

From

The Coleridge Bulletin

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge
New Series 32 (NS) Winter 2008

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

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reads
Joseph Cottle and the Romantics
(Redcliffe Press 2008)
by Basil Cottle

SINCE the 1930s, a handful of scholarly articles have appeared on Joseph Cottle, discussing his radical politics in the 1790s, his Baptist connections, and his unpublished letters to Wordsworth and Tom Poole. More recently, Lynda Pratt has presented Cottle's unpublished correspondence with Robert Southey, an important discussion of his much-maligned epic, *Alfred*, and a brilliant essay attacking the long-held opinion (originating with the review of Cottle's *Early Recollections* in the *Quarterly Review*, October 1837) that Cottle was fatally flawed due to his provincial boorishness and insensitivity to Coleridge's superior intellect and social class.¹ These articles have enlarged our understanding of Cottle and given us far more sympathetic insights into his life as a bookseller, man of faith, friend of poets and poet himself than appeared in a succession of reviews and reminiscences throughout the nineteenth century that culminated in the description of Cottle as a "moral and religious Philistine" in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Though recent scholars have done much to rehabilitate Cottle, only one scholar ever attempted a complete examination of his life and career. Now, through the generous assistance of the Cottle Trust, Basil Cottle's *Joseph Cottle and the Romantics*, after a delay of more than thirty years, is at last in print.

Basil Cottle (1917-1994) (no relation to Joseph) taught in the English Department at the University of Bristol from 1946 until 1980, when he retired as Reader in Medieval Studies. Cottle's scholarship, however, went far beyond the medieval period. He was also an accomplished historian of 18th and 19th century Bristol, an interest that led to his doctoral dissertation, "The Life (1770-1853), Writings and Literary Relationships of Joseph Cottle of Bristol" (University of Bristol, 1958). During the next sixteen years, Prof. Cottle continued to revise and expand his dissertation into the manuscript that formed the basis for *Joseph Cottle and the Romantics*.²

Prof. Cottle surveys the entirety of Cottle's life in Bristol, from his school days with John Henderson, his bookselling career in the 1790s in High Street

¹ See Alan Boehm, "Was Joseph Cottle a Liberal Bookseller?" *English Language Notes* 32 (1995): 32-37; Timothy Whelan, "Joseph Cottle the Baptist," *Charles Lamb Bulletin* 111 (2000): 96-108; Georges Lamoine, "Letters from Joseph Cottle to William Wordsworth: 1828-1850," *Ariel* 3 (1972): 84-102; Warren E. Gibbs, "Unpublished Letters Concerning Cottle's Coleridge," *PMLA* 49 (1934): 208-28; and Lynda Pratt, "The Media of Friends or Foes: Unpublished Letters from Joseph Cottle to Robert Southey, 1834-1837," *Modern Language Review* 98 (2003): 545-62; "The Sad Habits of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Unpublished Letters from Joseph Cottle to Robert Southey, 1813-1817," *Review of English Studies* 55 (2004): 75-90; "Anglo-Saxon Attitudes? Alfred the Great and the Romantic National Epic," in *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Donal Scragg and Carole Weinberg (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), pp. 138-56; "Let not Bristol be ashamed?": Coleridge's Afterlife in the *Early Recollections* of Joseph Cottle," in *Coleridge's Afterlives*, ed. James Vigus and Jane Wright (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), pp. 20-35.

² Prof. Cottle also published three short biographies—*Thomas Chatterton* (1963), *Robert Southey* (1980), and *Joseph Cottle* (1987)—for the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association.

and Wine Street, his years as arithmetic teacher in his sisters' school for young girls in Brunswick Square, his life as a "gentleman" sharing homes with his sisters in Dighton Street and Carleton Place, and his final years of considerable ease living with his last surviving sister, the wealthy Mrs. John Hare, at Firfield House, just outside of Bristol. Between 1795 and 1850, Cottle was also a prolific, though not particularly accomplished, poet. Prof. Cottle provides a complete chronicle of all his published works, including *Poems* (1795), *Malvern Hills* (1798, and later his enlarged 4th edition in 1829), his three epics—*Alfred* (1800), *The Fall of Cambria* (1808), *Messiah* (1815)—his *Psalms of David* (1801), *Expostulatory Epistle to Lord Byron* (1820), *Dartmoor, a Descriptive Poem* (1822), and the *Works of Chatterton* (1803) (in collaboration with Southey). Among Cottle's prose works are *Strictures on the Plymouth Antinomians* (1824), *On the Oreston Caves* (1830), *Essays in Reference to Socinianism* (1842), *The Heresiarch Church of Rome* (1845), and *Romanism, the True Antichrist* (1847).

