Coleridge at the Trial of William Frend: April and May 1793

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WHEN COLERIDGE FIRST MET SOUTHEY IN OXFORD as he began his walking tour of Wales in June 1794, they would have been very glad to find that they had both supported Frend during his trial at Cambridge—unmentioned in their subsequent correspondence. Southey had walked over from Oxford with Edmund Seward to visit Seward's brother, and looked on his walking as a republican and democratic act, as did Coleridge his Welsh tour with Joseph Hucks. Frend, a Fellow at Jesus, was on trial for suggesting how republican and anti-republican views might be reconciled in a pamphlet entitled *Peace and Union Recommended to the Associated Bodies of Republicans and Anti-republicans*. But in the opinion of some other Fellows of Jesus he had 'the evil intent of prejudicing the Clergy in the eyes of the Laity, of degrading in the publick esteem the doctrines and rites of the Established Church, and of disturbing the harmony of society.'[1] The signatories of the resolution who declared that he should be brought to account because his principles were 'calculated to mislead the minds of young men entrusted to our care' included Mr Costabodie, whose lectures on Euclid earned him no more than a costive pun from Coleridge, but also Mr Plampin, his tutor, who in the next year, 1794, and presumably in spite of their taking opposite sides at this trial, would treat him 'with exceeding and most delicate kindness' on his return from the army.[2]

The sixty short pages of Frend's pamphlet read today either as a work of great prescience, or suggest the seemingly inevitable course of legal, parliamentary and ecclesiastical reform. Frend writes, among other matters, of the absurdities of rotten boroughs (without using that term), of abbreviating parliamentary terms from seven to three years, of educating the poor, of amending the Poor Laws, of initiating the secret ballot (again not using the term), of simplifying legal processes, of repealing the Test Acts, of extending the franchise, and of abolishing the game laws. All these matters would eventually be addressed—the Test Acts in 1829, and many of the other matters in the Reform Acts of the 1830s—a long wait which, because he didn't die until 1841, Frend would live to see at the age of 75.

Frend seeks peace and union between republican and anti-republicans, between the radical and the conservative forces of his day: his immediate plea is against extremism on both sides so as 'to preserve us from falling into all the horrours attendant on civil commotions' (5). There was a real sense that there might be a revolution in England catalysed by that in France: it is, for example, a drone note in Southey's letters: '…when the storm bursts on England', he

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[1] Frend's pamphlet, *Peace and Union Recommended to the Associated Bodies of Republicans and Anti-republicans* (Cambridge 1793) is available online at<https://archive.org/details/peaceandunionre00frengoog>

[2] CL I 80

writes to Grosvenor Bedford, 'you may perhaps follow us to America.'[3] Thus, says Frend, on the one hand the murderous progress of the French Revolution must stagger the 'boldest republican' in his wish to overthrow the constitution, and on other 'he must be a weak or a wicked man, who, lost in admiration of the beauties of a voluptuous and effeminate court, forgets the miseries of the poor subjects, whose bodies were bowed down to the grindstone for its support…' (6). These liberal sentiments, so congenial to the modern mind, focus on social problems still with us in other forms. Speaking of the poor laws, he writes of 'the class just above poverty, just above want themselves, but by means of rates, reduced to a worse situation than those who receive their benefactions…'—in other words, the poverty trap (29-30). What he says of the game laws is comparable to our debates about drugs laws:

> Our game laws are … calculated only to produce a spirit of aristocratick insolence in the higher, and that of meanness, pilfering, and plunder in the lowest classes. It has been urged in their defence, that if it were not for them, we should be over-run with poachers; but in fact, as high duties made the smugglers, the game laws make the poachers. Destroy the game laws entirely, let game be sold freely in our markets, and the poachers, as the smugglers have done lately in many places, will return to the habits of useful industry.(27-8)

This was a live debate in the Coleridge family in the early 1800s—George taking the Tory anti-smuggling side, and Coleridge, with his mother, taking the people's.[4] Frend is consistently on the side of the poor, and the pamphlet ends with an appendix entitled 'The Effect of War on the Poor' which discusses a twenty-five per cent tax on earnings imposed in the light of the imminent war with France. It is an appendix because he only added the material after a discussion with some market women on his way to overseeing the second edition of his work: 'We are to be sconced a fourth part of our labour. What is all this for?' (65). On their simple words he builds a powerful rhetorical conclusion, beginning with an echo of the opening lines of Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, which to an attentive reader might suggest that we have as much to lose through a revolution as we lost through the fall:

