

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>

Robin Schofield
reads
Sara Coleridge: *Collected Poems*
(Carcenet, 2007)

Edited with an Introduction by Peter Swaab

WHEN Sara Coleridge was born, in December 1802, her father wrote to Southey: ‘I had never thought of a Girl as a possible event—the word[s] child and man child were perfect Synonimes in my feelings—however I bore the sex with great Fortitude—and she shall be called Sara’ (CL II 902). Yet, from an early age, Sara far outshone her male siblings in intellectual power and capability; and ‘it was she, rather than either of her brothers, who was the direct heir to her father’s cerebral prowess’.¹ Sara’s intellectual brilliance was recognised in her lifetime, first as a translator, and then, above all, as editor of her father’s work, restoring and transforming his reputation, to lay decisively the foundations of STC’s influence on Victorian thought: so that his scattered and amorphous literary remains would become, in the words of Leslie Stephen, ‘the centre of intellectual light in England’.²

Despite Sara’s contemporary reputation for ‘genius and learning’,³ she was not known as a poet: her volume of children’s verse, 1834, and her romance fiction, *Phantasmion*, 1837, which includes over 30 poems, were published anonymously. Two years after Hartley’s death, at Sara’s prompting, and in collaboration with her, Derwent produced a two volume edition of their brother’s poems; but he did not do the same for Sara, despite some evidence that Sara had hoped that he might. Derwent’s failure to follow the edition of Hartley’s work with a posthumous collection of Sara’s poems is perhaps one of the main reasons why Sara’s quality as a poet has remained largely unknown for more than 150 years.

Peter Swaab’s edition, published in January 2007, is the first ever collection of Sara’s poetry: of the 185 poems it contains, 120 appear for the first time. Its publication is therefore a major contribution to the Coleridge family canon, and will prompt a rediscovery, or indeed discovery, of Sara as poet. Virginia Woolf, reviewing E. L. Griggs’s biography of Sara, described her as merely ‘a fertilizer, a burrowing, tunnelling reader, throwing up molehills’, who left only a fragment of self-deprecatory verse in tribute to her father.⁴ On the contrary, Sara is shown in her poems as a writer of formidable range and power, colourfully imaginative, vital, versatile and innovative. Sara’s tone ranges from energetic celebratory lyricism to a profound and passionate solemnity in the face of death and loss. Her poetic work is, in the words of

¹ Molly Lefebure, *The Bondage of Love* (London: Gollancz, 1986), p. 239.

² Quoted in Bradford Keyes Mudge, *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 3.

³ Henry Reed, 1852, quoted in Mudge, p. 178.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, ‘Sara Coleridge’, in *Death of The Moth and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 1961; first published 1942), p. 203.

Edmund Blunden, at the very least, ‘uncommonly good’.⁵

In compiling the *Collected Poems*, Peter Swaab went through the eleven boxes of Sara’s papers in the Coleridge collection of the Harry Ransome Humanities Research Centre at Austin, Texas. He has included all the ‘completed poems for non-juvenile readers’ which he could find, and some significant drafts and fragments. Swaab has also included those of Sara’s poems for children which express adult emotions of anxiety, resentment, guilt or depression. A striking example of such a poem is *Poppies*, in which Sara contrasts her son’s innocent enjoyment of the flowers’ colours –

Some pearly white, some dark as night,
Some red as cramasie –

with her adult need for their narcotic properties:

When poor Mama long restless lies,
She drinks the poppy’s juice;
That liquor soon can close her eyes,
And slumber soft produce.

O then my sweet, my happy boy
Will thank the poppy-flower,
Which brings the sleep to dear Mama,
At midnight’s darksome hour.

As Peter Swaab remarks in his Introduction, the tensions in the poem between ‘secretiveness’ and ‘confessional eagerness’ are particularly compelling; as is the contrast of the ‘sweet ... happy’ state of childhood with the adult sufferings of ‘midnight’s darksome hour’. There is a sense, too, in which the poem affords a cruel lesson, certainly not a ‘pretty’ one: the boy, by implication, is shown what his ‘bright’ and carefree childhood costs his ‘restless’, pain-wracked mother.⁶ The fluency of metrical form, reminiscent of *Lyrical Ballads*, and the use of the richly evocative ‘cramasie’ [crimson] exemplify the economy and suggestive power of Sara’s poetic style; and her ability to create subtle emotional effects by simple means. Derwent disapproved of Sara’s publication of the poem, however, feeling that its reference to opium would serve as a reminder of their father’s addiction.

While many of Sara’s poems for children are haunted by ‘the image of the melancholy mother’ (Mudge 67) others, less personal, are equally unsettling:

Shepherd Shepherd haste away!

