Thomas Manning and the Coleridge circle

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THOMAS MANNING (1772-1840) IS KNOWN AS A FRIEND OF CHARLES LAMB, as a mathematician, Sinologist, and traveller. Manning met Coleridge just six weeks or so after he met Lamb, in the winter of 1799-1800, and Coleridge was often mentioned in letters between Lamb and Manning. There are no extant letters between Manning and Coleridge, and their relationship seems to have been more along the lines of acquaintanceship than friendship. Indeed, their acquaintance was interrupted for over 15 years, between 1802, when Manning left England for France to study Chinese, and late 1817, when he returned from China.[1] Nevertheless, that two such exceptional characters knew one another is reason enough to be curious about their interactions; and then there is their mutual influence and friendship with Lamb.

This paper highlights the extent to which Coleridge figured in Lamb's early letters to Manning throughout 1800, and suggests that he was pertinent to Lamb's response to the *Lyrical Ballads*. It also suggests that Coleridge's wide-ranging intellectual interests might help us better understand the nature of Manning's research, including the reasons for his interest in Chinese. It is hoped that further research on Manning will deepen our appreciation of his involvement in the Coleridge circle, shedding more light on the nature of his own thinking: a subject about which he maintained an air of privacy, if not outright secrecy, in his dealings with friends and the wider public.[2]

Considering the centrality of Asiatic studies to Manning's career, one might expect to find evidence that his researches helped shape Coleridge's thinking with regard to Asia. However, there appears to be little evidence of any direct influence, although there is certainly a good deal to be said about the ways in which Lamb responded to Manning's Chinese odyssey.[3] At present the published research on Manning remains relatively slight, but it is growing rapidly, thanks in no small part to the recent re-discovery of a large amount of Manning's archive, now held by the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland.[4] That archive has been digitized and is freely available online via the Society's Digital Library.[5]

The origins of Manning's connection to the Coleridge circle can be traced to 1798, in what some might consider inauspicious circumstances: through Charles Lloyd. Manning became Lloyd's private tutor in mathematics when the

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1 For the only spell during this time that Manning was in England - 1805 and early 1806 - Coleridge was in the Mediterranean.

2 This paper is related to the author's ongoing doctoral research.

3 For example, Felicity James, "Thomas Manning, Charles Lamb, and Oriental encounters", *Poetica*, Vol. 76 (2011), 21-35; Peter Kitson, *Forging Romantic China: Sino-British Cultural Exchange 1760–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 169-178; and David Higgins, *Romantic Englishness: local, national, and global selves, 1780-1850* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 146-156.

4 See Lawrence Wang-Chi Wong, "'We are as babies under nurses': Thomas Manning (1772–1840) and Sino-British Relations in the Early Nineteenth Century", *Journal of Translation Studies* 1(1) (2017, New Series), 85–136; Edward Weech, "'All the beauties of the road': Thomas Manning's Romantic Visions, from the Lakes to Tibet, 1799-1812", *The Charles Lamb Bulletin* (Spring 2018, New Series No 167), 7-17.

5 For further details visit http://royalasiaticcollections.org/thomas-manning-archive/.

latter enrolled for his brief stint at Caius College in August 1798. Manning was a gifted mathematician, having published *An introduction to arithmetic and algebra* in two volumes in 1796 and 1798; and after leaving Caius in 1795, he supported himself in Cambridge by taking on students. The second son of Rev William Manning, the progressively-minded Rector of Diss in Norfolk, Manning was from a genteel background, but had refused to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles and was therefore unable to take his degree. His time at Cambridge coincided with that of Coleridge, and while there is no evidence they were acquainted at this time, they had similar interests, encompassing maths and Greek, as well as rational Dissent, notably Quakerism and Unitarianism.

By background, intellect, education, and political and religious inclination, Manning was well-suited to befriending Lloyd, Coleridge, and of course Lamb, to whom Lloyd introduced him in Cambridge during the first week of December 1799. Upon his return to London, Lamb wrote to Manning, beginning a correspondence that would continue for the rest of his life. Manning's very first letter to Lamb offered feedback on his tragedy *John Woodvil* (then under its first title of *Pride's Cure*), sharing observations developed in league with Lloyd's wife, Sophia. Manning promised to visit Lamb in London, a promise kept towards the end of January, 1800.