> Oh! that I had the warning voice of an antient prophet, that I might penetrate into the inmost recesses of palaces, and appall the haranguers of senates! I would use no other language than that of the poor market women … We are sconced three-pence in the shilling, the fourth part of our labour, for what? … Is there a man, that could stand out against this eloquence? Yes; thousands … They know not what a cottage is; they know not how the poor live, how they make up their scanty meal … And should any grave courtier, pitying the distresses of the poor, be

[3] RS-LoL 96
[4] Cf. *TT* 24 July 1830

> anxious to relieve them, say to him, There is an easy method: let the first magistrate, the peers, the representatives of the people, the rich men of the nation, all who are for war, be sconced one fourth part of their annual income to defray the expence of it. Let them be the first sufferers; let the burden fall on them, not on the poor. Alass! my poor countrymen, how many years calamity awaits you, before a single dish or a glass of wine will be withdrawn from the tables of opulence!
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> At this moment, perhaps, the decree is gone forth for war. Let others talk of glory; let others celebrate the heroes, who are to deluge the world with blood: the words of the poor market women will still resound in my ears, We are sconced three-pence in the shilling, one fourth part of our labour. For what? (66-7)

That brief question ends the pamphlet, and coupled to the demotic 'sconced' clearly made a widespread impression at the time, for Daniel Stuart remembered it some 45 years later.[5] It also has a tragic modern echo: *Za chto?* (*For what?*) is the title of a book detailing the Russian involvement in Chechnya, by Anna Politkovskaya, murdered in 2006.[6]

How is all this 'calculated to mislead the minds of young men' entrusted to the care of the Fellows? They objected to nothing yet quoted, so in effect not to the main drive of the pamphlet, the idea of which is that reform, in the state and in the church, will prevent revolution, summarized towards the end when Frend asserts that had the French monarchy given up some useless prerogatives, the nobility consented to relinquish their feudal, out-dated privileges, and the clergy submitted to be citizens, they might have all kept their stations. But behind those common-sense words lies the angrier concept of 'aristocratick insolence', a phrase that Frend uses a couple of times and of which he accuses the clergy in respect of the laity, 'distinguished both by dress and manners from each other. The clergy every where affect a superiority, and in consequence claim to be indulged with peculiar power and privileges:'

> Hence ecclesiastical courts, ecclesiastical ranks and titles, ecclesiastical dress, all repugnant to the spirit of Christianity. The laity, like brute beasts, sit tamely under this usurpation: a man, if a priest or minister enters, is not a master of his own house, he must not thank God for the blessings of providence at his own table, he cannot pledge his faith to a lovely woman without the interference of the priest, his offspring must be sprinkled by sacred hands, and at death he is not committed to his long home without another spiritual incantation… (54-5).[7]

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[5] *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol X, New Series, 1838, p.124; hereafter 'Stuart'. Online at< https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=inu.30000080772837&view=1up&seq=136>

[6] LRB, (vol 32, no.12, 24 June 2010, p.15) from a review by Tony Wood.

[7] Cf. CL I 625, for a possible reverberation of 'sprinkled'. Coleridge is debating with himself, and his family, as to whether Derwent, gravely ill, should be christened: 'Shall I suffer the Toad of Priesthood to spurt out his foul juice in this Babe's face? Shall I suffer him to see grave countenances & hear grave accents, while his face is sprinkled, & while the fat paw of Parson crosses his Forehead? Shall I be grave myself, & tell a lie to him?

This is part of one of two principal passages to which the Fellows took exception. Frend's dissenting voice is clear—not least in his objections to ecclesiastical dress, which form part of that tradition, possibly originating in Fox's proud wearing of leather breeches. It is a kind of class warfare, in which he draws a parallel between the aristocrats' treatment of the poor with the clergy's treatment of the laity, arising from what he calls 'the love of pre-eminence … a fatal hindrance to the progress of christianity' (54). The people are not free, because all the stages of their life—marriage, birth and death—are overseen by the incantations of the priest. They lord it over 'a degraded laity' and it is to help redress this inequality that Frend seeks the education of the poor.

It is evident why the intellectual aristocrats of Jesus might find this hard to take. But their more substantial objections were to such statements as, in respect of the liturgy, 'it is very far from that standard of purity in its arrangement, language, or doctrine, which is required from such composition', (41) and in respect of the development of Christian theology, 'the great body of christians has imbibed, and glories in imbibing from the schools of Athens, opinions no where sanctioned in scripture, and has associated the worship of created beings, with that of the god and father of Jesus Christ' (52). These are the opinions of a fundamental Unitarian, who directed his warning voice not only at the Church of England, but to the dissenting congregations as well. We can now see why the Fellows thought that Frend had intended to prejudice the Clergy in the eyes of the Laity, degrade the doctrines and rites of the Established Church, and thus, they supposed, disturb the order and harmony of society.

