Martin Haggerty
reads
The English Opium-Eater: A Biography of Thomas De Quincey
(Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009)
by Robert Morrison

THE PUBLICATION of a new and substantial biography of Thomas De Quincey, especially if written by a respected scholar in the field of British Romanticism, is a noteworthy and happy event. By incorporating new knowledge and reflecting recent critical discourse concerning De Quincey,[1] Robert Morrison's book supersedes the previous major biographies by Alexander H. Japp (1890), Horace Ainsworth Eaton (1936), and Grevel Lindop (1981). It has benefited enormously from the twenty-one-volume *Works of Thomas De Quincey* (2000-03), edited by a team of scholars led by Lindop, which makes available probably everything that survives from this author, and provides, so far as possible, restored versions of the many texts which had been substantially altered—at the stage of collection for republication—by earlier editors. Morrison has assiduously tracked down and examined De Quincey's own letters; and these, along with lately discovered letters by his three daughters, have yielded a lot of additional information. Furthermore, to a greater extent than the previous biographers were either able or inclined to do, Morrison has drawn upon writings by De Quincey's contemporaries which record and describe their encounters with him.

The Introduction (xiv-xvii) eloquently argues for De Quincey's enduring importance as a prose stylist, a visionary, an intellectual, a learned journalist, and a seminal autobiographer; and it emphasises both his crucial influence on later writers and his function as an archetype for the tragically flawed genius. When Emily De Quincey asserted that "no one will make much out of my father who does not take in the extreme mixture of childish folly joined to a great intellect" (quoted, 310), she probably meant us to understand that, in combination with "a great intellect" active even in childhood, his "childish folly" persisted through life. Certainly, this impression is inescapable with Morrison's portrait. Here De Quincey is a strong-willed individual, but apparently fated to succumb to drug addiction; a formidable intellectual, envisaging himself as a philosopher, yet a man who continually made unwise choices; an immensely gifted person from a privileged background, who repeatedly suffered poverty and humiliation; someone who was arrogant and often snobbish, yet also remarkably compassionate, kind, and generous; an author who usually found great difficulty in writing, yet who produced a

---

[1] Nevertheless, some modern critical studies are absent from the bibliography, including *Thomas De Quincey: The Prose of Vision* by V.A. De Luca (1980), *Thomas De Quincey's Reluctant Autobiography* by John C. Whale (1984), *A Genealogy of the Modern Self: Thomas De Quincey and the Intoxication of Writing* by Alina Clej (1995) and *Thomas De Quincey: Knowledge and Power* by Frederick Burwick (2001), each of which offers valuable insights into De Quincey's intellect, imagination and creative practice, thereby into his personality, making them as useful for a biographer as for a literary scholar. Stranger still, it seems that Morrison has not used *Thomas De Quincey: Bicentenary Studies*, edited by Robert Lance Snyder (1985), many of which essays have some relevance to his biographical task.

massive body of work, almost all of high quality and some of which may be reckoned unsurpassable.

De Quincey's work is similarly deeply imbued with ambiguities and paradoxes. Morrison rightly draws attention to "the two powerful and often competing interests at the core of his intellect: an Enlightenment-based investment in classicism, and an anti-Enlightenment enthusiasm for mystery, mystification, and disorder" (31). As a commentator on current affairs, "despite his own rebelliousness, De Quincey was a determined advocate of the status quo" (166-7), which led him even so far as to endorse the Peterloo Massacre (see 190) and to advocate violent suppression of the Indian Mutiny (see 388-9). Conversely, he espoused a range of opinions and attitudes typically associated with radical-liberal politics: Ricardian economics, free trade, the extension of educational opportunities, the abolition of corporal punishment in schools, and opposition to slavery. The complexity of De Quincey's character is especially apparent in his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, where, as Morrison points out, on more than a few occasions, and probably without intended irony, he displays reactionary and elitist sentiments in the midst of recounting his own defiance of authority and social convention; and in this work, significantly, he refers favourably to Shelley and Hazlitt as well as to Burke and Coleridge. Here, in short, "De Quincey both endorses and rejects the status quo, while his enthusiasm for privilege is confounded by his embrace of Cockneys, Whigs, abolitionists, and rebels" (209). The semi-Gothic historical novel *Klosterheim* (1832), set in Germany during the Thirty Years' War, "reveals the perplexed nature of his own political sympathies, for […] the Protestant De Quincey gives the Catholics the victory, and confounds his attraction to power with his affinity for the outcast" (274). Morrison demonstrates that, contrary to his reputation "as a furious right-winger, De Quincey's sympathies [actually] extended to both sides of the political spectrum" (285). Even while he was editor of the *Westmorland Gazette* (1819-20), employed by the Tory land-owning Lowther brothers (who held neighbouring parliamentary seats) on the understanding that he would run the newspaper as their local propaganda tool, De Quincey "so managed it as to preserve my Independence" (quoted, 191), a boast amply justified by Morrison's scrutiny of its contents (see 187-94).

