Bailing Out Coleridge:
Debts of Gratitude and the Proofing of an Oceanic Poem

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JAMES GILLMAN'S 1838 BIOGRAPHY circulates the yarn of a young Samuel Taylor Coleridge suddenly leaving Cambridge for London, walking the streets all night, giving away all the money in his pockets to beggars, and spontaneously responding to an advertisement calling for "a few smart lads for the 15th Elliot's Light Dragoons." As the story goes, Coleridge answered the ad by showing up at the door of a kindly old sergeant who sized up his visitor as someone unsuited to the military who'd been out all night and tried, unsuccessfully, to talk him out of his rash decision. The next morning Coleridge marched off to Reading, Berkshire with his new regiment, under the name Silas Tomkyn Comberbache. "Comberbache" enlisted probably in early Dec. 1793 and was discharged and gone back to Cambridge as Coleridge again in the spring of 1794—to meet Robert Southey and begin talking about pantisocracy the following summer. Meanwhile, Coleridge's brief stint in the army quartered at Reading produced a couple of apocryphal reports that have stuck with the poet: First, though hardly a model soldier, Coleridge-as-Comberbache seems to have been the sort of person everyone wants to help with various arduous tasks like tending his horse. Second, Gillman circulated what seems to be an unverified myth of Coleridge writing the words "Eheu! Quam infortunii miserrimum est fuisse felicem!" in pencil on a stable wall [translation: Alas, how much the worse misfortune is to have once been happy."], and their being read by a Captain Ogle who took interest in him and worked to negotiate his discharge. Coleridge's letters tell a different story, indicating that his brothers found him out through the exertions of a college friend by early February 1794, and made their own determined effort, while Coleridge was relegated to nursing the sick, including a dismal stint caring for a raving smallpox victim. Coleridge describes Ogle in a letter of 12 March 1794 to his brother (the Revd. George Coleridge) as an officer "of our regiment, who is returned from abroad, [and] has taken great notice of me. When he visits the stables at night he always enters into conversation with me, and to-day, finding from the corporal's report that I was unwell, he sent me a couple of bottles of wine. These things demand my gratitude." Coleridge is known on other occasions to have found ways to control the narrative about his involvement or to minimize his responsibility in a situation, and it seems possible that he remains deliberately silent about the details of his release from the military.

Mary Russell Mitford in her *Recollections of a Literary Life* of 1852 tells a different story of Coleridge's release, a story that hinges on the Ogle connection, and gives an extended anecdote of her family's connection to Coleridge:

> Everybody has heard the often told story of Coleridge's enlisting in a cavalry regiment under a feigned name, and being detected as a Cambridge scholar in consequence of his writing some Greek lines, or rather, I believe, some Greek words, over the bed of a sick comrade, whom, not knowing how else to dispose of him, he had been appointed to nurse. It has not been stated that the arrangement for his discharge took place at my father's house at Reading. Such, however, was the case. The story was this. Dr. Ogle, Dean of Winchester, was related to the Mitfords, as relationships go in Northumberland, and having been an intimate friend of my maternal grandfather, had no small share in bringing about the marriage between his young cousin [Dr. George Mitford] and the orphan heiress [Mary Russell, 10 years his senior at age 37]. He continued to take an affectionate interest in the couple he had brought together, and the 15th Light Dragoons, in which his eldest son had a troop, being quartered in Reading, he came to spend some days at their house. Of course Captain Ogle, between whom and my father the closest friendship subsisted, was invited to meet the Dean, and in the course of the dinner told the story of the learned recruit. It was the beginning of the great war with France; men were procured with difficulty, and if one of the servants waiting at table had not been induced to enlist in his place, there might have been some hesitation in procuring a discharge. Mr. Coleridge never forgot my father's zeal in the cause, for kind and clever as he was, Captain Ogle was so indolent a man, that without a flapper, the matter might have slept in his hands till the Greek calends. Such was Mr. Coleridge's kind recognition of my father's exertions, that he had the infinite goodness and condescension to look over the proof sheets of two girlish efforts, "Christina" and "Blanch," and to encourage the young writer by gentle strictures and stimulating praise. Ah! I wish she had better deserved this honouring notice!" (vol. 3, pp. 14-16—'Authors Associated with Places')

