE SUMMER of 1828 Wordsworth and Coleridge, accompanied by Wordsworth's daughter Dora, went on a continental tour, in an attempt to renew their earlier friendship, so dramatically ruptured in 1810. Though the holiday was a qualified success there was never any question of the experiment being repeated. Thereafter, they were content to pursue such holidays as were left to them apart, and it would seem not unrewarding to look at two fairly comparable holidays they took in the eighteen-thirties. These holidays reveal much of the ageing men—Coleridge in his early sixties, but with only a year to live, on his tenth and last holiday to Ramsgate in 1833 and Wordsworth in his late sixties on his first and only holiday to nearby Broadstairs in 1837—Ramsgate and Broadstairs, its more genteel neighbour, being at the time fashionable seaside resorts on the North-East Kent coast.

It was for Coleridge an idyllic holiday, being fussed over by Mrs Gillman and having the intellectual companionship of her husband, with, as Coleridge wrote to J. H. Green, 'daily Bathings,' and 'receiving & returnings of visits, specially from the Lockharts'. Here he added in parentheses 'Mrs L[ockhart]., Sir Walter Scott's favourite Daughter, is truly an interesting and love-compelling Woman' (CL VI 947).

Sophia, the elder daughter of the late Sir Walter, had married John Gibson Lockhart, one of the founding contributors to Blackwoods Magazine, though he was by this time editor of the Tory *Quarterly Review* and later to become yet more famously, Scott's biographer. Soon after their arrival in Ramsgate Mrs Lockhart wrote to her brother, the second Sir Walter, from the house they had taken for a couple of months on Ramsgate's West Cliff.

We find it very comfortable and as yet like the place very much having a satisfaction of not as yet found a single acquaintance in it with the exception of old Colridge [sic] the poet who is grown very old and frail and lives at the opposite side of the town.¹

The Gillmans and their guest Coleridge, of Bellevue Place on the East Cliff, were duly invited to dine with the Lockharts at Spencer Place on the West Cliff. Coleridge returned an elegant letter of acceptance, including their special dietary requirements:

All that Mr Gillman dare venture on, in the way of eating, is a Lamb Chop—& you know, that my powers in the same line are not much more extensive (CL VI 942).

The Scott daughters had been brought up at the family home of

¹ Letter from Mrs Lockhart to Captain Sir Walter Scott published in the *East Kent Times*, 11 July, 1934 (quoted in part in footnote CL VI 942)

Abbotsford, and Scott's system of education for girls was the antithesis of the Gradgrind principle of memorizing 'facts alone'. In his biography of his father-in-law Lockhart sums up Scott's method, concluding:

He exercised the memory by selecting for tasks of recitation passages of popular verse the most likely to catch the fancy of children... He delighted to hear his daughters sing an old ditty, or one of his own framing; but, so the singer appeared to feel the spirit of her ballad, he was not at all critical of the technical execution.²

Not surprisingly Sophia grew up totally ignorant of prosody, and in an annotation to his last letter to her at the end of the holiday, Coleridge, at her request it would seem, carefully instructed her in scansion, choosing for illustration, by means of marked accents, lines from his own 'To a Cataract':

Unperishing youth	- - - - -
Thou leapest from forth	- - - - -
The Cell of thy ceaseless Nativity!	- - - / - - - / - - -
Never Mortal saw	- - - - -
The Cradle of the Strong One:	- - - / - - - / - - -
Never Mortal heard	- - - / - - - / - - -
The Gathering of his Voices—	- - - / - - - / - - -
The deep-mutter'd Charm of the Son of the Rock,	
Which he lisps evermore in his slumberless fountain!	
&c., &c.	(CL VI 945-6)

This long-forgotten 'fragment of an attempt at an English Pindaric', as Coleridge called it in a letter to Henry Nelson Coleridge (CL VI 948), appeared for the first time in the *Quarterly Review* the next year.

On this holiday Coleridge's intellectual activity revolved around reviewing the Logic on which he and his collaborator J H Green were endlessly engaged, while for holiday reading he tackled 'the four folios of Bingham's Antiquities of the Christian Church' which but served to confirm the truth of his Christian convictions. Yet he still had the insatiable curiosity to look into Jewish worship, and to this end he visited the newly dedicated Ramsgate Synagogue. Lockhart was away in town, but Coleridge invited the whole Scott clan to accompany him on an afternoon guided tour by the minister and a ceremonial evening service on the Friday. As he informed them by letter

I happen to be a favourite among the Descendants of Abraham: and Mr Montefiore, the Munificent Founder of this Synagogue, has expressed a strong Wish to be introduced to the Author of THE FRIEND (CL VI 943).