Frend's trial became a *cause celèbre* for two reasons: many of the undergraduates shared his opinions more or less; but the nature of the trial and its preliminary procedures were often farcically unjust. Having heard of the meeting which had passed the Resolutions against him, Frend requested a copy; he was refused by the chairman, The Rev Dr Kipling, on the feeble pretence he didn't have a copy. Frend asked how he could obtain a copy. From the Vice-Chancellor he was told, who first failed to answer his request, and then declared he didn't have the authority to pass on the Resolutions. The pettiness of the preliminaries can be seen in this extract from Henry Gunning's account:

> A little before twelve o'clock on April 3, 1793, he was called into the parlour by the porter, and the Master, in the presence of ten Fellows, showing him a pamphlet, asked him whether he avowed himself the author of it. He told the Master that, by the advice of a civilian, he requested the accusation, if he was accused of anything, in writing. The Master told him that there was no accusation, and that he should only ask him this question. He replied, "that by the advice of a civilian, he

must beg leave to waive any answer to this question." [8]

The Fellows refuse to set down the Resolutions, Frend refuses to acknowledge authorship—and later the jurisdiction of the court. The proceedings proved lengthy: Gunning records that 'The Court sat on May the 3d, the 10th, llth, 13th, 17th, 24th, 28th, and 30th, for four or five hours each day' (Gu 276). Gunning thought little of Frend's pamphlet: 'he spoke of the solemn rites and ceremonies of our Church with a flippancy and irreverence very offensive to serious persons, and which his best friends would find it difficult to defend' (Gu 276); but he thought even less of the procedures by which Frend was tried. The Promoter, or prosecutor, was incompetent, but the Vice-Chancellor was determined to convict, and thus over-ruled all objections raised by Frend—'otherwise the blunders of the Promoter were so gross and so palpable, that he must have been defeated' (Gu 272). A court deeply biased against him, in conjunction with admiration for his opinons, put all the undergraduates on Frend's side. Capable of powerful rhetorical flourishes, he was also the master of minutiae, and ably conducted his own defence, though his satirical asides, applauded by the undergraduates, will not have finally helped his case.

Party feeling ran high, and Isaac Milner, the Vice-Chancellor felt moved to address the question of the fairnesss of the court in his long closing speech, referring to

> the noisy and tumultuous irregularities of conduct by which the proceedings on some of the former court-days had been interrupted. He informed them, that their passions and affections had been founded upon some vague ideas that the accused person had been persecuted. It was necessary to advertise them of their danger, when this country had just escaped an alarming crisis, and every attempt to publish libellous attacks on the Constitution and Government was called a species of persecution, and contrary to the imprescriptible rights of man…
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> (Gu 271).

The alarming crisis was a potential invasion by France, who in early 1793 had declared war on Britain and on the Netherlands—which they had invaded—but subsequently were defeated by the Austrians at Liège. Milner attacks the presumptions of the radicals in that phrase 'the imprescriptible rights of man', a direct reference to and contradiction of Tom Paine's assertions in *The Rights of Man*. It is unlikely that Milner's words palliated the feeling of injustice that permeated the court-room, for most of those present would have enjoyed Frend's final demonstration of his contempt for the court when, after conviction, he was required to recant:

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[8] *Remiscences of the University, Town and County of Cambridge, from the year of 1780,* by the late Henry Gunning, MA, in two vols, Vol 1, second edition, (London, 1855) p.259; hereafter 'Gu'.
Online at <https://archive.org/details/reminiscencesofu0102gunn>

> Mr. Frend began to read the recantation, and comment upon it, when the Vice-Chancellor called out, with much vehemence, "Order! Order! the Court must not be trifled with any longer." He then adjourned the Court to the 30th of May. The form of recantation was then delivered to Mr. Frend, and he was asked whether he would subscribe to it, to which he answered, "That he would sooner cut off his hand than sign it."
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> (Gu 269)

That principled hyperbole brings us to Coleridge's involvement in the trial. At the heart of the story is a man with a missing hand, clapping. Probably because he could follow the intricacies of the trial better than other undergraduates, 'it had been previously agreed that Coleridge should be most violent in opposition to the Vice-Chancellor…'. Gillman takes up the story, telling us that the trial was going against Frend, when something said in his favour made Coleridge clap:

> The Proctor in a loud voice demanded who had committed this indecorum. Silence ensued. The Proctor in an elevated tone, said to a young man sitting near Coleridge, "'Twas you, sir!" The reply was as prompt as the accusation; for, immediately holding out the stump of his right arm, it appeared that he had lost his hand,—"I would, sir," said he, "that I had the power."[9]

Laughter all round. After the court rose, Coleridge went to the Proctor and admitted his offence, so that 'no innocent person should incur blame'—that was the sort of man he was, says Gillman. The Proctor, Farish or Parish, told Coleridge that he knew it was him, but had selected the one-handed man to prevent Coleridge being punished. The unanswered question is why the Proctor, of all people, would want to exculpate the ring-leader of noisy undergraduates defying the authority of the court. That everyone comes out of it well is a neat piece of story-telling, and it is corroborated by Daniel Stuart's account of visiting Cambridge with Coleridge in 1812, when the handless man brandishes a hook. Both versions stem from Coleridge himself. The one account that doesn't is Gunning's, who also gives the fall-guy a name, Charnock, of Clare Hall. Coleridge saw that the Proctor was coming for him, and

> turned round to the person who was standing behind him, and made an offer of changing places, which was gladly accepted by the unsuspecting man. Coleridge immediately retreated, and mixing with the crowd, entirely escaped suspicion. This conduct on the part of Coleridge, was severely censured by the Undergraduates, as it was quite clear that, to

[9] *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, James Gillman, London (1838), p.55.
Online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/8957/8957-h/8957-h.htm>

> escape punishment himself, he would have subjected an innocent man to rustication or expulsion.' (Gu 273)

Peer pressure thus forced him to own up. Gunning was admitted to Christ's College in 1784, and remained there all his life. His account reads as if he were a witness to the trial, and he records its development in detail, so there are good reasons to accept his version. His *Reminiscences*… were published soon after his death; a second edition was published a couple of years later when the unnamed editor received a corrective from an unnamed correspondent, asserting that Charnock colluded with Coleridge, agreeing 'to bear the brunt of the affray'. But not many people knew of this arrangement, so that Coleridge's reputation was impugned. The correspondent adds that Coleridge 'not unfrequently alluded to the transaction' and always insisted that the suggestion proceeded from Charnock. That version of the story minimized Coleridge's responsibility—he could barely even be charged with collusion (Gu 275).

But the 'always' is not borne out by the records: the collusion is not mentioned either by Gillman or Stuart, though both agree that the Proctor deliberately sought the wrong man. The question that these differing accounts ask is about the underlying nature of Coleridge's actions. Richard Holmes sees a distinctive pattern 'of extravagant behaviour, followed by remorseful confession …' which pursued him through life.[10] That implies a certain guilelessness, but if he was impetuous, he was also shrewd or, as we might say, manipulative. The long gestation of the clapping tale is example of his ability to modify a story, as he would his enlistment, removing all the thorns as he goes, and producing a perfect-smelling rose. What might have begun as a cowardly or manipulative act concludes—if we take Gillman's as the final version—with a story of his own boldness and the Proctor's altruism: nobody comes out of it badly. The Highgate version is particularly subtle because Coleridge cannot even be accused of collusion—he just sat there while the Proctor deliberately picked the wrong man: it is the satisfactory refinement of a story that has its rough edges in the other versions.[11]

The lack of early versions suggests that Coleridge was not proud of this event, and for quite a while he suppressed it in his memory. He never mentions it in his notes or letters, and all the published versions appear after his death. But he is a confessional man and a confessional poet, writing in a post-Puritan tradition, wanting to tell the truth—in Arthur Miller's memorable words, he is a man who wants to be fully known; but the truths he had to tell were not always heaven-descended, and thus were censored by his ideas of moral propriety;[12] there is a division in his works between those designed for publication, and those written privately—between, to take a classic example, *A Letter to*—— and *Dejection: an Ode*. The completed publication of the notebooks has highlighted

[10] EV 48-9

[11] In Stuart's version, there is no confession to the Proctor afterwards, though in all other respects it conforms to Gillman's.

