Images of Friendship:
The Stowey Portraits by William Shuter

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IN JULY 2019 AN AUCTION HOUSE IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE advertised the sale of a small oil portrait of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, attributed to the artist William Shuter. It was a work of the most provincial kind and an auction estimate of £500 to £1,000 suggested there were no great hopes that it would attract significant interest.[1]

To anyone familiar with E.L. Griggs's edition of the poet's letters, however, the portrait was at once recognisable as the image used for the frontispiece of volume 1, published in 1956, where it was described as 'formerly in the possession of the late Miss A.A. King, a grand-niece of Thomas Poole'.[2] A key portrait of Coleridge, lost to view since it was photographed in 1948, had re-emerged, and on auction day it was bought by a private UK buyer at a hammer price of £51,000. It thus became the most expensive Coleridge portrait ever sold.[3]

William Shuter's origins are obscure. He may have been the son of, or otherwise related to, the landscape and flower painter of the same name who exhibited in London between 1774 and 1779.[4] William Shuter, as he emerged in the West Country during the 1790s, was clearly a portrait painter above all. He was reputedly the artist of two portraits of *c.* 1796 in Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum, and painted a portrait of Nathaniel Williams, 1796, now in the collections of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter.[5] Like other portraits certainly by Shuter, the Exeter work is painted on a small wooden panel. Like them also, its imperfect grasp of human proportion demonstrates the limitations of Shuter's simple though often characterful style.

Shuter's name would be forgotten along with those of countless provincial artists from 18th-century England but for the fact of his presence in West Somerset in about the period 1797-8. Joseph Cottle would later describe him as 'an artist then at Stowey',[6] but why he had chosen rural obscurity is not known, nor how long he remained. It seems clear only that during a period of probably no more than a few months Shuter painted at least seven portraits of those in the circle of Tom Poole, including Coleridge, Wordsworth and Poole himself. Joseph Cottle in 1795 had commissioned the Bristol artist Peter Vandyke to

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1 The portrait was lot 650 at a sale in Wotton Auction Rooms, Wotton-under-Edge, Gloucestershire, 23 July 2019: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-gloucestershire-49047752. The definitive study of Coleridge portraits is Morton D. Paley, *Portraits of Coleridge* (Oxford, 1999), to which grateful acknowledgement is made. The author is also grateful to Wotton Auction Rooms and for the help given at various times over many years by the Chester, King and Poole families.

2 CL I, frontispiece, p. xiii

3 An oil portrait of Coleridge, 1818-21, by Thomas Phillips RA was sold for £47,000 in 2001 (Christie's, London, sale 6523, lot 26).

4 Ellis Waterhouse, *The Dictionary of British 18th Century Painters in Oils and Crayons* (Woodbridge, 1981).

5 https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/view_as/grid/search/keyword:william-shuter

6 Joseph Cottle, *Reminiscences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey* (2nd ed., London, 1848) p. 180n.

commemorate Coleridge and Robert Southey in the famous paired portraits now in the National Portrait Gallery. The following year he commissioned drawings of both men from Robert Hancock, supplemented in 1798 by Hancock drawings of Wordsworth and Charles Lamb. It seems likely that it was in the same spirit of commemoration and friendship that Tom Poole inspired, and at least in part commissioned, the series of Shuter portraits.

By far the best-known portrait is of William Wordsworth. It is the earliest surviving image of the poet and is evidently referred to by Dorothy Wordsworth in her Alfoxden Journal. On 26 April 1798 she wrote: 'William went to have his picture taken. I walked with him. Dined at home. Coleridge and he drank tea.' A further entry on 6 May says: 'Expected the painter, and Coleridge.'[7] What seems to be implied is that Wordsworth, perhaps accompanied by Dorothy, walked from Alfoxden to have his portrait painted elsewhere, and that ten days later Shuter, accompanied by Coleridge, delivered the completed work.[8] Though there is no evidence, it would be tempting to believe that Tom Poole's 'great windy Parlour'[9] in Castle Street, Nether Stowey, served as the artist's studio for this and the other portraits painted by Shuter.

