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Three Extraordinary Years: The Coleridges at Stowey
and
The Two Saras: Coleridge in Cumbria
(both Blue Poppy Publishing, 2020)
by Bethany Askew
and
The Secret Ministry of Frost
(52 Novels Publishing, 2019)
by J. S. Berkman

IF ANY DOUBT THAT THE APPEAL OF COLERIDGE AND HIS CIRCLE extends beyond the academy, let them pick up copies of these three novels. Published by small presses and written by unfamous writers (I don't say so to snark: I'm an unfamous writer myself) they speak to the hold STC still exerts on general readers. All are well-researched, deeply-felt exercises in summoning a fictional Coleridge and setting him in context. 'Amateur' might look like a term of dispraise, but we should not forget its etymology; it is, after all, really just another way of saying 'someone who loves'.

Still, we are entitled to ask what kinds of perspective fiction gives us on a figure like Coleridge that non-fiction doesn't. One answer might be: a fiction writer has greater licence than a literary critic or scholarly biographer, although it is often true—and is certainly the case with these three novels—that historical novelists hug the shore of documented actuality, for fear (presumably) of being accused of inaccuracy, insufficiencies of research, or perhaps more damningly of a cavalier disregard for historical truth as such. The result, often, is a limiting timidity of execution, one as likely to afflict the established author as the amateur. The best historical fiction, it seems to me, takes the same kinds of liberties with its source material as Shakespeare, and, guided in the first instance by the dramatic and aesthetic potential of its subject, laughs at the pedantry of 'accuracy' critics. With a figure like Coleridge there is the added challenge of the relative uneventfulness of his exterior life, especially when compared to the extraordinary capaciousness and wide-ranging adventurousness of his internal life. That might encourage a writer to focus, in Browning's phrase, on action in character rather than character in action. But again: doing so, to internalise the psychological complexities and nuances of so remarkable a creative intellect, asks a lot of a writer. It's no dispraise of the two novelists under consideration here that they fall back more often upon verifiable externalities.

Bethany Askew's *Three Extraordinary Years* sits somewhere between being a

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novel and a work of literary history, covering that period from January 1797 to the end of 1799 during which many of Wordsworth and Coleridge's greatest poems were composed. It's a novel that gives the reader lots of data about Sara and Samuel Coleridge and their circle. There is little inherently dramatic, novelistically speaking, in the set-up: Sara struggles with money and parenthood whilst Sam takes laudanum, moons about, goes for walks, and writes great poems. Wordsworth, Dorothy, and other friends come and go. The larger trajectory of the story is Sara and Samuel drifting apart, although the way Askew renders that estrangement gets overridden, rather, by the many day-to-day details lifted from letters and notebooks. There are a couple of tastefully softcore Sara-Samuel sex-scenes at the beginning of the story, before the later sexual chill settles between husband and wife. Askew steers wholly clear of the rumours of sexual intimacy between Wordsworth and Dorothy, presumably because she doesn't believe them, although incest would certainly had added dramatic intensity to the whole.

Three Extraordinary Years neither is, nor (to be fair) has any pretentions to being, great art. Askew's characterisation contains no surprises, and her prose, though never striking or notable, is always communicative and clear, such that her through-line narrative is easy to follow. Chapter 2, which steps back from Stowey in 1799 to sketch-in Coleridge's youth, truncated university career, brief time in the 15th Light Dragoons, and Pantisocratic friendships with other poets, is a perhaps a little over-busy, but the rest of this 300-page novel is well-paced and informative, always informative. That last term, though not intended as dispraise, is hardly a ringing endorsement, I know. As fiction *Three Extraordinary Years* is certainly more engaging than reading an encyclopedia article, and arguably less forbidding than tackling a big scholarly biography, but it contains much of the same information as both, and although the reader who knows little about the Coleridges will finish the book knowing rather more, the converse also holds—that a reader who already knows this stuff will learn little.

Stylistically *Three Extraordinary Years* errs so far on the side of unobtrusiveness as to slip often into cliché ('it never ceased to amaze Sara that …' [3], 'He was at his wit's end …' [23], 'His career as a writer was taking off …' [39]—there's lots of this kind of thing as the book goes on). Askew is innocent of the rule that sentences should not end in prepositions: 'Frank, out in India, seemed to be the only brother he could be proud of' (21); 'Poole was the only one he never had a serious argument with' (302). Saying so looks like nit-picking, perhaps; and Askew could certainly find support in modern grammarians who insist that this 'rule' is nonsense and people should write how they like. Still, I don't believe she'd find a single sentence in Coleridge's prose that perpetrates this particular solecism. The larger point is that Askew is not trying to *imitate* Coleridge, and if her novel fails to capture the dark sublimity, the opaque intensities, and self-searching complexity of her subject's art, it's not exactly a criticism to say so.