It was during this stay that Manning first met Coleridge. On January 23rd, Lamb wrote to Coleridge: "I expect Manning of Cambridge in town to-night—will you fulfil your promise of meeting him at my house? He is a man of a thousand."[6] The meeting seemed to go well: Lamb informed Manning that Coleridge "conceived a most high […] opinion of you, most illustrious Archimedes".[7] For his part, Manning claimed he was "dazzled" by Coleridge.[8] Like everyone else, Manning was susceptible to the powers of Coleridge's conversation, writing to Robert Lloyd that meeting Coleridge was "a great gratification to me. I think him a man of very splendid abilities and animated feelings."[9]

Charles Lloyd's novel *Edmund Oliver* was published shortly before Lloyd met Manning. Its critical standing has been heavily influenced by Coleridge's opprobrium, but on its own terms *Edmund Oliver* is an effective and sophisticated philosophical novel, which indicates that Lloyd, for all his faults, was not without literary talent. It is also clear that he and Manning forged a genuine and lasting friendship. Nevertheless, Manning admitted that "there is not that complete identity of sympathy between me & L[loyd] as to make me blind to his faults,"[10] and notable among these was a propensity for gossip. This was evidenced in the episode where Lloyd had told Lamb that George Caldwell had been told by Coleridge that he had no engagements with the press:

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6 E.V. Lucas ed., *The works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, VI (London: Methuen, 1905), 154.
7 Winifred Courtney, *Young Charles Lamb* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 252.
8 Frederick L. Beaty ed., *The Lloyd-Manning letters* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1957), 41.
9 E.V. Lucas ed., *Charles Lamb and the Lloyds* (London: Smith, Elder, 1898), 110.
10 Gertrude Anderson ed., *The letters of Thomas Manning to Charles Lamb* (London: Secker, 1925), 28.

> You recollect, I suppose the story about Coleridge's humming Caldwell of Jesus College concerning his newspaper engagements—well, it is turned out to be all a mistake—Caldwell has never imputed any such declaration to Coleridge—'twould waste both your time & my own to explain such nonsense.[11]

Already, Lamb was guiltily aware that Charles and Sophia Lloyd were being crowded out of his friendship with Manning. "They are my oldest friends; but ever the new friend driveth out the old, as the ballad sings!"[12] Meanwhile, one senses that Lamb was trying to engage Manning as an ally in his efforts to respond to the radical body of literary work emanating from the Lakes. For the poems of the *Lyrical Ballads*, both the first volume of 1798 and especially the second of 1800, marked a departure from poetic convention.

In one of his first letters to Manning (28 December 1799), Lamb alluded to Wordsworth's poem "The Idiot Boy", from the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, in a reference to Manning's amusing talent for pulling faces:

> Do your night parties still flourish? And do you continue to bewilder your company with your thousand faces running through all the keys of idiotism (like Lloyd over his perpetual harpsichord), from the smile and the glimmer of half-sense and quarter-sense to the grin and hanging lip of Betty Foy's own Johnny?[13]

It was satirical—if not profane—for Lamb to invoke Wordsworth's poem in this manner. The theme continued. In April 1800, Lamb informed Manning, "Coleridge has left us, to go into the north, on a visit to his god Wordsworth."[14] In August, Lamb wrote to ask Coleridge for a copy of Wordsworth's verse play *The Borderers*, "for I have got Manning with me, and should like to read it *with him* […] Manning has read it, so has Lloyd, and all Lloyd's family".[15] In November, Lamb began a letter to Manning with a long hoax pretending he was off to visit Charles and Sophia Lloyd in the Lake District: "I need not describe to you the expectations which such an one as myself, pent up all my life in a dirty city, have formed of a tour of the Lakes. Consider Grasmere! Ambleside! Wordsworth! Coleridge!"[16] Finally, in December, Lamb sent Manning all of his letters from Coleridge, followed by more in February from Coleridge and Wordsworth. "In Coleridge's letters you will find a good deal of amusement, to see genuine talent struggling against a pompous display of it".[17]

By bringing Manning up to speed in this way, Lamb ensured he had an independent, informed, critical friend with whom he could speak honestly about work like the *Lyrical Ballads*. It was of course not easy to speak freely in

[11] Anderson, 32-33.
[12] Lucas, *Works*, VI, 159.
[13] Anderson, 23.
[14] Lucas, *Works*, VI, 160.
[15] Lucas, *Works*, VI, 184.
[16] Lucas, *Works*, VI, 194.
[17] Lucas, *Works*, VI, 205.