⁵ Edmund Blunden, quoted in Peter Swaab, *Sara Coleridge, Collected Poems*, p. 1.

⁶ Sara’s book of children’s poems, 1834, in which *Poppies* was published, was entitled—at Henry Nelson Coleridge’s suggestion—*Pretty Lessons in Verse for Good Children*. *Poppies* is perhaps a deliberately ironic subversion of this imposed primness?

This is not a time to play;
 Let not buxom Amaryllis
 Hold you by a chain of lilies:
 For the youngest of your flock
 Underneath a frowning rock
 In the mire is sinking fast,
 There 'tis like to breathe its last,
 While the raven round it flies
 Ready to peck out its eyes.

This anticipatory glimpse of a Darwinian world seems ironically to recall Wordsworth's *The Last of The Flock*; though in Sara's poem, rather than political and economic injustice, a cruel and indifferent Nature, taking advantage of human weakness, is the agent of destruction.

Poems which Sara based on her own childhood memories, however, inhabit a completely different world, a Blakean paradise of energetic innocent delight:

A Wood full of harebells was close to their home
 It led to a river all broken with rocks:
 They loved o'er the thyme and the heather to roam
 'Mid branches and brambles they ruined their frocks.

Sara revels in the unfettered freedom of childhood, capturing the reckless vitality and joy with which she and her playmate, Edith Southey, would explore the woods near Greta Hall. In an unfinished autobiographical fragment started near the end of her life, Sara recalled how, as a child, she had revelled in 'great muscular activity', and how she and her companions would 'spend much of our summer-time in trees, greatly to the horror of ... some of our London visitors'.⁷ Such exuberant recollections energise her verse:

They frequently sat on the top of a Tree
 And climbed to the top of a very high beech
 They sought for the foxgloves and O with what glee
 They gathered the globe flowers that grew within reach!

Commenting on such poems, Hartley remarked: 'It is such an image of the tiny self—not perhaps as married life, and alas, sickness and sorrow have made her now, but as she was in those happy years when her idea was shaped in my heart.'⁸ The poignant contrast of the carefree child and the anxious and afflicted adult is a dominant image of the *Collected Poems* as a whole.

In editing her father's poems, Sara favoured a chronological arrangement, principally on the grounds that it revealed the poet's psychological

⁷ Sara Coleridge, *Autobiography*, quoted in Mudge, p. 266.

⁸ Hartley Coleridge, *Selected Letters*, ed. by E. L. and G. E. Griggs (Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 172.

development. Peter Swaab has followed the same editorial method, and has arranged Sara's poems into three sections, corresponding to the major stages of her life. In the first section, up to Sara's marriage in 1829, many of the poems are in effect verse epistles addressed to her cousin and fiancé, Henry Nelson Coleridge, through their protracted engagement; they are elegant, polished, affectionate, full of wit and good humour:

Each kiss he sends by kindness winning
She echoes by a kiss as fond;—
Nature prevents her from beginning,
But lets her sweetly correspond.

Sickness, by contrast, the first poem in the section 1829 – 1843, the years of her marriage, indicates a profound change in Sara's emotional tone and subject-matter. The poems of the 1830s record Sara's anguished struggles with illness, anxiety and depression; and her striving to attain in her writings restoration for the 'mind, by suffering tried', as she puts it in *Sickness*; suffering induced by the physical and psychological demands of marriage and motherhood. In *The Pair that will not meet* (the pair are 'Love' and 'Health') Sara writes of how the wonderful prospect Love's 'bounteous feast' yielded, in reality, a paralysis of misery and alienation:

Alas while Love this richest banquet brought
Youth stole away and Health with eye askance
Froze every glad desire and genial thought
And left me gazing in a joyless trance.

The bleakest of Sara's poems of this period express a deep and seemingly irredeemable sense of desolation:

But nought my waking hours can bless—
I strive to sweeten Sorrow's cup;
'Tis all in vain, for ne'ertheless
I find it dregged with bitterness,
When to my lips I lift it up.

Nonetheless, through the pain and suffering of the 1830s, living 'for sorrow not for happiness', as she puts it in another poem, Sara continued to write.

The novel *Phantasmion* belongs to these troubled years, and was written during one of Sara's most intense periods of illness, following a physical and psychological breakdown in October 1836, apparently precipitated by a visit to her relatives at Ottery St Mary (Mudge 89). The poems written to accompany this 'fairy-tale', as Sara termed it, explore the psychology of desire, jealousy and love. As a memorable 'song' about 'the blight of infidelity in love' shows, the *Phantasmion* poems are emotionally intense, and hauntingly powerful in creation

of mood:

The winds were whispering, the waters glistening,
A bay-tree shaded a sun-lit stream;
Blasts came blighting, the bay-tree smiting,
When leaf and flower, like a morning dream,
Vanished full suddenly.

