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Christ's Hospital: Tradition with Vision

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edited by David Taplin and Lizzie Ballagher

THE SCHOOL DAYS OF AN AUTHOR OFTEN YIELD fascinating insights into the formation of a writer's craft, an education being absorbed and considered. Richard Holmes' *Coleridge: Early Visions* (1989), for example, provides an interesting look at the young Coleridge in his school days, as does Rosemary Ashton's *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1996), which provides a sizable chapter on this period. Coleridge later reflected on those years at Christ's Hospital school in his own words, writing:

> Farewell, parental scenes! a sad farewell!
> To you my grateful heart still fondly clings,
> The fluttering round on Fancy's burnished wings
> Her tales of future Joy Hope loves to tell.
> Adieu, adieu! ye much-loved cloisters pale…(*PW* 1 29)

The heartfelt sentimentality is obvious in Coleridge's poem, although earlier lines and letters express more reserved emotion, bordering on frustration and sadness. Later Coleridge returned to thinking about those school days, particularly in "Frost at Midnight"; he recalls, "For I was reared /In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,/ And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars." (*PW* 1 242) The school, based in the City of London, evidently had little appeal to the young Coleridge compared with the wide-open spaces of the Quantock Hills in Somerset or the East Devon countryside he recalled from early childhood. In reflection, even the "very severe" (BL I 8) headmaster of the school, James Boyer, would come to be fondly remembered for the influence he had on Coleridge's approach to poetry. Coleridge writes that from Boyer he learnt, "that poetry, even that of the loftiest and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own, as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more fugitive causes" (BL I 9). Undoubtedly Coleridge, and indeed other contemporaries such as Leigh Hunt and Charles Lamb, were profoundly influenced by their time at Christ's Hospital.

David Taplin and Lizzie Ballagher's *Christ's Hospital: Tradition with Vision* explores the history and culture of Coleridge's alma mater. It is a celebration of the influences, heritage, and values of a school whose own influence is still profoundly felt today. The school is admirable in its aim to offer students from humble backgrounds the chance for a better life. *Christ's Hospital: Tradition with*

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Vision is filled with a series of treasured memories and delightful snippets of student life and history from past alumni. The first three sections entitled "Success and Diversity," "Some Memories and Reflections," and "Thoughts, Memories and a Sermon for Remembrance Day" are recollections from alumni about their time at Christ's Hospital. In section four, Sinclair Wynchank recalls the school's achievements in science and engineering through its encouragement that classes should be "taught by asking questions and adopting the attitude of a co-enquirer, not an authority" (67). The fifth section by David Taplin entitled "The World in a Grain of Sand," drawn from the opening of William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence," explores how the school evolved and adapted during the education reforms of the 1950s. It was the school's ability to streamline and diversify that has contributed to its continued success, although Taplin ponders what the future could hold by suggesting possible partnerships with the Royal Society or renewed emphasis on science and engineering.

In the sixth and largest section of the book, Lizzie Ballagher creatively explores the school and its past in a series of eighty poems. Her poems cover key figures such as Coleridge, Leigh Hunt, and Samuel Pepys, as well as significant events at Christ's Hospital and beyond. Ballagher explores great storms, cold spells, and freezes, as well as a poem on the studious Coleridge ("Devon Boy: The Reader, 1780") and one written from Coleridge's perspective as an equal to the thoughts examined in "This Lime Tree Bower My Prison." The poem "A Bronze for Christ's Hospital," for example, considers the 350 years in which the school was located in London before its move to Horsham, Hampshire in 1902. As Ballagher notes, it was "a time during which the school lodged, fed, clad, and taught over 45,000 children through the kindness of many London benefactors and donors" (272). The bibliography of sources for Ballagher's poetry demonstrates the wealth of material that has been consulted about the school, its history, and student life. Indeed, two editions of works by Coleridge—the 1956 edition of the *Biographia Literaria* and the 1969 edition of *Coleridge, Poetical Works*—highlight the significance and influence of one of Christ's Hospital's most famous pupils. What Ballagher has demonstrated through her writing is that poetry has the ability to connect and compliment a whole manner of different topics. Science, historical figures, and harsh weather are all treated with the same grace and artistic flare that echoes some of those sentiments shared by the Romantics.

The seventh section considers the school's influence in Canada. As Chris Johnson notes "between 1617 and 1778, an astonishing 967 students were sent from Christ's Hospital to work in the American Colonies" (272). The fact that the school was believed to have some of the most impeccably educated students not just in writing and reading but also in mathematics and navigation undoubtedly made them highly sought after individuals. In section eight, entitled "A Heuristic Success Story," Christopher Bugge recounts his own school days in the late fifties and sixties, linking his own career success to the importance of teachers who emphasise learning in concert with children's

natural instincts. Similar sentiments are shared by Terry Bate and Tim Parsons in the ninth and tenth sections.

The final section shifts the overall tone and direction of the book: rather than looking back on the history of the school, it considers how the school will continue to evolve and inspire in its 2052 quincentenary. This might seem like a great distance to work towards, but we are all too aware of the great changes that have and are taking place in the education system. Certainly, the recollections of students from the latter half of the twentieth century will contrast greatly with the experiences of current and future students at the school. Indeed, they would contrast with Coleridge's own studies there, not least because the school moved from urban London to rural Hampshire—one can only imagine what Coleridge would have made of being educated in that new environment. What this final chapter demonstrates is a great optimism for the future and a sense of how the school could adapt to meet the needs of students in an ever-changing world. Consideration is given to the urgency to prepare for challenges posed by climate change and sustainability, as well as the continued growth of technology and programming as vital future skills.

Scholars of Coleridge may find this book lacking in focused content on Coleridge's school life, although he is mentioned at the start and his influence is felt in some of Ballagher's poetry. Personally, I would have enjoyed a more thorough exploration of the school's history as background, although the personal anecdotes and memories provide a fascinating insight into student life during the twentieth century. Yet scholars and admirers of Coleridge will discover a wider overview of Christ's Hospital that encapsulates the school's heritage from its foundation to the modern day with a view to looking towards its quincentenary. The personal recollections are particularly poignant and the strength of the passion for the school very much evident in its pages. In addressing the school's past through a combination of poetry and prose, Taplin and Ballagher have also considered what the future could mean for a school with such a long and celebrated history. Its emphasis in educating the disadvantaged is a noble and inspirational aim that is evident in the fondness and affection that is expressed in the recollections and memories of all those who contributed to this book.