this way to the poets themselves, as Lamb found out after he offered a few critical remarks to Wordsworth, who responded with a lengthy retort. This was swiftly followed by a second, when "Coleridge, who has not written to me some months before, starts up from his bed of sickness to reprove me for my hardy presumption: four long pages, equally sweaty and more tedious".[18]

Still smarting from his "northern castigation", Lamb acknowledged that Manning was more critical of the *Lyrical Ballads* even than him: "So, you don't think there's a Word's-worth of good poetry in the great L.B.!"[19] In time, Mary Lamb would come to describe Manning as a "ventilator" for both her and Charles, and it seems likely that Manning helped Lamb to maintain a healthy independence from the potentially domineering personalities of Coleridge and Wordsworth.[20]

Manning's opinion of the new poetic vision was scathing indeed:

> I perused the Colerigian & Wordsworthian letters. Sheer nonsense, by God. I wonder Coleridge (who I know is a poet—I don't know that W. is *not*, but I'll be damned if that be poetry he has passed [?] upon us in the 2d Vol.)—I say I wonder Coleridge can be taken in by such foolish stuff. By habit one may learn to be excited by any thing—one may live so long with sheep & silly shepperds as to take the Baaing of a Lamb for poetry—[…] would Shakespear have taken it for poetry? Oh! But *he's* no judge perhaps—would Milton then? To *gravely*, mind that, *gravely* tell us of a sheep drawn out of a hole, & chronicle the beggar's twopenny mishap […][21]

In making a distinction between the poetic credentials of the two Lakers, Manning may have been trying to be tactful about Lamb's affection for Coleridge. Alternatively, Manning may genuinely have preferred some of Coleridge's earlier poems to those presented in "the great L.B." Manning's rejection of Wordsworth's poems was typical of the criticism that Coleridge took to task in the *Biographia Literaria*, where he noted how "The humbler passages in the poems themselves were dwelt on and cited to justify the rejection of the theory", often blinding readers even to the more conventionally laudable works.[22] Unflatteringly as this reflects on Manning, he nevertheless helped provide the necessary "ventilation" for Lamb to develop his own response.

Manning's life ambition, seemingly conceived while he was still in Cambridge during the 1790s, was to explore China. There was a negligible tradition of Chinese studies in Great Britain: when the Macartney Embassy set off for China in 1792, they could not recruit a single qualified candidate from

[18] Lucas, *Works*, VI, 213.
[19] Lucas, *Works*, VI, 216.
[20] Lucas, *Works*, VI, 349.
[21] Anderson, 54-55.
[22] S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, I (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), 74.

Great Britain to act as an interpreter.[23] Manning later described his objectives which, considered in such a context, read like a Coleridgean prospectus:

> [A] moral view of China; its manners; the actual degree of happiness the people enjoy; their sentiments and opinions, so far as they influence life; their literature; their history; the causes for their stability and vast population; their minor arts and contrivances; what there might be in China worthy to serve as a model for imitation, and what to serve as a beacon to avoid.[24]

As there were no facilities to study Chinese in Great Britain, Manning took advantage of the Peace of Amiens to travel to Paris in January 1802, in the hope of accessing sources and teachers. He remained in France for three years, the second half of which he spent as a prisoner of war once hostilities renewed between Great Britain and France. Manning wrote often to Lamb during his first year abroad, and asked that he hang on to his letters, so he could use them to recall some ideas when he got back.[25] Lamb assured him: "Not a sentence, not a syllable of Trismegistus, shall be lost through my neglect. I am his wordbanker, his storekeeper of puns and syllogisms."[26]

Manning wanted news about literary goings-on in England, word of Coleridge and Lloyd, and he was particularly interested in the critical response to *John Woodvil*. He had been provoked by some of Coleridge's observations on the play: "Was Colge asleep or possess'd by one of the Spirits of Mal-aproposity when he wrote you that amazing Critique?"[27] He strove to exert himself on behalf of Lamb's tragedy, which he showed to Thomas Holcroft, "who had taste enough to discover that tis full of poetry, but the plot he condemns in toto".[28] At Holcroft's Manning saw Thomas Paine, and also met William Taylor of Norwich.[29] Manning thought Taylor "a pleasant man, of considerable talents, & a very cultivated mind."[30] Taylor told his cousin Thomas Dyson that "In power of mind and amiableness of temper he [Manning] has few equals; he is a superior mathematician and Grecian, and is learning Chinese."[31]

Despite a shared interest in German literature, Taylor had little connection with Coleridge, but he was well-acquainted with Robert Southey, with whom he maintained a long and learned correspondence over many years. Southey met Manning on several occasions, and his letters with Taylor provide some interesting observations on Manning's character, balancing the more effusive

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[23] For the desultory state of Sinological studies in late-eighteenth century Britain, see T.H. Barrett, *Singular listlessness: a short history of Chinese books and British scholars* (London: Wellsweep, 1989).