What can we make of Mitford's tale of Ogle and her father, and the servant at the table who was induced to step in to bail out Coleridge in his youth? It is certainly possible that George Mitford's acquaintance with Coleridge dates back to this early period, given their proximity to each other in Reading at the time. The veracity of either Coleridge's or Mitford's anecdotes are worth my pondering, since as the organizer of the Digital Mitford Archive, a long-term project to edit the works and letters of Mary Russell Mitford, I need to get to know this woman as well as I can. I am wondering whether Mary Mitford might be inventing a tale here—perhaps spinning a web from the pages of Gillman's conjectures, or whether she is merely relaying a fictitious story her father might have told her, or finally, whether her account is simply true, since I've not yet seen her exaggerate or distort details of her own life. Born in 1787, she would have been six years old at the time of Coleridge's adventures as Silas Comberbache, and she doesn't represent herself as present at the table when

his fate was presumably being discussed. One aspect of her story does strike me as credible—that it would be difficult to extricate Coleridge from the army without procuring a substitute. The practice of paying hirelings to serve in the place of soldiers was very common after all.[1] If true, the account connects Coleridge with the Mitfords at a very early point, and perhaps at a formative stage in the life of this future very successful woman of letters.

As far as I have been able to tell, the details of how Coleridge was discharged from the army seem never to have been clearly documented, and I have not found anything more to confirm Mitford's tale of the Ogles at dinner with her father or the servant drafted to serve in place of "Comberbache." The earliest letters indicating a connection between the Mitfords and Coleridge are dated conjecturally by Earl Leslie Griggs to 14 February 1811. Given that letter's content, Griggs's date seems about right—since Mitford was in the correcting and proofing stages of her poem, *Christina, the Maid of the South Seas*, during March 1811. Coleridge wrote then to George Mitford:

> The last Sheets which I now send back corrected are exceedingly beautiful. Your Daughter like a spirited charioteer has driven in at full gallop, with untired Steeds.—If you will send me the poem entire, I will then give Miss Mitford my sincere opinion of the work, and what those points are in which she appears to me to have something yet to effect in the formation of her poetic style & the principles of construction. In short, I will write as *severe* a review as I can, & let none but the Authoress see it—and praise the poem as warmly as it deserves to all, but the Authoress— (CL III 302)

Coleridge closes by thanking George Mitford for sending him the delicacy of a jugged hare, which presumably was a gift from the Mitford's small country estate that Dr. Mitford had shot himself and had preserved.

It's reasonably clear why the Mitfords would have asked Coleridge to consult on this poem, since *Christina* represents an ocean-going verse romance of the South Seas. Set on Pitcairn's Island, the poem responds imaginatively to the first news printed in England in 1810 of the whereabouts of the lost mutineers from the HMS Bounty. (Christina, the title character, is named for Mitford's fictional construction of a daughter of Fletcher Christian and a Tahitian whose name Iddeah signals she's drawn from a powerful woman

[1] There are other occsions that suggest Coleridge's willingness to let someone else be the fall-guy. Henry Gunning's account of the trial of William Frend in 1793 tells us of Coleridge clapping in support of the defendant, but notes that he avoided a reprimand from the college proctor by agreeing to changes places with another man, Charnock, who responded to the Proctor's rebuke by brandishing a prosthetic hook to indicate he could not have been clapping. Coleridge, in the versions of the story that stem from him, is willingly protected by the Proctor who, Coleridge claimed, knew it was him all along. After the laughter over a one-handed man clapping fades, the tale ought to raise questions: why would the Proctor have knowingly blamed someone else for Coleridge's offence? And why do other accounts not mention the collusion between Charnock and Coleridge? On the evidence, it seems more likely that Coleridge slipped away and let another man take blame, but that he later skilfully tidied up the rough edges of his story. *Reminiscences of the Univeristy, Town, and County of Cambridge from the year 1780*, Henry Gunning, London, 1855, p.273)