² Lockhart, John Gibson, *Life of Sir Walter Scott*, J M Dent, London, 1906, 189

As if these visits were not enough he also found time to see over the Mother Church of the Anglican Communion, Canterbury Cathedral.

Coleridge paid his visit to Canterbury, twenty miles away, ostensibly to visit Robert Southey's estranged younger brother Thomas, a half-pay naval officer, then living impoverished with his large and unprepossessing family³ in the Cathedral Precincts and no doubt trusting like another Canterbury optimist Mr Micawber that something would turn up. Tom had once been Southey's confidant during his pantisocratic phase and the source of much naval material for his *Life of Nelson*.

Coleridge felt the visit might benefit them both, for, as he related to Green he had been

Visiting & (I have reason to believe) comforting Southey's Brother, Captn. Thomas Southey, with his very large family—& the feelings I have left behind with them may perhaps be a means with God's influence, of making the SOUTHEY feel his unkind neglect of me—& God knows! It is wholly & exclusively from my persistent regard for *him & his* better Being, that I desire it—&c—&c— (CL VI 947)

The real human interest of Coleridge's visit lies perhaps in his contact with Miss Anne Scott, Sir Walter's niece, daughter of Scott's scapegrace brother Tom, whom Coleridge had met at the Lockharts, with whom she had been staying. By coincidence, he travelled with her by coach from Ramsgate to Canterbury and the sequel of this coach journey was a source of great embarrassment to them both. In a letter of apology to Coleridge a mortified Miss Scott wrote:

... In writing a hurried note to her [Mrs Lockhart] the evening I arrived here, I told her how delighted I had been with my good fortune in meeting with you, with perhaps more enthusiasm than people usually express themselves ... I said you had conversed on various subjects ... [and] that a good Woman, who I imagine kept lodgings, only was in the carriage. On her observing that a gipsy life after all was the pleasantest—you observed that it was a common opinion but it might easily be proved to be a fallacy, and entered into a most delightful conversation—naming the heads of it—which remains imprinted on my mind (CL VI 958*n*).

Seizing on what would seem to have been a playful observation between close relatives on Coleridge's conversational exuberance, Lockhart, made it the subject of a 'GOOD JOKE' at Coleridge's expense. There the matter might have rested but that Mrs Thomas Southey heard the jest and lost no time in telling

³ Robert Southey was to comment wryly upon his brother's children: 'the eldest has nothing winning, and the next two act upon my affections as the repulsive end of the magnet upon the needle' Simmons, Jack, *Southey*, Collins, London, 1945, 201

Coleridge who, somewhat miffed, conveyed to Mrs Southey that he was not amused.

In response to Miss Scott's effusive apologies, Coleridge chivalrously pardoned her, and in her defence made the following observation:

... Women are too veracious creatures, and set too little value on a good Joke—a certain degree of Obtuseness in this respect I have ever considered among the characteristic traits, nay, *charms*, of Womanhood . . .(CL VI 958)

In justification he explained how he had in the past 'laughed heartily at the simplicity, with which the whole *joke* of a tale, told only *as* a Joke, has been over-looked on the sudden moral feeling excited by the supposition of its actual occurrence.' This feminine virtue, as he saw it, was nowhere better exemplified than in 'an old friend', Dorothy Wordsworth, whom he introduced to Miss Scott as 'a Woman of Genius, as well as manifold acquirements; and but for the absorption of her whole Soul in her brother's fame and writings would, perhaps, in a different style have been as great a Poet as Himself'. Coleridge illustrated his earlier point:

Once, she being present, I told one of these good stories, the main drollery of which rests on their utter *unbelievability* as actual fact—viz—of a Surgeon, who having restored to life two or three persons who had attempted to hang or drown themselves; and having been afterwards importuned by them for Help and Maintenance on the plea, that having forced life upon them against their own will and wish, he was bound to support it; had resolved that he would never interfere in any such accidents without having first ascertained whether the individual wished it or no. On a summer day, while on a water-party, one of the rowers in some unaccountable way fell over-board and disappeared. But on his re-emersion the Surgeon caught hold of his Hair & lifting his head & chest above the water said—Now, my good Fellow! Did you really mean to drown yourself! What is your —own wish?—O, O—(sobbed out the man)—a sickly *Wife*—and seven small children! Ha! POOR Fellow! No wonder then!'—exclaimed the Surgeon, and instantly popped him under again.—The party were all on the brink of a loud Laugh, when Dorothy Wordsworth, with tears sparkling in her eyes, cried out—Bless me! But was not that very *inhuman!*—This stroke of exquisite simplicity & singleness of heart, made us almost roll off our chairs; but was there one of the Party, that did not love Dorothy the more for it?—I trust, not one.—(CL VI 959)

His letter concludes with the assurance that he had 'laughed as unfeignedly' as any of the 'jovial Hearers' at Lockhart's joke, and should not have noticed it

but that I thought my gallantry as a Man, or in words that better become both me and my Age, my courtesy as a gentleman called in question; and even for the example's sake did not choose, that the supposed excess of my intellectual powers should be made a palpable defect of good sense and good manners. (Ibid.)

We shall, alas, never know what Lockhart's 'GOOD JOKE' was. On the other hand we do know what Coleridge regarded as a really good joke. In a *Notebook* entry made on this holiday Coleridge recalls the one about the two Irishmen, fit for even the most refined sensibilities:

Dan Hennesay's story—that passing over Black Friars' whom should I see (coming from t'other end of the Bridge) but my old chum, Pat Mahoney—and at the same moment he saw me—We ran towards each, & when we met, just at the middle of the Bridge, by Jasus! It was neither of us.—(CN V 6712)

* * * * *

At the end of August 1837, Wordsworth, recently returned from a lengthy and stressful continental tour with Crabb Robinson, set off again from London on holiday, on this occasion for Broadstairs, accompanied by his beloved daughter Dora, who was in poor health at the time, and whose consultant in London had recommended a protracted stay in the south of England, preferably with sea air. It was for Dora's sake that Wordsworth undertook the trip though, as he wrote to his wife back in the Lake District, he wished he were 'quietly at Rydal'.⁴

The couple took the steamboat to Gravesend, and an omnibus from there to Chatham Docks, where they stayed with Wordsworth's cousin, Mrs Proctor Smith. After spending a few days at Chatham, Wordsworth continued his journey to Broadstairs without Dora who did not feel strong enough to make the trip. This left Wordsworth in a thoroughly foul mood for he would certainly not have gone down to Broadstairs had it not been for Dora's sake.

Wordsworth, it seems, was to stay in the watering-place with his new publisher Edward Moxon and his wife, the Lambs' adopted daughter Emma Isola. He had arranged to join at Canterbury the banker poet Samuel Rogers and his sister, who were travelling down to the coast in their own carriages, but at Chatham the first two stage-coaches were full, and by the time he reached Canterbury Rogers had left for the seaside. To Wordsworth's annoyance he had to stay overnight in the city, but he revisited the Cathedral, and 'if it had been only 2 miles instead of 4 to Lee Priory', he would have walked thither.⁵ This Gothic re-creation—regarded by Horace Walpole as superior even to

⁴ Wordsworth, William and Dorothy, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Later Years: 1835-40*, ed Alan G Hill, from the First Edition Edited by the Late Edward de Selincourt, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1981, VI, 441

⁵ Ibid., 449

Strawberry Hill—was the home of Captain Thomas Brydges-Barrett, son of the bibliographer Sir Egerton Brydges, and sister of Edward Quillinan's first wife, Jemima. Wordsworth and Mary had stayed there for five weeks in the spring of 1823,⁶ while Dorothy and Dora had stayed there with Edward Quillinan the following year, when Dora had fallen in love with Quillinan, and where Dorothy, like William the year before, had been so memorably enraptured by the nightingales.⁷

The next morning Wordsworth was called at four to take a coach to Ramsgate, where he hired a fly for Broadstairs, presenting himself at No. 5 Prospect Place between seven and eight a.m., all of which did nothing for his temper and set him back twelve shillings. Wordsworth's altercations with coachmen and innkeepers over their charges were the stuff of family legend.