[24] Manning, *Narratives of the mission of George Bogle to Tibet, and of the journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa, edited by Clements Markham*, 2nd ed., (London: Tru□bner, 1879), 280.

[25] Anderson, 59.

[26] Lucas, *Works*, VI, 234.

[27] Anderson, 46-47.

[28] Anderson, 63.

[29] Anderson, 76.

[30] RAS TM 1/1/15.

[31] J.W. Robberds, *A memoir of the life and writings of William Taylor of Norwich*, I (London: John Murray, 1843), 409.

praise he received from other quarters. In 1806, Southey saw Manning the night before he left England for China, and remarked to Taylor:

> He has not made himself acquainted with all that has been written about China, as he ought to have done: I mentioned several books, some of them in my own possession, of which he had not heard. This is unlucky: he should have known what other people had communicated, to save himself trouble and direct his own inquiries profitably.[32]

Taylor replied in kind:

> I am glad you saw Manning, and glad you served him: he is near-sighted. Such men are mostly negligent of contiguous observations, literally and morally; they are moved in everything by a radiation from within, not by reflections from without; they do not see enough of what is beyond their circle of ken to be aware of its existence or value. Manning, with great talent, requires twice the time of another man to make a given quantity of observation: he is fit for a mathematician, for a metaphysician, or for an archaeologist. Poets make the best observers; they may become blind, but they are not born near-sighted.[33]

Others have surmised the nature of Manning's researches and studies in terms which tend to support Taylor's assessment of his intellectual approach. T.H. Barrett has observed that Manning had an "academic rather than practical approach" to the study of Chinese, suggesting that his interest "sprang from the long tradition of intellectual speculation in Europe prompted by the unfamiliar non-alphabetic nature of the Chinese script and its possible significance for the creation of a universal language".[34] Later, when Manning was in China, his translations for the East India Company were described as "bald and are fully intelligible only to one who can see through the English and descry the Chinese original".[35] To his sister, Manning observed that "the philological remarks, that a knowledge of this strange language gives rise to, these are what I hold most dear […] Be assured that I have more in me than people in England think".[36]

Manning was a friend of the renowned scholar of ancient Greek, Richard Porson, and his initial interest in Chinese is said to have been spurred by a desire to develop his theories on the usage of Greek prepositions. In eighteenth-century Europe, speculations abounded about possible connections between the languages and religions of the ancient world, tending towards the hope that these might be ultimately reconcilable with a scheme of universal history derived from the Bible. This subject occupied great minds like Sir

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[32] Robberds, II, 132.

[33] Robberds, II, 137-138.

[34] These quotes are taken from the text of two conference papers kindly provided to me by Professor Barrett, "Chinese Language Teachers and Regency Britain", 6; and "Thomas Manning as a Translator of Chinese", 4.

[35] Hosea Ballou Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company Trading to China, 1635-1834* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926-1929), 103.

[36] RAS TM 1/2/3.

William Jones, founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and Coleridge himself.[37] The origins of Manning's own interest in Chinese, in comparing the language to that of ancient Greece, would seem to relate to this tradition; even if his later description of his ambitions (a "moral view of China […]") would be more in keeping with the secular philosophical framework associated with the Scottish Enlightenment.

Frustratingly, Manning never published at length on his Chinese researches. Perhaps he felt that his visionary interests were out of step with the burgeoning utilitarian discourse after his return to England in 1817; or perhaps he sensed that his views on Chinese culture were at odds with an increasingly Sinophobic public opinion. Whatever the reason, this failure to publish, and justify the high opinion of his friends, distressed his advocates and defenders, particularly Lamb.