The primary focus of Prof. Cottle's book, however, is not Joseph Cottle's published works, numerous (and in some cases, ponderous) though they may be. Instead, Prof. Cottle weaves his narrative around Cottle's working relationships and personal friendships with certain members of an important coterie of Romantic writers who, by a fortunate happenstance, came into his life in Bristol during late 1794 and early 1795, preaching Pantisocracy. The dominant figures initially were Lovell, Southey, Coleridge, and later Wordsworth; the lesser ones were Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Charles Lloyd, Sir Humphrey Davy, Thomas de Quincey, and, in 1836, Henry Crabb Robinson. Between 1796 and 1798, Cottle, besides assisting Coleridge and Southey with their lectures in 1795 and Coleridge's *Watchman* in 1796, was the central figure in arranging the publication of Coleridge's *Poems on Various Subjects* (with additions by Lamb and later by Lloyd), Southey's *Joan of Arc, Poems*, and *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Spain and Portugal*, Charles Fox's *Delights of Achmed Aredebeili*, Amos Cottle's translation of *The Edda of Saemund*, Lloyd's novel *Edmund Oliver*, and, of course, the first printed copies of *Lyrical Ballads*. After 1800, however, Cottle's involvement with these figures became more occasional and peripheral, even estranged in the case of Coleridge, though he remained a lifelong friend and correspondent of Southey. He re-entered their lives in 1837 with the publication of his controversial *Early Recollections: Chiefly Relating to the late Samuel Taylor Coleridge, during his Long Residence in Bristol*, revised and shortened in 1847 as *Reminiscences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey*. *Early Recollections* lit a firestorm of invectives against Cottle, aimed partially at the poor quality of the work itself but more importantly at the inclusion of scurrilous details about Coleridge's opium habit and his acceptance of a £300 gift from Thomas de Quincey. Even before 1837, however, Cottle's reputation, as Prof. Cottle makes clear, had already suffered in the eyes of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb, and Southey; after the publication of *Early Recollections*, Cottle's reputation was forever tarnished.

In piecing together Cottle's life, Basil Cottle was fortunate to have at his

disposal a significant body of letters that passed between the bookseller and his literary friends, as well as letters by Cottle to other individuals, such as the Baptist essayist and preacher, John Foster. During the 1950s, when he began his dissertation on Cottle, Prof. Cottle worked primarily from the original autographs of these letters, some of which he purchased for his own private collection (now at the Bristol University Library). Other letters, such as those in Cottle's Bristol Album (now at Cornell) and the remainder of Cottle's correspondence with Southey and Foster (both of which are at the Bristol Central Library), were meticulously transcribed by Prof. Cottle. He did not have the advantage at that time of consulting the completed volumes of Coleridge's letters and notebooks, Southey's letters, or the revisions to Wordsworth's letters made available through the work of E. L. Griggs, Kathleen Coburn, Kenneth Curry, or Mary Moorman. By the time he had completed his revisions in 1974, however, Prof. Cottle had incorporated the work of these scholars into his biography of Cottle, along with summaries and transcriptions of nearly all his correspondence, creating a seamless narrative of Cottle's life that is remarkable for its scope and attention to detail.

Prof. Cottle carefully sifts through Cottle's generally muddled memories and botched transcriptions of letters in *Early Recollections* and *Reminiscences*, creating an accurate chronology of Cottle's publishing activities and the responses he generated from his young and ambitious literary friends. Prof. Cottle sets the record straight on Cottle's true role in the first printing of *Lyrical Ballads*. He joins D. F. Foxon in believing that Cottle printed a few copies (those bearing the Bristol title page) and distributed them to his friends before selling the remaining copies to Arch in London, who actually published the volume with a second title page, this time with no mention of Cottle or Bristol. "At all events," Prof. Cottle remarks with a touch of humor in dismissing Cottle's primary claim to fame, Cottle "had sponsored the poems, and bought them, and printed them, and distributed twenty-five of them; I believe that he even appreciated them. This is evidently not quite the same as publishing them." Prof. Cottle also provides a careful examination of Cottle's actions and motives during Coleridge's visit to Bristol in 1813-14 (when Cottle claims he first became aware of Coleridge's opium addiction), his relationship with Southey during the latter's years of estrangement from Coleridge, and, most importantly, his motivations and machinations (involving Southey, Poole, and others) that led to the publication of the *Early Recollections*. Throughout the book, Prof. Cottle provides fascinating insights into Cottle's complex relationships with these leading Romantic figures, first as their printer/bookseller, then friend, confidant, and correspondent, until finally as the discredited manipulator of their letters and smug chronicler of trivialities and private financial transactions that Prof. Cottle and many others have believed were better left unsaid.