The winds yet whisper, the waters glister,
And softly below the bay-tree glide;
Vain is their cherishing, for, slowly perishing,
It doth but cumber the river side,
Leafless in summer-time.

The chill desolate impact of desertion is expressed through visual imagery and simplicity of diction; and, above all, by the bleak anti-climactic shock of the short unrhymed line with which each verse concludes. Such effects characterise the maturity, assurance and technical accomplishment of the poems of *Phantasmion*.

A major poetic project of the late 1840s, which would appear to have had its narrative and thematic origins in *Phantasmion*, was the ballad *Howithorn*. Not mentioned by either E. L. Griggs or Bradford K. Mudge in their biographies, six passages are here recovered by Swaab for the first time, and included as an Appendix. What exists of this work, Swaab tells us, is ‘fragmentary’, ‘provisional’, sometimes barely decipherable, and the editorial task of piecing together a reading text (albeit incomplete) has been achieved with some difficulty. From the recovered text, it is clear that Sara uses the ballad form with an intellectual and imaginative boldness of design. An enchanted setting in the ‘North countrie’, and a narrative involving disguise, thwarted desire, deception and madness, would have been exploited to strong psychological effect, had the work been completed, as these striking verses suggest:

Those marriage bonds, that lately seemed,
When fruit of wedded love she dreamed,
Soft thornless wreaths with roses twined
Are now sharp swords with chains combined
Chains to enclose—a sword to sever
Her bleeding heart from joy forever.

She dreams that tightest cords are wound
Her galled and shuddering hands around
That thus she’s bound in the embrace
Of a stone statue face to face
Til she and it are one form grown
And she too slowly turns to stone.

A nightmare image of wreaths becoming swords; dreams of ‘tightest’ bondage; and gradual death by petrification exemplify Sara’s ability to depict an extremity of suffering which recalls, for example, the Shelley of *Prometheus Unbound*. However, the context of the torture Sara here portrays is not retribution for cosmic rebellion; but, more rawly intimate and disturbing, a woman’s dread of marrying a man she does not love. In November 1851, during her final illness, Sara expressed regret that she had devoted so much time to theology at the expense of her ballad. Though incomplete, this extraordinary fragment gives tantalising glimpses of a narrative and visionary energy recalling her father’s powers in *Christabel*: it is one of the real surprises and delights of the *Collected Poems*.

The energy of intellectual acuity, and a tough candid realism, combined with an elegiac, deeply passionate yearning in the face of ageing, loss and death, characterise the poems in the final section of the volume. These were written between Henry’s death in January 1843 and Sara’s own death in May 1852. It would seem that widowhood gave Sara her most productively fulfilled years, in which she achieved a practical and intellectual independence that was liberating and invigorating. This was the period of Sara’s friendship with leading figures such as Carlyle and Macaulay; in which she wrote professionally as a reviewer; and it was in the spring of 1843, shortly after Henry’s death, that she embarked on one of the most demanding and ambitious of her scholarly works: editing *Biographia Literaria*. These literary and intellectual concerns brought Sara into close engagement with the cultural milieu of her times, and committed her, as she put it, to the practical ‘business of life’ (Mudge 123). This is reflected in her poetic voice, in which the pervasive anxiety and anguish of the 1830s is replaced by a more decisive and confident tone. In a letter of 1847, Sara writes of having attained a ‘new [...] tough state of mind’ (Mudge 134). This quality is very much reflected in the poems of her later years; and, I would suggest, inform their distinctive power. There is none of the ‘underlying Tennysonian sadness’ which Jonathan Wordsworth discerned in Hartley’s poems;⁹ more the robust resilience to be found in those of her contemporary, Emily Bronte.

The yearning for lost love, and the irreparable changes wrought by ‘Time’ are dominant themes in this final section. *Dream-love* is among several poems of this period addressed to her friend, Aubrey de Vere, an Irish poet twelve years Sara’s junior. It has been suggested that, had Sara’s ‘temperament been different’, de Vere ‘might have become her lover’ (Mudge 150). In *Dream-love*, the affection remains Platonic, caught in ‘one brief moment’, the idealised ‘light and love’ of a ‘dream’. In *To A Friend who prayed, that my heart might still be young*, Sara acknowledges that to aspire to love ‘too youthful eager, yet too old’ will bring inevitable disappointment and pain. However, *On Reading my Father’s Youth and Age*, expresses the recognition that

To recompense for Spring and Summer gone

⁹ In his introduction to *Hartley Coleridge, Poems 1833* (Oxford: Woodstock, 1990), p. 4.