As early as 1801, Lamb described Manning to Robert Lloyd as:

> A man of great power—an enchanter almost—far beyond Coleridge or any man in power of impressing—when he gets you alone, he can act the wonders of Egypt. Only he is lazy, and does not always put forth all his strength; if he did, I know no man of genius at all comparable to him.[38]

Almost a quarter of a century later, in 1824, we hear an identical refrain when Henry Crabb Robinson records that:

> Lamb spoke with enthusiasm of Manning, declaring that he is the most *wonderful* man he ever knew, more extraordinary than Wordsworth or Coleridge. Yet this Manning does nothing. He has travelled even in China and has been by land from India through Tibet, yet as far as is known he has written nothing. Lamb says his criticisms are of the very first quality.[39]

This must have been absolutely maddening for Lamb. Indeed, in 1826 he declaimed to Coleridge, "I am glad you esteem Manning, though you see but his husk or his shrine. He discloses not, save to select worshippers, and will leave the world without any one hardly but me knowing how stupendous a creature he is."[40]

While Manning was discreet about his religious and other beliefs, there are hints which suggest something of his true ideas. Manning shared Coleridge's interest in Neoplatonic philosophy, and can perhaps be understood as one of those late-eighteenth century "visionaries" identified by John Beer, seeking to build a bridge between, on the one hand, Biblical history, ancient theology, and metaphysical speculation, and on the other, the new discoveries made possible

[37] For the theological context of Sir William Jones's Oriental researches, see Urs App, "William Jones's Ancient Theology", *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 191 (July, 2009). On Coleridge, see Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), 286-287.

[38] Lucas, *Charles Lamb and the Lloyds,* 127.

[39] Edith W. Morley ed., *Henry Crabb Robinson on books and their writers* (London: J.M. Dent and sons, 1938), 308.

[40] Lucas, *Works*, VII, 702.

by the advance of scientific rationalism.[41]

Thomas Allsop left a fascinating account which powerfully evokes the image of Manning as a Coleridgean visionary, suggestive of the esoteric transcendentalism associated with the Hermetic tradition (implied also by Lamb's jocular dubbing of Manning as "Trismegistus" in February 1802):

> Once, and once only, did I witness an outburst of his *unembodied* spirit, when such was the effect of his more than magnetic, his magic power (learnt was it in Chaldea, or in that sealed continent to which the superhuman knowledge of Zoroaster was conveyed by Confucius, into which he was the first to penetrate with impunity), that we were all rapt and carried aloft into the seventh heaven. He seemed to see and to convey to us clearly (I had almost said adequately), what was passing in the presence of the Great Disembodied ONE, rather by an intuition or the creation of a new sense than by words. Verily there are *more things on earth* than are dreamt of in our philosophy. I am unwilling to admit the influence this wonderful man had over his auditors, as I cannot at all convey an adequate notion or even image of his extraordinary and very peculiar powers. Passing from a state which was only not of the highest excitement, because the power was *felt*, not shown, he, by an easy, a graceful, and, as it seemed at the time, a natural transition, entered upon the discussion, or, as it rather seemed, the solution of some of the most interesting questions connected with the early pursuits of men. Amongst other matters, the origin of cooking, which it seems was deemed of sufficient importance by older and *therefore* wiser, nations to form part of their archives.[42]

This, of course, segues into a discussion of Lamb's essay on the origins of roast pig, the inspiration for which Lamb attributed to "my friend M.", but the first germ of which we see in a letter to Coleridge, the "Epistola Porcina".[43]

Did Manning truly have the exceptional powers attributed to him by Lamb, and sometimes by others, to rival Coleridge himself? His literary legacy, slim as it is, leaves us in some doubt. His powers of conversation were held in high regard, but his "table talk" survives only in tantalizing snippets. Samuel Ball, friend of Manning and Lamb, wrote to Manning's sister in 1850, that "I can say with great truth, what Fox said of Burke, that I have learned more from him in conversation than from books."[44] Further analysis of Manning's surviving manuscript notes and diaries should provide a clearer picture of his true capabilities, and help us better understand what ideas and insights were inspired by his long years of study and speculation.

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[41] Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary*, 49-51.

[42] Thomas Allsop, *Letters, conversations and recollections of S.T. Coleridge*, 3rd ed., (London: F. Farrah, 1864), 114-115.

[43] Margareta Eurenius Rydbeck, "'A dissertation upon roast pig': a critical reading of Elian allusion", *The Charles Lamb Bulletin* (Spring 2017, New series no. 165), 34.

[44] RAS TM 15/1.