described by William Bligh from his own account of the Bounty's voyage and the mutiny.) I've published elsewhere at some length about Mitford's *Maid of the South Seas,* and its fascinating constructions of oral storytelling and nonverbal communication, as well as generational memory of rebellion and crisis that constrains a younger generation from the radical activity of their parents.[2] What I'd like to do here is explore Coleridge's connections with the final stages of proofing and production of this poem, and with the literary network announced and hidden in its pages. Coleridge's life and work calls attention to the contingencies of interpersonal encounter and the networked nature of Romanticism. In Coleridgean fashion, people are heated and agitated in productivity by their encounters with each other—a familiar topic to us with regard to Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth, and which Judith Thompson has described of Thelwall and Coleridge. A similar vexing-yet-productive exchange is evident in Coleridge's relationships with Mitford, Matilda Betham, and other poets who came within his range of contact and, crucially, who sought profit from literary and dramatic production.

The chapter of Mitford's *Recollections* in which her anecdote of Coleridge's military service appears is titled "Authors Associated with Places" and in it she makes much of a connection between Coleridge, Reading, and thence herself through the fortunate presence of her father not so much as a deliverer but as an intermediary—one who set the stage for a successful outcome in Coleridge's life as well as her own. Mitford's is an odd life-writing account—part poetry anthology collecting writers that have mattered to her, and anecdotes about their personal lives, blended with her own personal reminiscences. The text meanders between "inside" and "outside"—that is, between personal memory and informal lecture about writers and their contexts--with an apparent goal to cultivate a love of poetry in her readers. Something more might be said about the seemingly innocuous, conversational way in which Mitford puts herself forward—and manages to place herself in the company of *poets* in particular—when she was, as she well knew by the end of her life, most popular for the easy-reading whimsical prose of *Our Village*, her series of tales set in her native Berkshire. Perhaps to counteract that localized prosaic reputation, Mitford seems pointedly at the end of her life to be positioning herself as, from the first, a poet with a worldly imagination, and one in whom Coleridge took a special interest by virtue of a fortunate connection.

Coleridge did indeed play a shaping role in Mitford's early poetic career, as she says, influencing and editing one of her first major literary efforts and advising her to pursue a direction he was taking at the time with staged drama. He read both of her early long verse romances (or what she called her "dwarf epics"), but evidently advised her *not* to acknowledge his copy-editing role in *Christina*, and he made many cuts—especially of an invocation that Mitford was especially proud of addressed to Sir Walter Scott. Mitford's poem was

[2] Cf. my article, "Romancing the Pacific Isles before Byron: Music, Sex, and Death in Mitford's Christina" *ELH* 76:2 (2009) 277-308.

accepted for publication by F. C. and J. Rivington to be printed by A. J. Valpy in Chancery Lane, and the production process seems to have been ongoing through February and March of 1811, which Mitford's father spent in London. Though the L'Estrange edition of her letters prints only two or three at most from these two months, we actually have a letter nearly every day in March sent from an anxious Mitford and her mother from the Mitford's Bertram House to George Mitford in London documenting the final stages of editing, and a sudden sense of outrage and betrayal over Coleridge's apparently decisive interventions at the last minute, altering the shape of Mitford's poem on its way to press. Mitford's mother wrote angrily to George on 29 March 1811 (on the eve of production):

> We are more than astonished at Mr Coleridge's conduct respecting the Invocation that a mean pitiful spirit of resentment to Mr Scott should induce him to expunge those stanzas so necessary to the poem, and the want of which must be to every reader of taste perceptible… If our treasure follows my advice, whenever she prints another poem, she will suffer no one to correct the press but herself, it will save you infinite trouble, and eventually be of great advantage to her works, I wish you had shown it to Messrs Rivington, they would no more have submitted to the exclusion of the Invocation, than they did to the ad-trission of the Gallows, neither would your friend Davenport—It appears very farcical Mr Coleridge[']s objection to receiving thanks for his attentions lest it should embroil the dear poetess with the reviewers and cause her to be classed with the Southey Wordsworth &c &c gang if he must assume a priviledge of curbing the effusions of her pen, and not suffering her to express her own sentiments of a man of genius because of their dirty foolish quarrels with him. I am extremely angry, the more so because the mischief appears past remedy from the very limited time before the poem must be published, it certainly is a most extraordinary liberty Mr. C. has taken, and will I hope be the last he will attempt.[3]