Sara has

More gained in pow'r than lost in loveliness;

and she is now content to accept the judgement of her 'gentle friends' as her 'soul's mirror'. In concluding that age has conferred a heightened perception of beauty, Sara presents a paradox, overturning a conventional moral precept:

And though this truth no genuine sage assails,
 'Less what we *have* than what we *are* avails',
 Herein *to have* is surely best by far—
 To—gaze—to love and care not what we *are*.

Sara expresses not so much a resigned acceptance of physical ageing, as the triumphant transcendence of self through a spiritual comprehension of love. Similarly, in *Time's Acquittal*, Sara finds recompense for her own lost 'radiance' in the 'blooming' beauty and health of her two surviving children.

Sara's most poignant, yet most 'tough', psychologically resilient response to her experience of loss, disappointment and death is the poem in which she engages with her father's *Work Without Hope*, the poem of which Virginia Woolf cited only the first two lines:

Father, no aramanths e'er shall wreath my brow, -
 Enough that round thy grave they flourish now:-
 But Love 'mid my young locks his roses braided,
 And what cared I for flow'rs of deeper bloom?
 Those too seemed deathless—here they never faded,
 But, drenched and shattered, dropped into the tomb.

In the elegiac solemnity of the verse's movement, coming to rest with awful finality on 'tomb', Sara shifts the focus from loss of creativity in her father's poem, to the inevitability of death in her own. In youth, the 'aramanths' of poetic achievement were of less interest to Sara than the 'flow'rs' of love; which, with cruel inevitability, are more absolutely and irrecoverably destroyed by Time:

Nought can for me those golden gleams renew,
 The roses of my shattered wreath repair.

Sara does not, however, accept the defeat implied in the concluding words of her father's poem: 'And Hope without an Object cannot live' (PW 606 14). By contrast, Sara confronts her loss with energy, practicality, even defiance:

Yet hope still lives, and oft, to objects fair
 In prospect pointing, bids me still pursue
 My humble tasks:—I list—but backward turn

Objects for ever lost struggling to discern.

The suffering self, practically and spiritually active, asserts the existence of 'Hope'. A challenge to continue in the creation of new meaning and identity in 'humble tasks' is accepted, and confers the spiritual strength to strive towards redemptive vision. The editorial 'tasks' with which Sara is engaged, moreover, will recreate both her father's cultural identity and help to forge her own distinctive intellectual character. The active verbs of Sara's concluding line—particularly the muscular 'struggling'—are 'tough', empowering and inspiring.

Sara Coleridge died on 3 May 1852, after a protracted battle with cancer. Little more than a month earlier, she wrote her last poem, *Doggerel Charm*, addressed to the 'little lump of malignity' which was killing her:

Crack away, tumour, I pray thee to crack,
Just now you seem to be on the right track
But if you're in the wrong, right let me be,
And promptly submitting to Heaven's decree.

The courageous grim humour of this final verse is unforgettable.

The *Collected Poems* vindicates Peter Swaab's view that Sara Coleridge's 'writing life should be seen as a success story'.¹⁰ However, the poems are an indication of the significance of Sara's achievement, not the full achievement itself. Sara was a committed and versatile writer, whose accomplishments range from children's verse and lyric poetry, through prose narrative, to critical, philosophical and theological writing. Jeffrey W. Barbeau, in a recent *Bulletin*, drew attention to Sara's independence of thought as a theologian, and indicated the importance of 'recovering Sara's largely unknown theological work'.¹¹ Swaab goes further and contends that, seen as a whole, Sara's work would confer on her 'a place alongside Mill and Newman as the ablest thinker of her day'.¹² The publication of the *Collected Poems* was long overdue: the follow-up volumes which Swaab is planning, a collection of Sara's literary criticism, and a new edition of *Phantasmion*, will be eagerly awaited.¹³

¹⁰ Peter Swaab, 'The Coleridge We Didn't Know', review in *Daily Telegraph*, 3/2/07.

¹¹ Jeffrey W. Barbeau, 'Sara Coleridge the Victorian Theologian: Between Newman's Tractarianism and Wesley's Methodism', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, New Series 28 (Winter 2006), 29-36, p. 36.

¹² Peter Swaab, 'The Coleridge We Didn't Know'.

¹³ Peter Swaab, interviewed on BBC Radio 4, *Weekend Woman's Hour*, 24/2/07.