Indeed *Three Extraordinary Years* works better when it centres the quotidian

travails of Sara Coleridge, and all her hard labour of home-making and child-rearing. The book's denouement sees her realising her husband's inadequacies: 'the scales had fallen from her eyes. She had looked up to Samuel, hero-worshipped him as a great man … now she saw him as a wastrel, a weak man who couldn't face his responsibilities' (285). It's not an unreasonable perspective on Coleridge, although the novel can't quite land it as the knock-out punch it needs to, because Askew is too involved in—too interested and invested in—Coleridge as a literary genius.

To compare this book with other contemporary historical fiction—Mantel's *The Mirror and the Light*, say—is to realise how largely that old Creative Writing 101 nostrum 'show don't tell' remains an unresolved issue for creative writers. My point is not just that Mantel is a more sophisticated stylist than Askew (she is, but that would be a high bar indeed, one few published writers working today would clear). It's a more Creative Writing 101 point: Mantel comprehensively and elegantly *shows*, where Askew tells throughout. I don't say this merely to dismiss her, since there is a real debate to be had about the merits of these two textual strategies. Sometimes simply telegraphing pertinent information to your readers *is* quicker and neater; sometimes too doctrinal a commitment to always showing and never telling can become oblique and tiresome. As in many things, the trick is finding the right balance. Not that Askew's beam is exactly horizontal in this respect. Much of her novel repackages unrepurposed data mined from her sources ('Samuel worked out he needed about £100 a year to support himself and his family, including the £20 a year allowance he gave Sara's mother. A guinea a week would cover about half that and the £40 annuity that had been set up by Poole … the Unitarian church in Shrewsbury had a vacancy for a minister … "£120 a year," he told Sara proudly. "And a house worth £30 in rent …"' [157]). Sometimes she can't resist the temptation simply to prod her reader towards the 'correct' conclusion. Coleridge, Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* poems in manuscript on his lap, tells Dorothy: 'it's only a shame Wordsworth does not agree with me about traditional superstitions associated with places … his poetry is more matter of fact' (195). All this would help newcomers orient themselves with respect to the broad-brush differences between these two great English poets, but you'd hardly call it complex or original analysis.

Askew's follow-up novel *The Two Saras* concerns the more dramatically promising subject of Coleridge at Greta Hall in 1800, falling in love with Sara Hutchinson (Askew, unusually, distinguishes Coleridge's wife from love-object by calling the first 'Sara' and the second 'Sarah'). There is, as they say, no story without drama and no drama without conflict, and a love triangle certainly embodies the latter. The problem is that this particular conflict went nowhere, which gives the writer no angle towards resolution. Lacking that, the story stagnates somewhat, driving Coleridge to misery and Sara Coleridge to resentment, slowly poisoning their marriage. Without resolution this can only be a portrait of frustration and misery. A different kind of writer might make something aesthetically interesting out of that, but Askew is a resolutely linear

storyteller, and *The Two Saras* falls back, like *Three Extraordinary Years* before it, on a series of well-researched but sometimes ploddy data about Coleridge and Wordsworth's life and poetry. Misery is notated but not excavated or dramatized, and Coleridge's hopeless infatuation becomes little more than a rather stare-eyed boob-fixation ('Sarah's generous breasts rose and fell' [109]; '… her lovely pendulous breasts …' [111]; ' … her beautiful bounteous breasts …' [296]). Fewer manifestly great poems were composed 1800–1804 than during the 'great year' of 1797–98, and Askew ends with Coleridge departing for Malta, leaving loose ends otherwise untied.

Still, once again, the interested reader who knows little of Coleridge's life will find *The Two Saras* a fluent and informative read. And since, as I said above, this is fiction that establishes itself according to the general criteria of historical accuracy I could add that I found no solecisms where Askew's historical research was concerned, with the possible exception—a very trivial one—of a scene early in *The Two Saras* in which Coleridge and Dorothy Wordsworth sit up into the small hours hearing the church clock toll the hours. Mechanical striking clocks did exist in the early nineteenth-century but they were elaborate and expensive and rarely fitted to small rural church towers. Otherwise the research here is detailed and impeccable.

