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reads

Private Lives of the Ancient Mariner: Coleridge and His Children

(Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2013)

by Molly Lefebure

BIOGRAPHY, IF COLERIDGE'S REMARKS ON SOUTHEY'S *Life of Wesley* (1820) are any indication, has a unique capacity to animate readers—"how often have I… argued with it, questioned… listened & cried, Right! Excellent!—& in yet heavier hours intreated it, as it were, to continue talking to me" (*CM* V 121). Biographical treatments of S. T. Coleridge abound, and while not all invoke such high praise as Southey's *Life*, it's hardly a surprise that more than a few have encouraged new insights and connections for readers. Coleridge's personal notebooks and letters—rife with ambitious plans, opium abuse, romantic affections gained, lost, and unrequited—contain ample material for the sort of thorny biographical treatment that would keep almost any reader interested in a writer's life, but the best biographies also serve as aids to reflection on the profound questions that faced the man in his own times.

Of course, many of Coleridge's letters and papers were banished to the flames by well-meaning family and friends, each wishing to protect his legacy (and often their own). Yet biographers have continued to produce new treatments of his life and thought. Richard Holmes's two part biography may be the best known in recent decades: who can forget the contrast between his denomination of Coleridge's life under the two prominent headings "early visions" and "darker reflections"? Other biographers have presented Coleridge through vastly different rubrics. Walter Jackson Bate's intellectual biography reveals the poet-philosopher turned philosophical theologian (*Coleridge*, 1968). Basil Willey read Coleridge through the lens of spirituality, tracing his movement as a necessarily religious life indebted to English theological traditions (*Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1971). Rosemary Ashton, by contrast, takes up Coleridge as the genius mediator of German philosophy (*The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Critical Biography*, 1996). To these (and others), one could add related biographies of STC's wife Sarah and his children—Hartley, Derwent, and Sara; though fewer in number, these studies shape the assessment of not only the afterlife, but also the *family* life of STC.

The late Molly Lefebure (1919–2013) certainly belongs in any shortlist of leading biographers of Coleridge and his family, so it is no surprise that in her final work, *Private Lives of the Ancient Mariner: Coleridge and His Children* (2013), Lefebure brings the two major biographical strands together in a thoroughly enjoyable treatment of Coleridge as husband and father. Lefebure's *Private Lives* builds on her two previous, exemplary treatments of STC and his wife in *A Bondage of Opium: Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1974) and *The*

Bondage of Love: A Life of Mrs. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1986). The former study contends against Norman Fruman's damning portrait of Coleridge as an opium-addicted plagiarist in *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel* (1971), while the latter recovers Mrs. Sarah (Fricker) Coleridge from the memorial wasteland of her husband's innumerable slights and unhappy complaints. In short, *Private Lives of the Ancient Mariner* rounds out the portrait of husband and wife with an account that allows their children's voices to be heard, and shapes our understanding of STC as a man in the process.

Lefebure's enigmatic title intimates two central concerns of her project. First, the biography takes up the "private lives" of Coleridge (notably plural) in order to demonstrate the connections between STC's personal relationships and the public persona that formed around his image. There is something rather deceptive implied in Coleridge's public reputation. Consider, for example, STC's legacy as the great "Sage of Highgate," a denomination which conceals the well-known fact that his residence with the Gillmans in London coincides with his flight from a wife and children in Keswick, his total powerlessness in the face of addiction, and even the Gillmans' quest for public notoriety through their celebrity houseguest. Second, Lefebure's use of the image of the Mariner recalls her earlier, autobiographical reading of the Mariner as a symbol of the self, projected into the future and lived out unconsciously in his vagabond movement through homes in the Lake District, the West Country, and London society. Viewed in the light of his private relations, STC's life unfolds as a mirror of the arrogant man who shot the albatross and is now consigned to a life of digressive discourse: "The pair, poet and subject, reflected each other, as in twin mirrors: the Ancient Mariner wandering the face of the earth, for ever compulsively telling his tale; Samuel Taylor Coleridge roaming through life, talking, talking—which he increasingly described as 'teaching'" (154).

Those familiar with other biographies of Coleridge will immediately note Lefebure's uncommon starting point. She begins with Coleridge's death and the lamentations of his adult children. The paradoxical response of STC's offspring to the death of their father sets the stage for the troubled story of his life (and their own). Hartley, writing to Derwent, worried that his father's final thoughts of him were laden with disappointment: "For me, I can only hope that no painful thought of me adulterated the final out-gushing of his spirit, that if he breathed a prayer for me, it was a prayer of comfortable love, foreseeing in its intensity, its own effect" (19). If STC was finally disappointed in his oldest son, he had only himself to blame, but Hartley could not articulate how his own shortcomings might have had anything to do with his father's absence and neglect. Nonetheless, even Hartley recognized the strange portrait of his father in Henry Nelson Coleridge's *Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1835). Hartley expressed his objections to *Table Talk* privately, as did others (such as Southey) who read this strange new contrivance. Here, the distinction between the private man and his public persona comes into view:

> Hartley, when he read the *Table Talk*, had no hesitation in complaining to Derwent that it gave him no feeling of their father's manner; Derwent agreed. Even worse than the failure to capture STC's manner was (in Hartley's view) Henry's distortion of the content. STC was presented by his nephew as having discoursed in a distinctly starchy Tory strain. Hartley, raised in infancy in a fiercely republican household of which he retained vivid recollections, objected strenuously to the presentation of STC, by Henry, as virtually a solid Establishment figure. This was not 'dear Papa' as Hartley, himself a staunch Whig in maturity, had known and loved him. (42)

Lefebure never discusses their sister's reaction, but it will come as no surprise that Sara defended her husband's *Table Talk* on the basis of Henry's integrity and the substance of her father's late writings (such as *On the Constitution of the Church and State*).