This portion of the letter tells us something of a loss of control over final production: George Mitford had entrusted his daughter's poem to Coleridge, relying on his judgment to "improve" its lines and (among other expectations) to correct its punctuation, and they are outraged at how Coleridge has, without consulting them, at the last minute cut out the entire invocation to a male muse in Sir Walter Scott. The reference to the gallows here is about a successful authorial intervention to control the final printed product: A. J. Valpy made a characteristic Gallows printer mark on the final page of a book, and an anxious Mary Russell Mitford had worried about offending Fletcher Christian fans

[3] This manuscript is bound in a large collection, *The letters of Mary Russell Mitford*, vol. 1 of 6, 1806-1811 at Reading Central Library, shelfmark qB/TU/MIT. I have not yet seen a manuscript of Mitford's *Christina* or a copy of the Invocation described in Mitford's correspondence. As of January 2013, there is a new record of a manuscript extract of the poem at the British Library under reference RP 9988, but it is reserved and unavailable for viewing until January 2020.

inadvertently with the Gallows as a kind of last symbol—that it might be misread as an implicit condemnation of the mutineers—a touchy subject given Fletcher Christian's popularity. Rivington had honored her request to intercede with Valpy, and indeed *Christina* would appear without the Gallows mark. But Coleridge exerted his own decisive pressure on the poem, to remove not only its invocation to Scott, but any association with himself either--even though Mitford's poem opens with lines that would have struck most readers of poetry as resembling the ominous appearance of the sun over the ocean in a certain long poem printed in *Lyrical Ballads*:

> The setting sun, with lurid ray,
> Crimson'd the vast Pacific's spray;
> The lowering welkin darker grew;
> The sable rack low threatening flew;
> And, thro' the gathering mist, the sun
> Subdu'd in blood-red lustre shone;
> Awhile, like some dark oracle
> Which deals around its deadly spell,
> Upon the ocean's verge it stood,
> Then sank beneath the heaving flood.
> And sailors spoke the word of fear,
> "A dreadful storm is gathering near!" (*Christina* I. i.)

This opening effectively locates the Pacific voyages of Mitford's poem in the terrifying ocean domains of the Ancient Mariner, an association also made by Coleridge scholars from the time of John Livingstone Lowes and Bernard Smith who connected Coleridge's mystical Rime to real 18th-century voyages.[4] Besides such implicit homages to Coleridge within Mitford's verse, the only evidence of *Christina*'s supporting network to be advertised openly in the poem's prefacing matter is a poetic dedication to Sir William Elford (whose long-standing friendship with Mitford is documented by some hundreds of literary letters) and a more immediate connection to Captain James Burney in prose "for the friendly assistance which he has rendered her in arranging and revising her notes, an office which none would have performed so readily, and none could have performed so well."

Captain Burney seems to have been for Mitford what William Wales (Cook's navigator and maths instructor at Christ's hospital) had once been to Coleridge: a source of authentic knowledge about the South Seas. Captain Burney was the brother of the novelist Fanny Burney and raised in an educated household apparently giving him unusual literary credentials among naval officers: he'd sailed on Cook's second and third voyages and witnessed Cook's assassination on Hawaii. Burney's connection to Mitford's poem is crucial—her strongest eyewitness link to the characters and events in the early history of

[4] Bernard Smith noted that William Wales, Cook's navigator, was the instructor of mathematics at Christ's Hospital school when Coleridge was there.