[12] James Vigus commented: 'Hence the tortuousness of "On the Communication of Truth" at the start of *The Friend*, and his persistent anxiety about 'arming fools with fire'.

this division. If a work or poem escapes his ethical trawl-net, such as *The Pains of Sleep* or *Kubla Khan*, Coleridge disclaims it as peculiarly his, throwing it back into the wide sea of human consciousness. Post-facto disclaimers or revisions served his purpose for earlier poems, but in later, and perhaps more controlled poems, the matched forces of confession and suppression were part of his creative process, producing works in which the suppressive re-shapes the confessional, obscuring its raw and original nature: *The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-tree, The Pang More Sharp than All*, *Work without Hope* are all examples of poems in which risky private emotions are the mysterious smile on a public face, behind which Coleridge himself largely disappears.[13] This unwillingness to offend public opinion is evident at all levels of his life: politically, for instance, in his refusal to offer his friend Thelwall a home in Nether Stowey; intellectually, in his endless hedging of the question of plenary inspiration in his aptly titled *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*.[14] The result is that readers of his works often don't quite know where they are, or what position Coleridge is really taking: who could summarize the intentions of *The Friend* or who remember, unless they had deliberately asked themselves the question, which side he takes on Catholic emancipation, the original question that *On the Constitution of Church and State* was intended to answer? Where is he? That is a question we could ask of much of his work, as well as his life.

The fact is that, despite a few apparent close shaves, Coleridge never got himself into real trouble, though harbouring what look like some extreme opinions. One wonders how he managed it, when several of his peers didn't. Was it his quick wit and boyish exuberance—qualities that saved him from the blockheads and brickbats of Bristol? Was it moral cowardice, or the shrewdness of the survivor? A subtle mix of all such qualities, most probably. He admits, for example, to his hedging his conventional bets in such early comments as 'No! tho' I am not an *Alderman*, I have yet *prudence* enough to *respect* that *gluttony of Faith* waggishly yclept Orthodoxy' (CL I 20). Daniel Stuart put a sceptical slant on the 'shrewdness' another writer found in Coleridge: suggesting that it referred 'to Coleridge's request for fifty pounds, his preparatory flattery to extravagance, and my weakness in so often complying with such requests' (Stuart 126).

Coleridge straddled every fence he could find. Although he and Frend appeared to stand on common ground in that court room in Cambridge, they were two very different types of men. Frend had much more to lose, both professionally and socially, but he not only declared his principles, he did so with a relentless rhetoric, refusing to recant or repent, wilfully pulling the pillars down around him. Coleridge cheered and clapped, but as the pillars fell,

[13] Cf. Tim Fulford's remark, that 'the author is unimagineable by the reader as a figure beyond his texts'. 'Paradise Rewritten? Coleridge's *The Blossoming of the Solitary Date-tree*', *The Wordsworth Circle* (Vol.24, no. 2, 1993) pp. 84-91; p.86.

[14] The cautiousness of this work stems from his fear of offending the orthodox tenet of Biblical inerrancy, a doctrine central to the Anglicans and Evangelicals alike. He says his title originates from reading Carlyle's translation of Goethe's *Confessions of a Fair Saint*, but given the long and complex history behind the word 'confessions' (Augustine and Rousseau on one side, De Quincey and Lamb on the other) we should remember that it is an assertion of truth partially masked in the guise of weakness.

he disappeared out of the back door, or as Gunning says, 'immediately retreated, and mixing with the crowd, entirely escaped suspicion.' Whatever the precise facts, there is something not quite bold, not quite honest in passing the buck—Frend would not have done so—and the one thing that Coleridge does in all the accounts is pass the buck, even, in some accounts, to the extent of asserting that the collusion was Charnock's idea. He had something to be ashamed of, just as he had something to be ashamed of in joining the dragoons, a shame sufficient to make him refuse recognition to a fellow Ottregian in a Reading street.[15] It was only when this soul-stifling shame could be resolved into a story that cast all the players in a good light, when the confessional was modified by select suppression, that he thought this story, or any story, fit for circulation.[16]

[15] CL I 72, fn. 2

[16] Other sources:
Paul Zall, 'The Trials of William Frend', *The Wordsworth Circle* XLV 3 (Summer 2014) p.216 ff
Valentine Le Grice, 'College Reminiscences of Mr. Coleridge,' *Gentleman's Magazine* Dec. 1834, p. 606.
Online <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=inu.30000080772902&view=1up&seq=630>
Cobbett's Complete Collection of State Trials, Vol 22, London 1817, page or column 523 ff. Some 200 pages representing an enormous effort on Frend's part to overturn his conviction, which failed. The proceedings demonstrate the significance of the pamphlet at the time.
John Beverley – *TheTrial of William Frend, M.A. and Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge. In the Vice-Chancellor's Court. For Writing and Publishing a Pamphlet, Intitled Peace and Union* (Cambridge: F. Hodson, 1793)
Online: <https://archive.org/stream/trialofwilliamfr00beveiala#page/n1/mode/2up>