The Wordsworth portrait may have been commissioned by Joseph Cottle. If not, he was soon aware of it, and in a letter written to Cottle in late May Coleridge promised: 'The picture shall be sent'.[10] It descended in Cottle's family and later became a prized addition to the Wordsworth Collection at Cornell University.[11] It shows Wordsworth wearing a dark-coloured coat, into which he thrusts his left hand in a manner that Leigh Hunt would later describe as characteristic.[12] Wordsworth is seated on a wooden chair, evidently the same that appears in some of the other portraits. The significant success of Shuter's portrait can be judged by comparison with William Hazlitt's description of the poet as he remembered him from their first meeting a few weeks after the picture was completed:

> The next day Wordsworth arrived from Bristol at Coleridge's cottage. I think I see him now. He answered in some degree to his friend's description of him, but was more gaunt and Don Quixote-like. He was quaintly dressed (according to the *costume* of that unconstrained period) in a brown fustian jacket and striped pantaloons… There was a severe, worn pressure of thought about his temples, a fire in his eyes (as if he saw something in objects more than the outward appearance), an intense high narrow forehead, a Roman nose, cheeks furrowed by strong purpose and feeling, and a convulsive inclination to laughter about the

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7 Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, ed. Pamela Woof (Oxford, 2002), pp. 152-3.
8 Another interpretation of the entry for 6 May might be that Shuter had come to paint a portrait of Dorothy herself. If so, it has never come to light.
9 CL I 643.
10 Cottle, *op. cit.*, p. 180; CL I 412. Cottle footnotes Coleridge's words as follows: 'A portrait of Mr. Wordsworth, correctly and beautifully executed, by an artist then at Stowey; now in my possession.'
11 Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, ref. 4621.
12 Leigh Hunt, *Autobiography: With Reminiscences of Friends and Contemporaries* (London, 1850), vol. 2, p. 164.

mouth, a good deal at variance with the solemn, stately expression of the rest of his face.[13]

William Shuter, Portrait of William Wordsworth, 1798 (Image: Alamy)

Two other portraits, both signed 'W SHUTER 1798', are of John Chester (1764-1842) and his mother Elizabeth (née Dibble) (1740-1830), friends of Coleridge and Poole.[14] The portraits have evidently descended in the Chester

[13] William Hazlitt, *Selected Writings*, 'My First Acquaintance with Poets', ed. Ronald Blythe (Harmondsworth, 1970), pp. 58-9.

[14] The portraits remain in private hands. Photographs are in the Somerset Heritage Centre, Taunton, ref. A/BAU 1.

family since they were painted and so may have been directly commissioned. John was born at Dodington, a mile or so north-west of Nether Stowey, and came from a respectable family long-established in the area.

William Shuter, Portrait of John Chester, 1798 (Image: Friends of Coleridge)

His father had farmed land at Dodington as a tenant of the Marquis of Buckingham and his widowed mother came from Brompton Ralph, on the

eastern edge of the Brendon Hills.[15] John would later achieve prosperity from his interests in Cornish tin mining and other business ventures. But the time of his life was undoubtedly in the late 1790s when Coleridge arrived at Nether Stowey and John became his awed disciple. He accompanied Coleridge and the Wordsworths on their voyage to Germany in September 1798.

William Shuter, Portrait of Elizabeth Chester, 1798 (Image: Friends of Coleridge)

[15] Somerset Heritage Centre, refs D/P/b.ra 2/1/2 and D/P/dod 2/1/2; Berta Lawrence, *Coleridge and Wordsworth in Somerset* (Newton Abbot, 1970), pp. 135-40.