If few of Cottle's contemporaries were sympathetic (Henry Crabb Robinson, for one, did not think Cottle deserved the opprobrium heaped on

him by critics and friends of Coleridge and Southey in 1837), even fewer scholars of the Romantic period have been willing to grant much more than a passing desultory opinion on a man they considered vain, petty, obstinate, self-righteous, and pretentious, terms used even by Prof. Cottle. Concerning the *Early Recollections*, he writes: "Posterity will endorse most of these verdicts on a book which ought to have been interesting, moving, and indispensable. In compiling this biography, I myself have found Cottle's directions thoroughly benighting: a tattered tapestry of inventions, transpositions, exaggerations, truth suppressed, wrong dates, misplaced wit, and sheer bad English." Prof. Cottle nevertheless acknowledges that, despite its shortcomings, "we need the book, and it has been part of my task to wrench its statements nearer to the truth." Though he has been left "to sleep the sleep of the petty" (a judgment Prof. Cottle believes not altogether "unfair"), Prof. Cottle argues persuasively that Joseph Cottle's life is indeed "memorable," precisely because he did have relationships, whether good or bad, with these Romantic figures. "The more we know of him," Cottle writes, "the better we shall understand them, especially (I admit) in their relaxed moments."

Certain aspects of Cottle's life, however, are of interest to us today even apart from his relationships with these Romantic figures, and these, unfortunately, receive only passing attention from Prof. Cottle, such as the bookseller's lifelong devotion to his Calvinistic faith, shaped and nurtured among several Baptist and Independent congregations in Bristol; his work as a poet, religious writer, and amateur archeologist; and most importantly, his career as a bookseller. Though he notes the entries for Cottle, his mother, and his sisters in the Broadmead church books after 1801, Prof. Cottle makes no mention of Cottle's prior experience in the Baptist meeting in the Pithay, where his father served as a deacon (and where Josiah Wade, Coleridge's friend, later worshipped for several decades under the ministry of Thomas Roberts), nor Cottle's forty-year association with the Bristol Education Society, the promotional arm of the Bristol Baptist Academy, or his more than thirty-year attendance at Broadmead under the ministry of two of the leading Baptist ministers of his day, John Ryland, Jr., and Robert Hall, both of whom were personal friends. Though he later became an Independent, Cottle was always an ardent Calvinist, and his life (as several of his later prose works make evident) was devoted to his faith and his Nonconformity in a way that separates him quite distinctively from his more famous literary friends. His letters to and from John Foster, discussed at length by Prof. Cottle for the keen insights they reveal at times about both men's opinions on Coleridge and Southey, also provide rich material for examining the role Cottle's Calvinist faith played in his life, a course Prof. Cottle, however, does not pursue.

One of Prof. Cottle's final judgments of Cottle is that he lived a life "second-hand and second-rate"; this statement may explain why he devotes so little attention to Cottle's writing, whether poetry or prose, or his career as a bookseller. Though clearly not the intellectual equal of his Romantic friends,

Cottle's writings are not without significance, especially his *Poems* of 1795, which, in its treatment of war, slavery, famine and corrupt government, deserves more attention than it has received to date. Selections from this volume, which included his "Monody on John Henderson" (praised by Lamb) and "John the Baptist," appeared on several occasions in Benjamin Flower's politically radical *Cambridge Intelligencer* (as did Cottle's sentimental piece, "The Affectionate Heart"). Ann Yearsley, Bristol's "milk maid poet," upon receiving a copy of Cottle's *Poems*, dashed off a verse epistle to the author on 4 November 1796, revealing that Flower was not the only one to notice the radical politics embedded in Cottle's early poetry:

Advance! Appease with poesy the mind
 Inured to furious passion: deaf and blind!
 Scourge the dark Daemons who roll on the storm
 Inveloping Destruction's horrid form;
 Charm War accurst till as in magic bound
 The Monster drunk with slaughter gazes round
 Beholds relenting, thro' the blighted shade
 The Father dying on the breathless maid,
 Scatter the rules, the customs meant to bind
 With human chains, God's Principle of Mind:
 Do this, commit thy bold advent'rous flight
 Beyond the bigot's, or the tyrant's sight,
 Each wrongs humanity till being cease
 Each aids a warfare at the cost of PEACE
 Thee, Genius yet shall lead thro' paths unknown
 Reflection bright'ning! Make her bliss thy OWN!³

In 1795-96, Cottle was not only publisher and patron of some young and idealistic poets; he was also a kindred spirit, and Coleridge's later denial of such a political connection in his *Biographia Literaria*, aside from creating consternation and disappointment in Cottle's mind, masked what was an evident reality in Bristol during an extremely volatile period in British politics.