Throughout his career in journalism, "De Quincey was often bellicose in the articulation of his conservative views, but he was also a canny writer who needed to sell his work, and who possessed a remarkable ability to tailor his views to suit different—and in some cases oppositional—magazine contexts" (286). Consequently, the liberal-minded editor William Tait, despite reckoning De Quincey "a Tory of the purest strain," was nonetheless delighted to publish his essays and reviews, even while he was also contributing to *Blackwood's*, the arch-Tory journal against which he was in direct competition. Commencing in 1834, "A more informal and tolerant De Quincey began to emerge" in the pages of *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* (285). However, one tends to suspect that

De Quincey's adaptability was mainly consequent upon his need to maximise income to support a growing family and finance his massive consumption of opium.

As Morrison readily admits, "despite the wealth of new information, De Quincey remains in many ways a remarkably elusive figure" (xvi). Like many other drug addicts, in his relationship with opium De Quincey "over and over again […] fought cycles of denial and guilt, excess and restraint, secrecy and candour, despondency and hope" (337), a situation which influenced his imaginative and intellectual concerns, and appears at times even to have directed his artistic practice. For example: "Like the mind of the opium-eater, the city of Klosterheim is strangely cut off from its surroundings. In the day various authority figures attempt to maintain order, while at night chaos reasserts itself in ways that are both inspired and frightening" (274). Contrary to the judgements of some early critics, such as Edward Sackville West (*A Flame in Sunlight*, 1936), Morrison shows that De Quincey was a prolific, well-focused and rigorous author, in spite of extremely unfavourable circumstances for literary work, and also much more gregarious and socially accomplished than it suited him to pretend. But this does not constitute an argument that De Quincey was essentially unhandicapped by his dependence upon opium: "On the surface, De Quincey's addiction did not prevent him from carrying on as a writer, a father, and a friend. But within, it fragmented his sense of self to the point of disintegration" (337). He abundantly documented and analysed this experience in the *Confessions* and *Suspiria de Profundis*, revealing that "opium is revelation and destruction, simultaneously deepening and obliterating the self" (339). Portraying this "man of enormous gifts who was both damaged and inspired by his fate" (xvi), and describing "the way in which drugs, erudition, and eloquence defined De Quincey's public persona" (239), Morrison contends that he qualifies as "the first modern artist, at once saint and exile" (108). De Quincey was well aware of the myth attached to his authorial identity and increasingly he sought to manage it as an asset. Thus, Morrison observes, in the revised and much-expanded version of the *Confessions* (1856), "For an audience that perhaps saw him first as an opium-eater and second as an author, De Quincey was working hard to rewrite his own history, and to establish himself, not as a slave to the drug, but as a beneficiary of it" (386). The "paradoxes that shape De Quincey's life and writings" (396) contribute much to their lasting interest, perhaps especially now, in a postmodern cultural climate: "Far more than the other great essayists who were his contemporaries—Lamb, Hazlitt, Emerson, and Carlyle—De Quincey speaks to us directly about our divisions, our addictions, our losses, our selves" (xvii).

Far beyond what is strictly necessary in a biography of a writer, this book includes a substantial amount of expert literary criticism, which enhances the overall value of the work for scholars as well as ordinary readers. Morrison's concise analysis of the *Confessions* (207-10) is admirable. For 'The English Mail-

Coach', Morrison offers an orthodox interpretation (361-3), but one whose clarity and efficiency will be appreciated by non-specialists. Regarding De Quincey's essays and reviews dealing with other writers, Morrison emphasises his role in shaping their images and reputations for posterity; most decisively, "De Quincey's reading explicitly inverts the contemporary view of Wordsworth and clearly anticipates our own" (342). Morrison's impressive deconstruction of De Quincey's first letter to Wordsworth (88-91) is a highlight of the book.