Shuter's portrait of Chester is technically one of his more successful and shows a man evidently handsome of face and amiable of disposition. If William Hazlitt's account of a walk to Lynton is an accurate record, however, the portrait tells only half the story. This is Hazlitt's mocking but affectionate account of that memorable day in 1798:

> We set off together on foot, Coleridge, John Chester, and I. This Chester was a native of Nether Stowey, one of those who were attracted to Coleridge's discourse as flies are to honey, or bees in swarming-time to the sound of a brass pan… He had on a brown cloth coat, boots, and corduroy breeches, was low in stature, bow-legged, had a drag in his walk like a drover, which he assisted by a hazel switch, and kept on a sort of trot by the side of Coleridge, like a running footman by a state coach, that he might not lose a syllable or sound that fell from Coleridge's lips. He told me his private opinion, that Coleridge was a wonderful man. He scarcely opened his lips, much less offered an opinion the whole way: yet of the three, had I to chuse during that journey, I would be John Chester. He afterwards followed Coleridge into Germany, where the Kantean philosophers were puzzled how to bring him under any of their categories. When he sat down at table with his idol, John's felicity was complete; Sir Walter Scott's, or Mr Blackwood's, when they sat down at the same table with the King, was not more so.[16]

The remaining Shuter portraits all seem to have a provenance that originated with Tom Poole. One is of the Revd John Poole (1771-1858), Tom's dear cousin and boyhood friend who lived at the large farmhouse called Marshmills in Over Stowey. John Poole was a man of high Tory opinions and was predictably scandalised when, in August 1794, he was first introduced to Coleridge and Southey during their walking tour in Somerset: 'Each of them was shamefully hot with Democratic rage as regards politics, and Infidel as to religion,' he wrote in his Latin journal. 'I was extremely indignant'.[17]

Shuter's portrait of Tom Poole himself, aged 31, is a lively, sensitive and convincing depiction of the man Coleridge had first met almost four years earlier and would revere as his friend and supporter for the rest of his life. Its companion portrait is of Poole's sister, Sarah (b. 1764), or Sally, of whom, it was said, he was 'both fond and proud'.[18] In 1796 she married Thomas King, a Bristol merchant, at Nether Stowey, and in 1799 their son Richard Jenkins Poole King, later the inheritor of the Coleridge portrait, was born in Bedminster. Tom Poole might have wished that his brother Richard's image could also have been added to the gallery. But in May 1798, just as Wordsworth's portrait was being brought to completion and *Lyrical Ballads* was taking shape, Richard died at Sherborne of a malignant fever. 'In all your

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[16] Hazlitt, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-61. John Chester was still living (by then at Redruth in Cornwall) when Hazlitt's account was published in 1823.

[17] Tom Mayberry, *Coleridge and Wordsworth in the West Country* (Stroud, 1992), p. 40. The plate given there reproduces a later copy of Shuter's portrait. The original is in private ownership.

[18] Mrs Henry Sandford, *Thomas Poole and his Friends* (London, 1888), vol. 1, pp. 10-11, 15.

Sorrows as in your joys,' Coleridge wrote to his friend on 20 May, 'I am, indeed, my dearest Poole, a true & faithful Sharer! May God bless & comfort you all!'[19]

William Shuter, Portrait of Thomas Poole, *c.* 1798 (Image: Author)

It seems certain that Shuter's rediscovered portrait of Coleridge, aged 25, was Tom Poole's own commission and represented for him an expression of the most important friendship of his life. In historical terms, it is also, with

[19] Sandford, *op. cit.*, p. 267; CL I 411. The portraits of Tom and Sarah Poole are in private ownership.

Shuter's Wordsworth portrait, outstandingly the artist's most significant work, capturing the moment when some of Coleridge's greatest creative achievements were being brought to fulfilment.

William Shuter, portrait of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *c.* 1798 (Image: Author)

It is the third surviving portrait of the poet, and the only one that was created in Somerset. It is not a glamorous image and opinion has long been divided on whether it is a truthful one. It shows the slightly protruding teeth and parted lips which many people noted as striking aspects of Coleridge's appearance.[20] But it also presents him as innocent-faced and unworldly, the child of the West

[20] Dorothy thought he had 'not very good teeth' (EY 189).