More importantly, Prof. Cottle does not adequately address the full extent of Cottle's activities as a bookseller and publisher.⁴ Though Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth were no doubt attracted to Cottle because of his politics and his generosity, they may also have been attracted to him because of his stature in Bristol as a bookseller. Though often ridiculed even in this regard by literary historians as being incompetent and ultimately a failure (he did incur excessive debts and his bookselling career was short), Cottle was by no means a minor figure as a bookseller in Bristol in the 1790s. In fact, between 1791 and 1802, his name appears as bookseller (generally in

³ Perceval Bequest, Fitzwilliam Library, Cambridge.

⁴ Neither does Sandra Spencer, who focuses exclusively on Cottle's publishing experiences with Wordsworth and Coleridge in "Joseph Cottle," in *The British Literary Book Trade, 1700-1820*, ed. James K. Bracken and Joel Silver (Detroit, Washington, D. C., London: Gale Research Inc., 1996), pp. 66-74.

collaboration with other booksellers, which was not uncommon at that time, especially for provincial booksellers) or printer (primarily during his partnership with Nathaniel Biggs) on 107 titles, more than any other bookseller or printer in Bristol.⁵ Among these titles are 13 works by Thomas Beddoes of the Pneumatic Institute at Bristol, 63 sermons and other works of a religious nature, almost exclusively by Baptists and a few Unitarians; 16 political pamphlets, all from a liberal Whig perspective of political reform, including four Fast Day sermons in February 1794 and 1795; and 26 literary works, among which are the early works of Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, Lamb, Lloyd, and Amos Cottle, the only publications that Prof. Cottle's discusses in depth.

In fact, had Cottle *never* been connected with these Romantic writers in the mid-1790s, he would still deserve recognition for his contribution as a bookseller in Bristol. During his eleven years in business, he appeared on four pamphlets by the politically radical Baptist minister at Newbury, James Bicheno; five works by Cottle's friend and later pastor, John Ryland of Broadmead; five works by John Evans, General Baptist minister in London and former student at Bristol Baptist Academy; three works by John Rippon, one of London's leading Baptist ministers; and works by other Baptist ministers, including William Steadman of Broughton, Isaiah Birt of Plymouth, Daniel Turner of Abingdon, and Joseph Hughes of Battersea, a former assistant to Ryland at Broadmead and close friend of Cottle. For many of these publications, Cottle joined with his fellow Baptist Isaac James (Robert Hall's brother-in-law) to form a Bristol connection in a conger dominated by Baptists, both Particular (Calvinist) and General (Unitarian), many of whom were also ministers as well as booksellers. At various times this conger included Joseph Johnson, H. D. Symonds, Thomas Vernor, John Knott, William Button, Timothy Thomas, and John Marsom, all in London, as well as John Horsey in Portsea and Benjamin Flower in Cambridge.⁶ Though a devoted Baptist at that time, Cottle was not parochial in his associations, for he also sold works by two Unitarian ministers, John Prior Estlin of Lewins's Mead in Bristol and David Jardine of Bath, as well as two Independent ministers in Bristol, John Hey and Samuel Lowell.

Cottle announced his retirement as a bookseller in *Bonner and Middleton's Bristol Journal* on 6 July 1799, despite his claim in the *Reminiscences* that he retired as a bookseller in the fall of 1798. Prof. Cottle describes Cottle's financial situation at that time as being "near to ruin," Cottle having incurred extensive losses from investments in the Kennet and Avon Canal. Prof. Cottle also suggests that Cottle's misdating is another instance of his poor memory, but it may be more than that. By the spring of 1798, Cottle had already joined with

⁵ By comparison, among the other Bristol booksellers and printers, Nathaniel Biggs appears on the most titles (72), followed by William Matthews (54), William Bulgin and Robert Rosser (39), Thomas Mills (32), William Browne (27), William Pine and Son (25), and William Bulgin and William Sheppard (22).