Now sixty-seven, Wordsworth's own health was not robust, but it seems that at the start of his holiday he had only himself to blame for feeling out of sorts, as he observes in a letter to his wife and sister:

... I am well except the heat in the toe and something of numbness in my hands which I think is always worst after drinking a little, however little, more than usual. I feel strongly persuaded that I should do best to leave off fermented liquors altogether.⁸

The hospitable Rogers was a frequent visitor to Broadstairs, and well placed to conduct Wordsworth around the neighbourhood. There were excursions to the neighbouring attractions, but they were fair-weather excursionists, as Wordsworth implied in a letter to Dora:

This is a very pleasant, though not particularly amusing place; but the drives are agreeable; yesterday I went with Rogers to Margate and Kingsgate but it rained so we could not get out of the Carriage.⁹

Kingsgate, near Broadstairs, featured the preposterous pseudo-Gothic pile of the first Lord Holland, mercilessly satirised by the poet Gray.¹⁰ Though by then abandoned it continued to attract tourists.

Rogers' carriage, apparently, was not all it was cracked up to be, and Wordsworth developed an inflammation of the eye, attributing it somewhat ungraciously to 'having been struck by the coldness yesterday in Mr R's

⁶ *Ibid.*, (ed. De Selincourt), IV, Part I, 199: '... in an hour and a half we must leave our good friends here—this elegant Conventual Mansion, with its pictures and its books, and bid a farewell to its groves and nightingales, which this morning have been singing divinely—by the bye it has been so cold that they are silent during the season of darkness.' Letter from Wordsworth to John Kenyon, dated Lee Priory, 16 May [1823]

⁷ *Ibid.*, 265: 'I will not say a word of Lee and the nightingales—I was too sorry to leave them—and poor Doro could think of little but what she had left behind, for some miles of the journey.' Letter from Dorothy Wordsworth to Edward Quillinan, dated Clapton, 3 May 1824

⁸ *Ibid.*, Part II, 441

⁹ *Ibid.*, 450

¹⁰ 'On Lord Holland's Seat Near Margate, Kent'

carriage'.¹¹

Apart from its bracing air in August, which he regarded as 'full as nipping an air as in October with us',¹² Wordsworth does not record anything of significance about Broadstairs, unlike a visitor the following year, Charles Dickens, who immortalized what became his favourite resort in a sketch for *Household Words*, 'Our Watering Place'.¹³

Wordsworth spent just over a week at Broadstairs, visited Margate three times and Ramsgate once, but there is no comment about these resorts, other than a suggestion that Ramsgate would suit Dora better than Broadstairs being 'much more amusing on account of the size of the harbour, the fine quays or piers, and the multitude of vessels'.¹⁴ The only poetic thought expressed in his letters was the hope that Dora had seen 'from Chatham Docks the glorious sunset we had on Sunday evening'.¹⁵ On this holiday Wordsworth wrote letters to his wife, sister and daughter, but there is virtually nothing of any local or intellectual interest, and alongside the inimitable letters of Coleridge they are poor fare indeed.

Disappointingly he had nothing at all anecdotal to record about Rogers, who was a man of considerable social consequence, erudition, and good conversation. His table talk is not greatly inferior to that of Coleridge, and, like Falstaff—in one respect alone—he was not only witty in himself, but the cause that wit was in other men.

The gnomish Rogers had stayed in Margate as far back as 1795, where according to his own coy evidence, he seems, after his fashion, to have played the ladies' man—with limited, if any, success. However, he was made for *not* marrying, and in this happy state he lived until his ninety-third year, content with the company of many friends and his sister. 'It doesn't much signify whom one marries,' he used to say, 'for one is sure to find next morning that it was someone else.'¹⁶

At the end of his Broadstairs holiday Wordsworth came briefly to life, and had 'a delightful excursion with Mr Rogers to Dover'.¹⁷ What memories of previous visits must have been stirred—in particular, that of 1802 with Dorothy, when he crossed to Calais to meet Annette Vallon and their daughter Caroline. On his and Dorothy's return he had produced two patriotic sonnets—'Composed in the Valley Near Dover, on the Day of Landing' and 'September, 1802, Near Dover', the octave of the first reading:

Here on our native soil, we breathe once more
The cock that crows, the smoke that curls, that sound

¹¹ *Ibid*, 451

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ Dickens, Charles, *Household Words*, 2 August 1851

¹⁴ *Letters*, ed Hill, *The Later Years*, III, 452

¹⁵ *Letters*, ed De Selincourt, *Letters*, II, 892

¹⁶ Rogers, Samuel, *Recollections of the Table Talk of Samuel Rogers*, ed Rev Alexander Dyce, The Richards Press, London, 1962

¹⁷ Wordsworth, *Letters*, 895

Of bells—those boys who in that meadow-ground
 In white-sleeved shirts are playing, and the roar
 Of the waves breaking on the chalky shore,—
 All, all are English. Oft have I looked round
 With joy in Kent's green vales; but never found
 Myself so satisfied in heart before.