the mutiny represented in *Christina*'s verse and notes. As Edmund Garrett has documented, Burney's voyaging days seem to have ended in the 1780s due to insubordination of some kind, so that he was in England when his old companion William Bligh returned in 1790 from his epic voyage (with evident troubles with insubordination of his own). Burney helped Bligh to revise his rough writing into publishable prose, which became Bligh's *Narrative of the Mutiny on Board the H. M. S. Bounty* first published in 1791.[5] According to Garrett, Burney had developed several friendships with London literati by 1802, including with John Rickman (secretary to the Speaker of the Commons and friend of Robert Southey) and Charles Lamb among others—with whom he regularly played whist. Garrett speculates that Captain Burney might have sought out Coleridge in this context perhaps just before Coleridge's first extended experience with a sea voyage to Malta in April 1804. Certainly Burney's social network included many friends and contacts of Coleridge, and Burney had in January 1804 expressed a desire to meet the poet.

The proofing of *Christina, the Maid of the South Seas* in 1811 is certainly a further point of association between the Pacific voyager and the poet of the Ancient Mariner, a connection formed via George and Mary Russell Mitford only half revealed in the published text of Mitford's poem, since only Burney is directly mentioned among those proofing Mitford's work. Burney would have been important to Mitford as an eyewitness authenticator of details about Polynesian culture in the poem and as someone intimately knowledgeable of William Bligh's account of the mutiny. He, too, vexed the Mitfords by delays in the proofing process, but Mary Mitford, in a letter to her father dated March 31, 1811, about a week before press production of *Christina* expresses something of the need for Burney in this process:

> It is indeed rather provoking my own dearest Darling that our kind friend Captain Burney has not returned the proof. I find but little alteration in the notes[,] the chief advantage is the comfortable assurance that we are by his means secured from all animadversation[sic][;] his 'name is a tower of strength', & I hope he is not angry at the use I have made of it.[6]

In the following year, Coleridge read her next verse romance venture, *Narrative Poems on the Female Character*, containing *Blanch*, a poem set in medieval Muslim-and-Christian Spain—and though he never got around to giving her detailed comments this time, she eventually must have listened to her mama, and proceeded to press without waiting for him to make unwanted alterations. Significantly, Coleridge did comment that Mitford's *Blanch* seemed adaptable to the stage, at a moment when he must have been celebrating the financial success of his medieval Spanish play, *Remorse*. *Blanch* was published

[5] Edmund Garrett, "The Early Friendship of Capt. James Burney and Charles Lamb" *Charles Lamb Society Bulletin* No. 122 (April 2003) 64-70; 65.

[6] Manuscript at Reading Central Library, bound in *The letters of Mary Russell Mitford*, vol. 1.

in 1813, in the same year that *Remorse* saw its very successful 3-week production at (in January – February) at Drury Lane Theatre earning Coleridge around £400 profit. Eventually by the 1820s, when Mitford needed to support her parents in their increasingly severe financial distress, she took up Coleridge's advice and wrote drama of her own for the Royal Theatres—more plays than Coleridge with similar success—performance runs over many weeks. Mitford's successfully staged plays include *Julian*, *Rienzi*, *Foscari*, *Inez de Castro*, *Charles the First*, and an opera *Sadak and Kalusrade*—and several of these were performed internationally.

Was it the cost of her success that Mitford would repeatedly lose control over her work in the throes of production? With her plays, this time the source of vexation wasn't Coleridge or Burney but powerful actor managers, William Macready and Charles Kemble as well as a collision with the censoring Examiner of plays over her tragedy of *Charles the First*. Repeatedly after that early experience with Coleridge, Mitford endured a series of intense ups and downs, attractions and repulsions—in which the venturesome author courted an alliance with someone she perceived to be a "tower of strength" (as she called Burney) and gambled with a risk of unwanted editorial intrusion and rejection. "He who has suffer'd you to impose on him knows you" goes one of Blake's Proverbs of Hell, and in that sense Mitford seems to have known Coleridge quite well. At the end of her life in her literary *Recollections*, Mitford claims perhaps an unwonted authority of her own to document a formative chapter of Coleridge's life, and if she held back the full recollection her family's irritation with Coleridge she also made a point of saying the proverbial last word on a once-vexed subject—to finally announce a thing Coleridge had once erased from her work, the public acknowledgement of his formative impact on her long and tumultuous writing career.