Readers of this journal will take a particular interest in how Morrison treats the relationship between De Quincey and Coleridge. As a seventeen-year-old, "Dreams of Coleridge profoundly engaged him" (83), and a year later he "began consciously" to follow his hero's lead in studying German literature and metaphysics (101), and thereafter similarly aspired towards eminence as a philosopher. De Quincey's extravagant gift of £300 to Coleridge is well known, as are his subsequent attempts to retrieve it. One might fairly say that De Quincey behaved dishonourably in this affair, the only mitigating factor—albeit a weighty one—being his own penury and fear of the debtors' prison. With their common addiction to opium, De Quincey "fathomed Coleridge's chaos by the darkness of his own" (337). Not only in their shared tastes for metaphysics, seventeenth-century English divines, philology, mountain scenery, erudite conversation, narcotic adventure, and much else, together with their lofty ambitions as thinkers and writers, moreover in their remarkable improvidence, impracticality and unreliability, Coleridge and De Quincey were uncannily similar in outlook and temperament, creating a strong mutual attraction which, in spite of their quarrels and deepening distrust, continually reasserted itself. However, the weaknesses they held in common, even before they met, were unpropitious for an intimate or resilient friendship between them. Morrison's book provides a well-documented and carefully considered representation of their relationship, complementing the modern biographies of Coleridge and further illuminating that writer's personality.

The general standard of this biography is so high that my queries and criticisms must be directed solely at a few details in Morrison's work.

The runaway fifteen-year-old De Quincey was given shelter in 38 Greek Street, Soho, which was, Morrison tells us, "a corner house that stood partly in Soho Square, and that has long since been demolished" (73), information apparently derived from A. St John Adcock's 1929 book, *Famous Houses and Literary Shrines of London* (cited in a reference); but further research would have revealed that this house was subsequently renumbered 61 and demolished in the early 1980s; indeed "long since" De Quincey's sojourn there, though one suspects that Morrison really means *long ago*, which is incorrect.

Concerning Ann of Oxford Street, as portrayed in De Quincey's *Confessions*, Morrison alleges, "His representation of her is most probably a composite of different prostitutes and situations" (82). This possibility must have occurred to many readers of the *Confessions*, but to state it as a likelihood seems

unjustifiably sceptical. In contrast with this attitude, Morrison appears to accept De Quincey's word at face value respecting the highest dosages of opium which he took, when he might reasonably have counted these claims as instances of the writer's characteristic self-sublimating hyperbole, or have interpreted them simply as laddish bravura.

"So much for Thomas's oft-proclaimed sympathy for outsiders!", Morrison exclaims, after recounting an incident when De Quincey nearly struck out at a persistent menacing stranger (84); but surely the teenager's anger is understandable and excusable in a situation of indignation, fear and desperation, and not fundamentally contradictory to his usual tolerance and compassion.

"This is the first biography to take account of the complete range of his published and unpublished writings," Morrison claims (xvii); but though it is true that he has made much wider and deeper use of these, it is not quite comprehensive. Most notably, *The Stranger's Grave*, De Quincey's novel first published anonymously in 1823, is not discussed, nor even mentioned by name, even though its theme of familial breach, the depiction of incest, a Cumbrian setting, and a multitude of details very possibly drawn straight from the author's personal experience, should have won this biographer's attention.[2]

The title of this biography is unnecessarily similar to Lindop's *The Opium-Eater: A Life of Thomas De Quincey*, a likeness which is unimaginative as well as potentially confusing. And the striking cover design of Morrison's book erroneously uses a background of *red* poppies. Most likely the publisher is to blame on both counts.

The quantity and the depth of Morrison's research, and his intelligent assessment of the evidence thus assembled, make this the most comprehensive and reliable account of De Quincey's life. Morrison is at ease with his subject, appreciating his strengths and achievements, but also acknowledging his weaknesses and failings; avoiding both panegyric and censure to create a sympathetic yet fully nuanced appraisal of this enigmatic personality. Morrison's own dextrous and engaging authorial style is an additional pleasure throughout a book which honourably fulfils its ambitious purpose. *The English Opium-Eater* should now be regarded as the standard and indispensable biography of Thomas De Quincey.

[2] Neither are De Quincey's similarly "rediscovered" short stories 'The Peasant of Portugal' (1827) and 'The Caçadore' (1828) alluded to, despite their concern with human power and weakness, and the ethical issue of violent revenge, shared with *Klosterheim* and several other short stories including 'The Avenger' and 'The Household Wreck', which Morrison *does* consider.