Hilary Newman

reads

Sara Coleridge: Her Life and Thought

(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

by Jeffrey W. Barbeau

IN AN EARLIER VOLUME IN THIS SERIES ON Sara Coleridge, Peter Swaab concluded his introduction with: 'The theological works deserve a separate volume of their own, since they represent a sustained area of Sara's thought and study, and a distinct field of enquiry requiring specialist presentation.' (*The Regions of Sara Coleridge's Thought: Selected Literary Criticism*, xxxi). An associate professor of theology, Dr Barbeau provides this specialised approach to Sara Coleridge. The book is an exploration of Sara's biography and intellectual history that argues for the primacy of religion in Sara's life. It suggests that everything in her life was orientated around 'a single belief in the inner knowledge of the soul' (x) and that an interest in contemporary theological debate unified the different genres across which Sara wrote. Barbeau seeks to remove her from her father's shadow.

Sara Coleridge Her Life and Thought is more about Sara's 'thought' than her 'life'. The analysis of her intellectual life is suggested by single word chapter headings. When dealing with familiar life events, Barbeau often offers thought-provoking comments on them. For example, like Kate Waldegrave in *The Poets's Daughters*, he sees the importance of Sara equating her change into a nervous child by a fall into the River Greta, with STC's similar experience as a boy in Devon. (6) However, Barbeau sensibly suggests that it might have been the unhappy marriage of her parents and the children's abortive hopes of their reunion, which contributed as much to her delicacy and lifelong tendency to depression. (9)

In his first chapter, 'Beauty', Barbeau diverges from earlier writers when he considers Sara's essay, 'On the Disadvantages Resulting from the Possession of Beauty', in relation to her own life, which challenged the idea that it was outward beauty that mattered in a woman. Sara promoted the inward and unseen beauty above that of the external and visible. This is Barbeau's initial assertion of the importance of Sara's faith, as the essay advances the paramount importance of 'the beauty of the soul.' However, Barbeau also explains this essay was prompted by Sara's fear that her betrothed husband focused too much on her physical beauty. (21-22)

In Chapter 2, 'Education', Barbeau details the biographical facts of Sara's marriage to her cousin and the subsequent arrival of children who need educating. One of the great merits of this book is that it frequently places Sara's private experiences and preoccupations within a contemporary public context. Thus, Sara's views on educating her children are examined in the context of the national debate on education. Barbeau argues that although Sara's ideas on education were 'neither original nor revolutionary', (31) she rejected the idea that external forces shaped the individual, instead advocating

the importance of the inner development of the child. Barbeau quotes Sara's contention that the '*whole* aim' of children's education was 'the growth of their souls in goodness and holiness (32).' Sara did not challenge the different education of the sexes, rather apparently conforming to the Coleridge family's belief that female education had little value. Later her brothers and other family members came to recognise her superior intellect. Moreover, in private life Sara was more flexible, teaching her son to sew and her daughter Latin.

Barbeau displays a thorough mastery of the educational practices of the time. He tells us Sara was influenced by the theories of Madame de Genlis, Rousseau and Anne Laetitia Barbauld. The greatest influence, Barbeau suggests, was an American called Jacob Abbott, whose wish to combine pedagogy and theology was shared by Sara. She disapproved of popular stories that inculcated morals by catechising children. Among others, Barbeau instances her disapproval of the work of Reverend William Carus Wilson, but does not mention Carus Wilson's fictional counterpart, Mr Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre*: readers of Brontë's novel will remember Brocklehurst's crude attempts to produce piety in children through horrifying tales of child-deaths and subsequent hellfire. Sara's private views on education became public when she published her *Pretty Lessons in Verse for Good Children* (1834). The poems were predominantly happy and amusing.

In accordance with his emphasis on Sara's Christian faith, she was concerned with providing a religious education for children. She supported the clergyman Walter Farquhar-Hook who thought children should receive education from both teachers and clergymen. Sara was also aware that the social unrest of her period would lead to improvements in working-class conditions and that these depended on universal education.

Chapter 3, 'Dreams', again relates the public and private sphere through the publication of Sara's essay 'Nervousness', which arose from her own mental and physical sufferings. 'Dreams' also suggests *Phantasmion* (1837), an imaginative fairy-tale for adults. Barbeau usefully links *Phantasmion* with STC's definition of the imagination as 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.' (63) Barbeau's long and detailed discussion of *Phantasmion*, is an original interpretation based on his belief of the primacy of Sara's Christian faith. Although Barbeau believes that Sara inherited an interest in the dream life from her father, it is equally arguable that this was simply a result of their shared opium addiction. Barbeau has also uncovered some intriguing contemporary reviews of *Phantasmion*, including one in the *Boston Quarterly Review,* written in the form of dialogue! (68-69)

Chapter 4, 'Criticism', shows Sara finding fulfilment in writing essays on literature, theology and politics in combination with family duties. Barbeau thinks it ironical that it was the deaths of STC in 1834 and her husband in 1843 that provided her with the freedom to develop her own intellect. However, she also increasingly identified herself with STC as she continued to edit his work, resembling, in Barbeau's memorable image, 'a filial ventriloquist'. She did not publish STC's works under her own name. Barbeau brands some of her

comments at this time as 'outrageous', including her view that it was 'rather unfeminine' for women to write 'at all' on politics. Once again, she was more assertive in her private life. Paradoxically, she believed that her soul once separated from her body was the equal of any man's, but possessing a woman's body she lacked the confidence to challenge prevailing social expectations about women's status.

