

From

The Coleridge Bulletin

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge
New Series 30 (NS) Winter 2007

© 2007 Contributor all rights reserved

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

Averill Buchanan
reads
The Literary Protégées of the Lake Poets
(Ashgate, 2006)

by Dennis Low

ALTHOUGH the Lake Poets have been the focus of scholarly attention for decades and the women writers of the period firmly established, albeit more recently, in the literary landscape of Romanticism, it is rare to find the relationship between them the primary topic of a book. Such is the case with Dennis Low's *Literary Protégées of the Lake Poets*.

Taking the later careers of Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth as his starting point, Low examines the relationships between them and several young, aspiring women writers who sought their advice and support in the 1820s and 1830s, a period usually considered something of a no-man's-land between Romanticism and Victorianism. Along the way, he discusses the difficulties the older poets had adjusting to what they perceived as an era of cultural decline, and describes their reticence to cater to the tastes of a newly-emerging readership who seemed to thrive on 'innocuous' literary annuals and gift books such as the *Keepsake* and the *Literary Souvenir*, and whose principal contributors were women.

The opening chapter helpfully contextualises the literary scene of the 1820s and 1830s by characterising it as the 'era of accomplished women'. Low is particularly keen to defend the Lake Poets against charges of misogyny and makes the somewhat exaggerated (rather than contentious) claim that there was no greater supporter of women writers than Robert Southey. He tackles head-on Southey's infamous put-down to Charlotte Brontë, that 'Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be', but makes the equally exaggerated assertion that this sentence, 'taken out of context, has been one of the principal causes of Southey's critical neglect'—most Southey scholars would argue that charges of misogyny were the least of the Poet Laureate's problems. Contrary to the view advanced by some feminist critics,¹ Low argues that Southey was reluctant to recommend literature as a professional occupation to *any* aspiring writer, regardless of their gender.

To shore up his thesis, he singles out for more detailed discussion four women writers—Caroline Bowles (later Southey), Maria Gowen Brooks, Sara Coleridge, and Maria Jane Jewsbury—because they were 'quieter, more ordinary women', and because of what Low discerns as the 'intensity' of their relationship with their respective mentors. The prolific novelist, Anna Eliza Bray, is also briefly discussed, but is considered a writer who demands much more attention.

¹ For example, see Kathleen Jones, *A Passionate Sisterhood: The Sisters, Wives and Daughters of the Lake Poets* (London: Virago, 1998), and Judy Simons and Kate Fulbrook (eds), *Writing: a Woman's Business* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

What follows is a chapter on each of the four women which combines literary biography with close readings of their work. For those readers familiar with women's writing of the period, Low's treatment of Bowles, Coleridge and Jewsbury will not reveal much that is new. These three writers have already been the subjects of book-length studies in their own right (by Virginia Blain, Bradford Mudge, and Norma Clarke, for example). Indeed, it is hard to see evidence of the 3,000 manuscript sources which, it is claimed, have been used in the book, for Low relies heavily on the work of other scholars, quoting huge chunks from them and needlessly summarising afterwards.

This is balanced, however, by close readings of texts which are perhaps not so familiar, especially to those whose focus has been on the Lake Poets. In the case of Bowles, these texts include *Ellen Fitzarthur* (1820), *The Cat's Tail* (1831) (which gives Low an excuse to digress into a general discussion of poetry about cats) and her final work, *The Birth-Day* (1836), a poem which potentially challenges Wordsworth's *Prelude* as the first autobiographical poem. The chapter on Sara Coleridge examines her astonishingly precocious translations, *Account of the Abipones*, by Dobrizhoffer (1821) and *The Right Joyous and Pleasant History of the Feats, Gests, and Promesses of the Chevalier Bayard* (1825), as well as her children's verse, in particular the fairy-tale *Phantasmion* (1837). Jewsbury, who was mentored by Wordsworth, earned a living by contributing to the literary annuals and reviewing books, but Low looks most closely at the essay 'The Age of Books' from her miscellany, *Phantasmagoria* (1825), and 'A Farewell to the Muse', a poem which he reads in the context of the letter to Dora Wordsworth in which it was originally written.

The chapter on Maria Gowen Brooks provides the novelty in Low's book, and opens by tracing the connection between Brooks to the Modernist writer Djuna Barnes through Barnes's grandmother, Zadel Barnes Gustafson. Unlike the other chapters, this one is short on biographical context, and instead concentrates on usefully providing readers with samples from some of Brooks's neglected work, *Judith, Esther and Other Poems* (1820), and *Zóphiël or the Bride of Seven* (1833). The latter is a six-canto poem based on the biblical story of the book of Tobit (from the Apocrypha), and the chapter is mostly taken up with close readings of this fascinating poem.

Admirable as Low's book is—in its attention to the women writers mentored by the celebrated Lake Poets, in its consideration of the literary scene of 1820s and 1830s, and in its examination of the attitudes of the Lake Poets towards women writers—his attempt to cover so many aspects of this period means that little has been done in any depth. The book is also let down by its index.

Nevertheless, it makes a useful contribution to Ashgate's Nineteenth Century series. For those interested in the Lake Poets—mostly Southey as it turns out—this book may provide a new perspective on their later lives and work. Certainly Low seems to identify most closely with Southey, and it may have given the book a sharper focus if he had confined his discussion to

Southey's relationship with, and attitude towards, women writers. For those more concerned with the women who were the protégées of the Lake Poets, this book may stimulate fresh research into the lives and work of the less well-known writers discussed—Anna Eliza Bray and Maria Gowen Brooks.