

From

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reads

*The Journal of a Short Tour to the Lakes in 1822 by John May*

(Bookcase, 2007)

by Ian Broadway

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THOSE READERS of *The Coleridge Bulletin* who remember Chris Rubenstein know that literary criticism can still, even in today's highly-institutionalised state of affairs, be enriched by the contributions of amateur scholars. Like Rubenstein, Ian Broadway is not a literary critic either by profession or training, but he nevertheless possesses an enquiring and unconventional mind, and a love of ferreting out information that others have neglected. Here, the results are interesting in their own right and of great use to Romanticists, although not for the reason that the book's title might lead one to expect. John May Junior's actual Lake District tour journal is slight and uninteresting—the brief notes of a callow youth with little insight. Broadway, having found May's manuscript journal and purchased it, makes a creditable job of editing it. But far more rewarding is the introduction he appends to it, effectively, at over a hundred pages, a mini-biography of not only John Junior, but also, more significantly, of his father (also John). John Senior was a lifelong friend of Coleridge's elder brother George. A merchant, he came from a successful and extremely wealthy family business based on the importation of British good into Portugal. It was in Portugal in 1796 that May, who by this time was already corresponding with George Coleridge, met Robert Southey, there to visit his uncle Herbert Hill who was chaplain to the British factory in Oporto. The meeting led to May's becoming Southey's friend, confidante, and advisor for the next thirty years, lending him money, finding him rare books and organising his business affairs.

Broadway charts the history of this relationship in fascinating detail, showing at the same time just how intertwined the May, Southey and Coleridge families became. May helped James and Edward Coleridge, as well as George, financially and by assisting in recruiting pupils for their Ottery school among the sons of his banking associates. Later, when May's son John Junior was involved in a pupil rebellion at Eton which resulted in his expulsion, the Coleridge family took him into their care at Ottery, where James Duke, Francis, Edward and George all tutored him. John Junior's 1822 tour of the Lakes was undertaken as a rehabilitation exercise, during which he would meet and fall in love with Sara, the poet's daughter, an infatuation which she did not reciprocate. By this time, much of the May family wealth had been lost owing to Napoleon's invasion of Portugal. Attempts to transfer the business to Brazil incurred further losses and May, habitually generous to his literary friends, was forced to live in reduced circumstances in suburbia, abandoning his fine house in Richmond. John Junior, his fixation on Sara stymied by her marriage to her cousin, became a diligent parish priest.

Such are the outlines of the story Broadway tells. He makes illuminating use throughout of previously unseen May family papers, supplementing these with the published letters of Southey, Poole and Coleridge. The overall result is that he restores to our picture of Coleridge and his circle a hitherto missing dimension. Effectively, he changes our perspective not just on family matters, but also on the development of the political and literary discourse of Romanticism in the 1790s, as this extract shows:

In June, 1797, Robert Southey wrote to John May from Christchurch telling him that he had begun a tragedy on the martyrdom of Joan of Arc. His writing continued through the year and John visited him at Burton in the summer. In December, after the sale of his mother's Bristol house and before he moved to lodgings in Lambs Conduit Street, Southey stayed with John May at Richmond. They both took a great interest in humanitarian matters, John May foregoing sugar in the hope of discouraging the slave trade. John opened an office in London where he met beggars and learned their history. On December 24, 1797, Robert Southey wrote to his brother, Thomas, setting out, in some detail, a scheme he and John had discussed for the setting up of a charitable institution. It was to employ poor convalescent patients to become self-sufficient by gardening and making nets, baskets, matting and sheeting, any surplus being sold—'Six hours' labour is all that will be required from the strongest persons.'

At Bath, in the spring of 1798, Southey investigated an old charity for John and discovered that thirteen paupers were supported upon a foundation that had increased in value to £100,000, and that well-nigh £5000 a year went 'to no one knew who.' He wrote some verses entitled, 'The Complaints of the Poor', which he sent to John in July. In the same year *Joan of Arc* was published and he dispatched a copy to John from Bristol, writing on 5th May: 'You will I hope receive Joan of Arc on Tuesday morning'. The two volumes inscribed by hand: 'John May, 1798, from Robert Southey' are now in the library of the Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere. Later in the year in November, Southey accepted John's invitation to stay with him at Richmond, but declined a further offer of financial aid.

By using May family papers, and by demonstrating just how often May advised and financed the activities of his radical friends, Broadway gives us a fascinating close-up picture of the nature of their politics. It becomes even more apparent than previously, that these emerged not from any experience in solidarity with the labouring poor, but from a position analogous to that which, in the twentieth-century, Fabian socialists would occupy—a superior class-position from which they made social studies of the lives of working-class

people of which they were otherwise entirely ignorant. May, like the rich merchants and industrialists who financed Wordsworth and Coleridge, bankrolled Southey's idealistic radicalism, recognizing him as a fellow university-educated man of the mercantile class and, as such, an opponent of the inherited privilege and power of the landed classes and of the culture of corruption these classes maintained in order to buy support. It is fair to say that Broadway is not the smoothest of writers: sometimes paragraphs digress unexpectedly to matters that belong later in the book. Sometimes his thoughts about the Romantics' literary achievements verge on the hackneyed. Nevertheless, the book is original and valuable: by putting May at the centre of the picture, by following May's correspondence and his meetings, Broadway explicitly demonstrates what was always there in the documents but was always overlooked because scholars were searching for other things—he demonstrates that our understanding of Romanticism's development—its characteristic discourse as well as its social networks—was incomplete. In this respect his work is like that of those other amateur scholars of the milieu in which Romanticism arose—Stuart Andrews, Paul Cheshire and David Worthy. Like them, Broadway benefits from his non-institutionalised perspective and from an insistence on places, dates, times and people. The result is a rich piece of empirical scholarship that adds several pieces to the jigsaw that, as historians of the culture called Romanticism, we are all trying to complete.

Broadway's excellent contribution to Coleridge and Southey studies is available from Bookcase, 19 Castle St, Carlisle, CA7 8SY, tel. 01228 544560. [www.bookscumbria.com](http://www.bookscumbria.com).