Berkman's *The Secret Ministry of Frost* is a rather different kind of novel. The focus here is on Coleridge's son Hartley. The story opens in 1820 as Hartley's abortive university career is coming to an end, and he frets over what to do with his life. His father, distressed at the delinquencies of his 'magic child', wanders Hampstead Heath barefoot in his nightshirt and has to be retrieved by Derwent ("Who are you? Wordsworth come to mock me with Asra's white breast?" "Father, don't you know me? It's your son, Derwent … please come back with me to your rooms at the Gillmans" [60]). Up north, Wordsworth is irked by bad reviews of his *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. Derwent survives typhus. Dorothy Wordsworth speaks common-sense to anyone who will listen. Hartley embarks on another abortive career as a journalist in London, and then yet another one as a teacher in Ambleside. As the novel closes, Coleridge's daughter Sara marries her cousin Henry and Coleridge *père* declines towards death. The narrative is interspersed with letters, fictional rather than actual, although Berkman also includes a good number of *echt* poems by Coleridge and his contemporaries (an afterword notes that two of the quoted poems are 'cuckoos eggs', written by Berkman himself: it's a credit to his skills as a pasticheur that these two do not stand out.)

Building a novel around 1820s London, rather than the more familiar 'great decade' West Country or Lake District, represents a commendable strategy, although Berkman, like Askew, must also deal with the lack of dramatic tension or easily resolvable plotting. The plainer prose of *Three Extraordinary Years* and *The Two Saras*, though it sometimes stumbles into blandness, at least keeps decently out of the way of the story it is telling; *The Secret Ministry of Frost*'s errs the other way, and sometimes gets mired in overwriting—passages in which every noun is given adjectival accompaniment, and verbs are all given

chaperoning adverbs. For example: the book opens with Hartley summoned for an awkward interview by the authorities at Oriel Oxford: 'the dark, dwarfish figure in academic gown rapped three times quickly on the thick oak door before him … Hartley shuffled rapidly across the study and collapsed on a sturdy wooden chair next to the Dean's large antique desk, with his black gown crumpled under him' (5–6). Not all the writing is like this, but a fair proportion is.

Still, in mixing narrative, epistolary and poetic modes Berkman keeps the reading experience varied, and by keeping Hartley's earnest and fidgety incapacities in view the novel as a whole builds towards an effective, if mournful, conclusion. The novel ends with Coleridge's funeral, juxtaposed with adult Hartley's alcoholic withdrawal from the possibilities of life, professional and personal, as his siblings go on to their various conventional successes. The contrast between the sometimes transcendent soarings of the poetry and the disappointments of Hartley's life provide a pungent study in the gap between hope and reality, and Berkman's novel makes clear that, so far as Coleridge's 'magic child' is concerned, good intentions and a lively imagination are not, in themselves, enough to constitute a life well lived.

This brings me back to the point with which I started: though Berkman is ready to invent with a little more licence than Askew—the episode in which an opiated and barefoot Coleridge roams Hampstead Heath in his nightgown in the 1820s, sobbing about Asra is an invention, for instance—the novel nonetheless skims over the interiority of STC. If it works better than for Askew in the final analysis that is because it matches that noncomprehension to its subject: poor old Hartley, living in the shadow of his extraordinary father in ways that he cannot grasp and certainly cannot emulate. That makes *The Secret Ministry of Frost* less a novel about Coleridge and more a novel about the impossibility of writing a novel about Coleridge—a novel in other words, intriguingly situated in the space eclipsed by genius rather than genius itself. In that sense this is a remarkable piece of writing. 'I have never been permitted to peruse the Day Book of the Recording Angel', Berkman's Hartley writes to his brother, after their father's death, 'to contemplate the memory of God which forgets nothing, in which the very abortions of time, the thoughts which we think we never thought, the meanings which we never meant to mean, live everlastingly' (195). He is articulating his regret at falling short of his great parent ('I tried once to reconcile with Father, but failed utterly, and was thereby prevented from ever trying again' is how he puts it: there is real pathos here) but this is also the dilemma of any writer who attempts to revive, on the kinds of sketchy and limited evidence available to us, a real person in their fiction.