Country fields, not as the brilliant speaker who had so recently roused or enraged the citizens of Bristol. The only sign of his intellectual credentials is provided by the book he holds in his right hand. It bears the label 'Hartley' in honour of his new hero the philosopher David Hartley (1705–1757), after whom Coleridge named his first son. William Hazlitt, whose visual memory was evidently so acute, remembered Coleridge at their first meeting that year in the following terms:

> At a distance … there was to me a strange wildness in his aspect, a dusky obscurity, and I thought him pitted with smallpox. His complexion was at that time clear, and even bright … His forehead was broad and high, light as if built of ivory, with large projecting eyebrows, and his eyes rolling beneath them like a sea with darkened lustre … His mouth was gross, voluptuous, open, eloquent; his chin good-humoured and round; but his nose, the rudder of the face, the index of the will, was small, feeble, nothing—like what he has done.'[21]

Shuter's portrait may to some extent be said to accord with Hazlitt's description, but the 'strange wildness' seems entirely absent. When an image was sought as the basis for the frontispiece to a new edition of Coleridge's poems (London: Moxon, 1852), his daughter Sara was distressed that Shuter's portrait was chosen.[22] In her draft preface to the edition she wrote:

> It is difficult indeed to conceive, that the countenance of him who wrote "The Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan" displayed so little of fire and energy as appears in this representation; or that the lover of long pedestrian excursions and mountain rambles, with health as yet unbroken, was so wanting in the outward air of vigour.

To her brother Derwent she expressed herself more forcibly: 'I can hardly bear to let *that* face be stamped upon the youthful STC without any kind of protest'.[23]

Given the evident fidelity of Shuter's portraits of Wordsworth, Tom Poole and others, it would perhaps be too easy to discount the Coleridge portrait as a misleading failure. It may, rather, represent an important version of the truth. Whereas Tom Poole kept the Shuter portrait until he died, he gave away his copy of the much more celebrated 'German picture' of 1798-9 in which, as E H Coleridge put it, Coleridge 'figured as the creature & apostle of Romance'. Poole viewed that picture more sceptically and thought it showed Coleridge 'in the drawing-room, and not in the vales of Quantock, or on the top of Skiddaw'.[24]

We might wish that William Shuter had been a more sophisticated artist with a surer and more consistent technical grasp. We can be grateful at least

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[21] Hazlitt, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-7.
[22] It was engraved by W. Holl from one of three oil copies made of the original. One of those copies is now in Coleridge Cottage, Nether Stowey. Paley, *op. cit.*, p. 130-1.
[23] Paley, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
[24] Paley, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-4.

that his presence in Stowey preserved for us so memorable a gallery of Tom Poole's friends and companions at a moment whose full significance they can scarcely have guessed.

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Description of the Coleridge Portrait

Title: 'The Portrait of Samuel Taylor Coleridge' [inscribed on reverse]

Artist: William Shuter [signed 'SHUTER' in right-hand corner]

Date: Undated. Presumed to be 1798

Medium: Oil on wood panel

Size: 28 cm x 24.5 cm

Provenance: 1) Thomas Poole (1766–1837) of Nether Stowey, Somerset, until Poole's death; 2) Poole's nephew Richard Jenkins Poole King (1799–1874) of Kensington House, Brislington, Bristol, until his death; 3) King's daughter Miss Alice Annie King (1860–1949) of Newark Park, Ozleworth, Wotton-under-Edge, Gloucestershire, until her death; 4) Mr and Mrs Cartwright; 5) sold at auction to a private UK buyer, 2019.

Inscriptions: The reverse of the painting has two inscriptions:

[1] 'The Portrait of
Samuel Taylor Coleridge

It was taken at Nether Stowey, the latter end of the last Century, and came into my possession in 1837 on the death of my Uncle Thomas Poole Esqr.

When his Son Derwent Coleridge came to Bristol about twenty years ago to see for the first time the Portrait by Alston, He said, He liked my portrait much the best and He pronounced it to be the best Likeness of his Father extant.[25]

Richard Poole King
Kensington House, Brislington, Bristol,
5 May 1873'

[2] 'Nov 30 1948 – Mr. Clements who photographed the portrait of S.T. Coleridge found the name of the painter SHUTER in the right hand corner.'

[25] The reference is to Washington Allston's portrait of Coleridge, 1814, in the copy made for Tom Poole by the Bristol artist James Curnock. The portrait was acquired by the Friends of Coleridge for Coleridge Cottage, Nether Stowey, in 1996.