⁶ Cottle also joined at times with two of London's leading Independent booksellers, Thomas Conder and Thomas Williams.

the Bristol printer Nathaniel Biggs to form the firm of Biggs and Cottle (though he would later say he was merely the “inactive” partner⁷). When he turned his business over to his apprentice, a Mr. Carpenter, in the fall of 1799, his apprentice moved the remaining stock into the offices of Biggs and Cottle, where he operated as a bookseller. Prof. Cottle duly notes this, but he has almost nothing to say about Cottle’s work with Biggs thereafter. Between 1798 and 1802, Biggs and Cottle printed at least 34 titles, with six other titles bearing the signature “Biggs and Co.,” in which the “Co.” may have stood for “Company” or possibly “Cottle.” Whatever the case, Joseph Cottle was Biggs’ only partner at that time, and we can assume he was as involved in those six publications (which included the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Mary Robinson’s *Lyrical Tales*, Cottle’s own *Alfred*, and the second volume of the *Annual Anthology*) as he was in the other 34.⁸ Prof. Cottle gives us an extraordinarily detailed look at Cottle’s business dealings with his coterie of Romantic poets between 1795-98, but those publications form only a small part of Cottle’s bookselling and publishing career. A more complete account of Cottle’s activities as a bookseller and his importance in the history of the book trade in Bristol remains to be told.

Basil Cottle exposes with clarity and honesty every aspect of Cottle’s life that intersected with the bookseller’s notable literary friends, from the beginnings in late 1794 to Wordsworth’s death in 1850. Unfortunately, the overall impression left with the reader is not one that is very sympathetic toward Cottle. Though Joseph Cottle’s shortcomings as a biographer are legendary and extreme, in an age not known for strict fidelity among biographers, they were not complete anomalies. Yet Cottle, it seems, has borne the brunt of his age’s indiscretions more than any other figure, a condemnation not altogether fair. Despite his faults, Cottle did not always deserve the belittling, sarcastic, even contemptuous comments said of him at times by Coleridge, Lamb, and even Southey on a few occasions, all meticulously recorded by Prof. Cottle. If anything, Cottle’s Romantic friends were just as vain and petty at times as they made Cottle out to be. In fact, he rarely receives the credit he deserves for seeing the budding genius in these young poets, at a time when Coleridge claimed that “Wordsworth’s name is nothing” and “to a large number of persons mine *stinks*.”⁹ Cottle’s generosity has also been disparaged because of his later proclivity to highlight his every act of kindness in the *Early Recollections*.

The fact remains, however, as Crabb Robinson noted in his diary, Cottle may have been “one of the worst of poets” but he was, at the same time, “one of the kindest of men.” We see this in a letter by Cottle to Southey, dated 20 September 1795,¹⁰ in which he promises Southey that “my home shall always

⁷ Undated autobiographical notice in Cottle’s hand, now at the John Rylands Library, Eng. MS. 351, f. 49b.

⁸ Among their other printings was Humphrey Davy’s *Researches, Chemical and Philosophical Chiefly concerning Nitrous Oxide* (1800).

⁹ E. L. Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), vol. 1, p. 412

¹⁰ This letter, at the Fitzwilliam Library, Cambridge, was not used by Prof. Cottle.

be your home, and my purse shall be your purse.” “It will always be my desire,” he continues, linking his devout religious faith with what was, at that time, a daring aesthetic judgment, “to partake of and lessen every pang that may oppress you—in saying these things I speak from the integrity of my heart—I believe there are few persons from whom you would not feel reluctance in securing a favour—but may I not be one of those persons—my principles deprive me of ostentation in doing that which is but my duty and if even I feel my heart ardently desire any one gift of the Supreme Being in preference of another—it is, that *he* would *make me* the instrument of doing *his* good—To whom belongs the only merit.” Cottle has no reason to be disingenuous in his comments here, for Southey in September 1795 was hardly a household name. As Prof. Cottle demonstrates so well in this biography, Cottle kept his promise to Southey, remaining his friend and correspondent thereafter. As for being the “instrument of doing *his* good,” Cottle, at least in the eyes of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Southey and the other Romantics in his circle, may not always have succeeded. However, as Crabb Robinson rightly perceived, his intentions were well meant, even if, at times, somewhat misguided. Posterity has not been particularly kind to Joseph Cottle, but with the publication of *Joseph Cottle and the Romantics*, Basil Cottle has created a platform from which scholars can further enhance our understanding of and, in some cases, soften some lingering prejudices against a man whose contribution to literary history has yet to be fully explored.