

The Coleridge Bulletin

New Series 27, Summer 2006

© Contributor 2006, all rights reserved

From <http://www.friendsocoleridge.com>

David Jesson-Dibley
reads
Ancient Mariner
by Ken McGoogan
(Harper Flamingo Canada)

A FRIEND OF COLERIDGE or a subscriber to the Coleridge Bulletin, were he or she to fail to note the withholding of a definite article in the title of this book, might judge it to be in breach of the Trade Descriptions Act. Where is the literary commentary, where is the appraisal of our poet's masterpiece? Not here. But then, the author of this book does not claim to be adding to the corpus of studies of STC's poem.

A mariner, certainly, but McGoogan's subject, Samuel Hearne (1748-1792), is much more than that. Ancient? Hardly, though by 18th century estimations, Hearne may have been thought to be 'ancient' during his latter years of retirement in central London. And by then he would have had a haunting, grief-stricken tale to tell of a savage massacre, his young wife among the victims, when he was briefly absent from his post as governor of Fort Churchill on a trade mission for his employers, the Hudson Bay Company.

Mariner Hearne's nautical experience and his pioneering journeys overland stand in contrast to rather than comparison with the experiences of Coleridge's Mariner: he is more like one of a number of deck hands, who, with no apparent objective, sets off on a lengthy sea voyage and who disassociate themselves from the Mariner when he casually shoots an albatross (clubhouse boasting golfers should be wary of a future come-uppance) after their vessel had just happened to be 'the first that ever burst' into the vast expanses of the Southern Pacific Ocean.

Unlike Coleridge's Mariner, Hearne kept a diary of exploratory journeys inland from the Hudson Bay, subsequently published. It reveals him to be a discerning naturalist as well as an able and reliable trader with Inuits, Denes and other indigenous tribes; and with one of them, Matonabee, a formidable chieftain of the Denes, he sustained an enduring friendship grounded in mutual respect.

Making much use of the diary, though without citing sources of details from it, McGoogan covers the central period of Hearne's career interestingly enough, even though Friends of Coleridge may not be enthralled to follow this 'sailor who walked to the Arctic Ocean'

Elsewhere McGoogan places Hearne in his early years as an officer of the Royal Navy. Accompanied from his native town in Dorset, Beaminster, by his widowed mother, the boy of 12 travels to Portsmouth to be accepted as a presentee midshipman into the care of Commander Hood, later to become a renowned admiral. He is remembered into the 20th century by the war time exploits of the battle-cruiser named after him, HMS Hood, in which between the two Wars an uncle of mine happened to serve.

The author evokes with well resourced detail the 18th century naval port

where, aboard Commander Hood's sloop, Hearne's mother parts with her son; equally convincingly he evokes the routines, the physical constraints and ethos of life below deck, that are to shape the boy's naval career as he follows his Commander, an austere though humane officer, serving aboard four naval vessels between 1757 and 1762, earning promotion on the lower deck to quarter master's mate.

These years coincided with the Seven Years War against the French. Whether because he was weary of warfare at sea or the constraints of naval routines, brutally deterring punishments and narrow career structures, Hearne, a junior officer, chose to resign from the navy in 1763; much to Hood's regret, it seems, as recounted in what is presumably dialogue imagined by the author. A fine, upstanding young man, Hearne was by now sympathetic to the views of 18th century Enlightenment: notably his mind was influenced by Voltaire's humane scepticism. Voltaire's response in *Candide* to the execution of Admiral Byng on his quarter-deck (*pour encouragez les autres*) would have struck a chord with Hearne's view of naval punishment meted out as deterrence.

Friends of Coleridge, acquainted with his fraught ballad 'The Three Graves', may recall the poet's passing reference in his Preface to Bryan Edwards's account of the effects of 'Oby witchcraft on the Negroes in the West Indies and Hearne's deeply interesting anecdotes... on the imagination of the Copper Indians'. The source, familiar to Coleridge, is Hearne's record of his two notable expeditions (1770-1772) published as *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson Bay to the Northern Ocean*. To this literary reference, McGoogan adds, as a preface to his largely biographical life of Hearne, a chance meeting between Coleridge, the 18 year-old Christ's Hospital scholar, and the retired governor of an outpost of the Hudson Bay Company, mariner, explorer, trader, in front of the vast 17th century painting by Verrio of the founding of the Mathematical School. Aspiring youth and weather-beaten age – Hearne was in his mid-forties, yet near the end of his life – were introduced to each other by the Head of the Mathematical School, William Wales, a friend to both and a onetime mariner of some merit himself, having accompanied Captain James Cook on one of his pioneering voyages.

Apart from one brief return to the United Kingdom, Hearne served the Hudson Bay Company for 20 years, during which time, aged 31, he married a mixed-blood Cree teenage daughter of his lately deceased predecessor as governor, Moses Norton. Her tragic death with a number of Denes at what was to become known as Bloody Falls, occurred during Hearne's brief absence, navigating a vessel to Stornaway laden with traded furs.

Subsequently, after visiting the scene, Hearne wrote an impassioned eulogy of his murdered wife. The event was the haunting experience that McGoogan equates with the Ancient Mariner's tale of guilt and expiation, which he feels compelled to relate to 'one of three' and which he presumes Hearne recounted to young Coleridge on the occasion of their meeting, as he may have done to captivated customers in London's coffee houses.

His service to the Hudson Bay Company, ending a few years earlier, was the result of an 'invasion and capture' of the Company's Fort by three French sloops. It was a civilised takeover by a cultured French lieutenant, with whom Hearne established a lasting friendship.

The last section of McGoogan's biographical narration provides a social historian's account of the London to which Hearne returned for the last eight years of his life, passing his time in fashionable coffee houses, where, we are to understand, Hearne became acquainted with distinguished men of letters and politicians of his day.

Finally, McGoogan recounts his own experience, retracing Hearne's journeys in 2000 to the never-to-be discovered North West Passage and also visiting London in search of Hearne's last home, long since demolished, off Red Lion Square, and lastly the market town of Hearne's birth, Beaminster.

Some of STC's land-locked Friends, who may never have explored beyond the mole of Watchet harbour, may find McGoogan's account, combining historical contexts and biographical narrative, a bit heavy going but the voyage is worth the taking. It is supported by seven pages of bibliographical titles, confirming that this is a scholarly work. But the reader has to take the relevance of all these references for granted: they are not cited in the text. What the author does introduce, presumably from his own imagination, are two or three snatches of dialogue, which prompt momentary doubt, if not total suspension of disbelief: Friends of Coleridge would probably prefer to have the boundaries of literary genres of their reading, fact and fiction, kept distinct and apart.