The personal relationship, or lack thereof, between the children and their father frames Lefebure's narrative and heightens the reader's sense that only STC's closest relations can pull back the curtain on the man. Shrewdly, even as the children's mourning opens the biography, so their emergence into adulthood concludes Lefebure's account: "Derwent's childhood finished when Hartley was destroyed before his very eyes and banished to the distant north…. Sara's childhood ended when Collins painted her portrait seated on the shore of Derwent Water and she was thrust (to what extent she did not at first realise) into the public eye. . . . Hartley resolutely turned his back on the hand of time, remaining 'a child of the vale,' as some romantically put it, to the very end" (296). One might quibble with Lefebure's interpretation of these lives, but the theme of life intersecting death fits exceedingly well in such a portrait.

Lefebure's deft handling of oft-told narratives gives *Private Lives of the Ancient Mariner* a refreshing, analeptic quality. The Coleridge who emerges from these pages captivates the reader's attention because Lefebure invokes a new sense of mystery around her subject. When, in the wake of STC's death, writers such as De Quincey attacked Coleridge as an opium addict or magazines carried incriminating stories of his plagiarisms, the public thought they finally knew the *real* truth behind the public figure—the private man had finally been revealed. Lefebure's account, by contrast, takes up the private lives of Coleridge not in a hasty dash to notoriety, but in deliberate reflection and research on the Coleridge family over the course of a lifetime. Reading Lefebure on Coleridge reminds me of listening to thoughtful, sometimes impressionistic stories of relatives I've never met, as told by a family member who knew them well. There is a breezy proximity to Lefebure's biography, a willingness to pull back the curtain on overblown myths and family secrets without sacrificing individual dynamism and familial affection in the process. Some expected details are missing and well-known subplots are passed over,

but the narrative opens new insights even as wonder is restored through the whole.

Set within the complex network of family ties, Lefebure imagines the young Samuel Taylor Coleridge as the orphaned child of a grieving, widowed mother. Lefebure freely psychologizes on their relationship: "In persons suffering from depression arising from having been 'starved of love' or sent away early to school there is always intense ambivalence towards anyone who was loved; a fixation on the mother together with an inability to forgive her for the separation being most prevalent and probably the most persistent" (66). Little Sam, as she calls him, is sent off to school, falls in love, and seeks the approval of guardian brothers. By the time he marries Sarah Fricker, S. T. Coleridge has made a name for himself both as a keen intellectual and a deceptive, often unreliable friend.

Lefebure's early professional experience in forensic medicine shapes her account of STC's life. For example, she makes a convincing case that his brother Frank died neither of suicide nor a self-inflicted gunshot "in a delirious fever" during the siege of Seringapatam, but more likely died from severe illness or even during an enemy attack on officers while asleep in his tent (83). This same eye for detail contributes to Lefebure's reconstruction of Coleridge's time in Malta (with help from Santana's *Samuel Taylor Coleridge in Malta and Italy*, 1969). Here, in a shrewd departure from her emphasis on Coleridge's broken family relationships, Lefebure distances her account from the commonplace emphasis on STC's deteriorating health and unhappy home life. Instead, she makes the case that Coleridge enjoyed the extraordinary respect of high ranking governmental officials such as Alexander Ball. In Lefebure's account, Coleridge's political writing for the *Morning Post* placed him in a decisive position for political intrigue abroad. He traveled, she maintains, as one of the most trusted civil servants of the day: "Experts do not find themselves in highly confidential positions of authority, at exactly the right moment, in exactly the right place, by chance" (216). Before long, Ball elevated Coleridge to Public Secretary and, de facto, "STC was now second in civil dignity to Ball himself" (222). Lefebure even proposes that Ball considered Coleridge for espionage assignments as far away as Russia. By placing the accent on Coleridge's accomplishments, Lefebure reinterprets the Coleridge of 1804–1806: rather than a derelict husband, Coleridge surfaces as a dauntless political agent whose widening circle of experience results in new perspectives on the world. In this way, the Malta period reveals the range of "lives" Coleridge lived. He continued to fight the demons of his private life, worried for his children, spent lonely weekends lost in the fog of alcohol and opium abuse, and continued to read widely, even as he served Ball with greater and greater devotion.[1] The Malta experience also created private space for meditation and self-reflection—space that allowed Coleridge to depart from his earlier radicalism. His was a turn of mind driven neither by apostasy from

[1] For more on Coleridge's political experiences in Malta, see Barry Hough, '"Dupes to the love of duping": Coleridge and Ethics in Government Communication', *Coleridge Bulletin* NS 40, pp. 49-57.

earlier principles nor transparency of character, but formed in the alchemy of "constant battle with himself, in himself" (225).

The remainder of STC's life is treated in only the most superficial manner. In fact, Lefebure never entirely follows the standard narrative. This is no play-by-play account of his life, but a selective examination of the man in his network of near relations. Inevitably, with so many hypotheses and guesses and thoughts on the possible outcomes for any given event, readers will occasionally wish that Lefebure had not neglected many of the writings that brought STC public acclaim (prose and poetry alike often receive only the most cursory attention). Researchers, too, will be frustrated that many quotes lack references and all archival manuscript sources want critical notation for follow-up study. Still, Lefebure's *Private Lives of the Ancient Mariner* is a book worth reading for the fresh perspective she brings to the life and family of a complex man, and only a writer with the wisdom, experience, and discriminating voice of Molly Lefebure could have written it.