Chapter's 5 to 7 ('Authority', 'Reason' and 'Regeneration') are a detailed study of Sara's contribution to theological debate. Her private desire to defend her father's reputation as a Christian theologian led her into the public arena of national contemporary debate. Barbeau believes that Sara was not primarily interested in clearing her father from charges of plagiarism but in building 'her father's reputation as a *Christian*.' (93)

Barbeau suggests that while Sara shared some of her father's views about popular Biblical misapprehensions, she was uncomfortable with the extent to which he took these views in his commentaries on the Old and New Testaments. (91) She accepted Julius Hare's advice to suppress some of them. At the end of Chapter 5 Barbeau links these questions with a wider debate: 'The nation required a complete rehabilitation of reason as the antidote to the false and superstitious teaching of the Oxford Movement.' (109) This prepares the way for the next two closely argued chapters on contemporary theological debate.

In Chapters 6 and 7 Barbeau aims to 'develop her unique—and previously unrecognised—contribution to the history of nineteenth-century theology.' (112) One of the texts on which he bases this is Sara's treatise *On Rationalism*, begun in 1838 and appended to STC's *Aids to Reflection* (1843). Rejecting previous judgments of this treatise—notably that of Earl Leslie Griggs—Barbeau argues that it was a unique contribution to theology.

This treatise was partly a response to the Oxford Movement's 90 *Tracts for the Times*, published between 1833-1841. Once again, Barbeau provides a simple and succinct summary to the reader: the Movement rejected Radical Protestantism and leaned towards Rome. Although some contemporaries saw a link between STC's theological writings and the Oxford Movement, John Henry Newman rejected this idea. Barbeau considers *On Rationalism* a direct challenge to Newman's 'Tract 73', which attacked the sort of Rationalism that Newman associated with STC's theology and philosophy. Newman favoured revelation over rationalism. Barbeau sums up the content of *On Rationalism* as 'an *apologia* for the individual subject, interiority, and the spirituality of the heart against a religion founded on outward acts and ancient practices established by early church authorities.' (124)

In Chapter 7, Barbeau makes large claims for Sara's writings on regeneration, which he sees as being 'the most important idea in Sara Coleridge's literary compass' (130) and one essential to an understanding of her life and character. Barbeau suggests a private motive for Sara's public treatise and her opposition to the need for infant baptism was possibly her own devastating experiences of multiple miscarriages. Barbeau sums up the treatise

as a result of 'years of study in the biblical, historical and contemporary literature on theological anthropology, soteriology and ecclesiology.' (137)

Further, Barbeau believes that her unpublished manuscripts on regeneration constitute another outstanding contribution on the topic. As these are not available in print, Barbeau provides a straightforward and informative discussion of one of these, *Regeneration Dialogues*, which, he says, reveals 'the height of Sara's creativity as a writer, the breadth of her learning as a researcher, and the depth of her understanding as a thinker.' (147)

These central chapters deal with religious concepts that may not appeal to readers whose interest in Sara is more general. The last two chapters move away from intensive religious debate to deal with the private aspects of the remaining years of Sara's life. Chapter 8, 'Community', deals with Sara's membership of a church, an experience which was not without its ironies, and her friendships with several prominent religious thinkers whom she saw as living in the traditions of her father.

The last, and briefest, chapter, 'Death' concerns itself with that of Sara herself from breast cancer at the age of 49. In distinguishing between her failing body and her mental powers, she wished to cast aside her body and enter heaven. Although she believed she would be resurrected in a better body and reunited with those who had predeceased her, she nevertheless feared death, which finally came to her on May 3 1852. Barbeau's final sentence envisages her entry into 'her long-awaited reunion.' (181) The more secularly minded readers of this book may prefer an earlier comment of Barbeau's, when he expressed wonder at her many achievements despite years of mental depression, bodily suffering and opium addiction.

Dr Barbeau's book on Sara Coleridge is a stimulating and thought-provoking account of his subject's life and thought, particularly in its treatment of its subject's religion. Bradford Keyes Mudge had already written a biography of Sara Coleridge from the point of view of gender politics in his *Sara Coleridge: A Victorian Daughter: Her Life and Essays* (1989). Peter Swaab's *The Region of Sara Coleridge's Thought* (2012) had dealt with his subject's literary opinions. In devoting a book to the discussion of Sara Coleridge's Christian faith as the major shaping force of her life, Barbeau has come full circle to *The Memoirs and Letters of Sara Coleridge,* edited by Sara's daughter Edith, who also emphasised her mother's theological interests. Nevertheless, Barbeau has approached his topic with far more erudition than was possible for Edith. He has been able to link the personal and public aspects of Sara Coleridge's faith. But although one major theme predominates, Jeffrey Barbeau's book will stand as a peer with those others, helping readers to understand the multi-faceted talents of Sara Coleridge.