His revisiting of the town in 1837 would seem to have roused in him sufficient emotion to be recollected in tranquillity some six months later in the form of another sonnet, 'At Dover', to be first published in Moxon's deluxe collection of his sonnets the following year.¹⁸

From the Pier's head, musing and with increase
 Of wonder, I have watched this sea-side Town,
 Under the white cliff's battlemented crown,
 Hushed to a depth of more than Sabbath peace:
 The streets and quays are thronged, but why disown
 Their natural utterance? Whence this strange release
 From social noise—silence elsewhere unknown? —
 A Spirit whispered, 'Let all wonder cease;
 Ocean's o'erpowering murmurs have set free
 The sense from the pressure of life's common din;
 As the dread Voice that speaks from out the sea
 Of God's eternal Word, the Voice of Time
 Doth deaden, shocks of tumult, shrieks of crime,
 The shouts of folly, and the groans of sin.'¹⁹

Clearly Dover had impressed him once again, and at the end of 1837 he wrote to Dora who was spending the winter with Isabella Fenwick in that seaside town, expressing himself with an enthusiasm not shown on his holiday.

I rejoice that you have stood on Shakespeare's cliff—I did so a few weeks back. Blessed be his name. I wish a thousand places in England were called after him.²⁰

Wordsworth, however, had generally less than happy memories of the 1837 visit, as he wrote in his next letter to Dora.

... as to Dover not only the winds, but the saline air, the white cliffs and dazzling waters are all enemies that I am afraid of. I am not sure

¹⁸ 'There will be one add Son: which I composed yesterday for a conclusion to our Continental Tour in—20—' Letter to Crabb Robinson, February 1838. See also *n* 'At Dover (P.W. iii 198), incorrectly dated by de Selincourt to 1837' Wordsworth, *Letters VI. The Later Years*, Part III, 522 and *n*

¹⁹ Wordsworth was neither the first nor the last to write about Dover's cliffs and sea. Apart from Shakespeare, there are, among others, William Lisle Bowles' 'At Dover Cliffs (July 20, 1787)' and, of course, Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach'

²⁰ *Ibid*, 481

but my late attack was prepared by my residence at [?Broadstairs].²¹

It would seem that what holidaymakers came in droves to the coast of South-east England to enjoy had the contrary effect on Wordsworth.

After just over a week at the seaside the homesick Lakeland poet embarked by steamboat from Margate, looking forward with unconcealed impatience to his return to London, and to seeing Dora again before leaving for home.

In Coleridge and Wordsworth we find two distinct types of seaside holidaymaker. Coleridge was outgoing, ready to enlarge his circle of acquaintance; Wordsworth, on the other hand, was content with the company of those he knew, and appears not to have met anyone else worth mentioning. Coleridge shows real enthusiasm, as far as his frail body would allow, for new experiences, while Wordsworth puts his faith in trusted activities, sketchily described, and with a paucity of imagination. Coleridge ensures that his holiday, if not action-packed, is at least eventful, whereas Wordsworth's holiday passes without incident.

A measure of how much Coleridge enjoyed his Ramsgate holiday may be seen in a wish expressed to his nephew and son-in-law Henry Nelson Coleridge soon after his return, that 'for six or eight weeks a comfortable & well-situated House [in Ramsgate] could be procured for the whole *Kit* ...'²² — thereby expansively embracing even his long-suffering wife, then residing with his daughter. Wordsworth, on the other hand, could not shake off the chalk dust of Thanet under his feet quickly enough.

We may, I feel, reflect with profit on how far the mutual interests and concerns of the two ageing poets have diverged since those early communal years in the West of England.

²¹ Ibid., 489

²² Coleridge, *Letters*, VI, 948