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Constructing Coleridge: The Posthumous Life of the Author

(Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

by Alan D. Vardy

THE PREMISE OF THIS BOOK IS IMPORTANT and persuasive: the Coleridge we think we know today is a *construct*, the outcome not only of his own visions and revisions, but also of editorial decisions, publishing deals, biographical investigations, of critical debates and squabbles. Given the peculiar instability of Coleridge's textual corpus, it is even truer of him than of other Romantics that he reaches modern readers mediated through his multiplicity of afterlives. One of Alan Vardy's concerns is with Coleridge's own revisions of his literary past in *Biographia Literaria*, as he attempted to rebut contemporary charges of Jacobinism, plagiarism and indolence. The principal focus of Vardy's investigation, however, is the construction of the author undertaken by the family editors, mainly (as the subtitle indicates) after the poet-philosopher's death in 1834. As Vardy notes, the Bollingen *Collected Coleridge* owes a great debt to the editorial foundations laid above all by Coleridge's daughter, Sara, as well as Henry Nelson Coleridge (Sara's cousin, whom she married in 1829) and other family members and collaborators.[1] It's therefore remarkable how little attention this phase of STC's construction has received in critical discussions. Vardy begins to make good this neglect, highlighting the significance of the family editions, the often tortuous process of compiling and annotating them, and the labour of making Coleridge's reputation respectable. In this respect the outstanding feature of *Constructing Coleridge* is its extensive reference to the largely unpublished Coleridge family letters in the Harry S. Ransom Centre archive in Texas. This archival material informs chapters on the family's response to De Quincey's scandalous articles on Coleridge in 1834; on Henry Nelson Coleridge's controversial editorship of the *Table Talk*; on the plagiarism controversy; and on Sara's editorial work, concentrating on the *Literary Remains*, *Biographia Literaria*, *Aids to Reflection*, *Essays on His Times* and the problem of establishing a collected edition.

But there are some peculiarities in this book's scholarship. Vardy is strongly conscious that Coleridge's Victorian afterlife was plagued by an unprofitable discourse of moral accusation that has lingered into present-day accounts. He thus strives equally to avoid Norman Fruman's 'moralizing' (2; not to say 'relentless moralizing', 35), whose 'morally overwrought tone' (78) on the plagiarism question appeared in an already 'unfortunate moral frame' (64); James Frederick Ferrier's 'morass of moral recrimination' on the same issue (101); and William Hazlitt's 'high moral tone of condemnation' (124). If this seems like protesting too much, what Vardy says of Ferrier may give pause to readers of *Constructing Coleridge*, too: 'the author often lapsed into moral judgment despite declaring his intention not to do so' (101). Thus Vardy after

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[1] See my 'Coleridge's Textual Afterlives', *Coleridge's Afterlives*, ed. by James Vigus and Jane Wright (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1-19. An excellent source for Coleridge-constructions is Seamus Perry (ed.), *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Interviews and Recollections* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

all takes the toughest line on the plagiarism, dismissing Coleridge's list of reasons for not always providing full citations as a 'subterfuge'—a 'laughable' one at that (68, cf. 78). Vardy insists that is 'unlikely' that 'Coleridge could remember verbatim translated passages from [his] notebook'; but also, on the same page, that J C Hare's defence of Coleridge's compositional method as the result of memory lapse is nevertheless inadmissible, since Hare's own 'poor memory, lamentable as it is, is unlike Coleridge's, *which was nearly photographic*' (104, emphasis added; cf. another arraignment of Hare's memory-based defence and—inevitably—his 'moralizing', 42).

This is not the only inconsistency: Hartley Coleridge is called a 'Whig' (50), but then quoted as maintaining a 'mixture of old cavalier Toryism and German liberalism' (51). Another affiliation is confused in the case of Joseph Cottle, Coleridge's long-suffering Bristol publisher and later—to the Coleridge family's horror—memoirist. When, in 1814, Cottle exhorted Coleridge to rid himself of opium by praying, Coleridge responded (CL III 478) with some agonising reflections on prayer in the course of which he attacked Socinianism (the anti-Trinitarian doctrine that Christ was a mere man, not divine). According to Vardy, Coleridge was here 'correcting Cottle's reductive Socinian rationalism' (88)—an interpretation that makes for good drama, but overlooks the fact that Cottle, a Baptist, was theologically at a different extreme from Socinianism. Indeed, Cottle reveals in his *Recollections* that he had rejoiced when Coleridge turned against the latter doctrine.[2] Coleridge's anti-Socinian remarks in this letter, then, were calculated not to antagonise Cottle, but to conciliate him.

It is also necessary to take one of Vardy's most pivotal and striking lines of interpretation with a pinch of salt. Throughout the book, he maintains that Henry Nelson Coleridge was a baneful influence on the early construction of STC. Vardy argues especially that Henry put his own 'ultra-Tory cant' (6) into STC's mouth when compiling the *Table Talk*. He therefore questions this work's inclusion 'in the Coleridge canon' on the ground that 'Coleridge wasn't the author' (56).[3] It may well be the case that 'examination of the notebook entries that served as the basis for the text [of *Table Talk*] shows subtle, but clear, evidence of deliberate distortions in the public text' (ibid.)—but no such detailed comparison appears in these pages. There is also little doubt that Henry's political views, revealed for instance in his comments on slavery in *Six Months in the West Indies* (1825), were from a modern perspective unpalatable (cf. TT I lxx and f.); but to establish that Henry was uniformly 'reactionary' (25), lacking 'political sophistication' (63), 'completely unqualified' in philosophical matters (95), irascible and 'arrogant' in his dealings with the publisher William Pickering (142), and above all a bad influence on Sara (8, 59) whom he kept 'isolated in Regent's Park' and who at length 'succumbed' to his 'retrograde views', only to be mercifully '[f]reed to live' by his early death in January 1843 (141)—would require a really comprehensive review of biographical evidence. For this amounts to a wholesale reassessment of

[2] See Timothy Whelan, 'Joseph Cottle the Baptist', *Charles Lamb Bulletin* 111 (2000), 96-108; also Lynda Pratt, '"Let not Bristol be Ashamed?" Coleridge's Afterlife in the *Early Recollections* of Joseph Cottle', in *Coleridge's Afterlives*, 20-35.

[3] For an implicitly contrasting view, see David Vallins, 'Coleridge as Talker: Sage of Highgate, *Table Talk*', in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Frederick Burwick (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 307-322.

character that runs counter to, say, the *DNB*'s presentation ('contemporary accounts suggest that Henry Coleridge was a man of great wit, irresistible charm, and sociability…'), but above all to Sara's own touching expressions of regret at the loss of 'my beloved Henry'.[4]

What do powerfully emerge in the passages of manuscript correspondence selected by Vardy are the remarkable qualities that Sara brought to the intractable task of editing and publishing her father's works. As a *Victorian Daughter* (the subtitle of Bradford K. Mudge's 1989 biography) as well as wife and widow, Sara's sphere of action was limited, yet she became one of the greatest scholars of her age. (This fact alone puts in question the portrayal of Henry as boorish tyrant.) Jeffrey Barbeau has drawn attention to her theological writing, and Vardy's analysis of her long essay 'On Rationalism' and her contribution on 'Mr. Coleridge's Religious Opinions' in her introduction to *Biographia Literaria* continues this welcome reassessment, as does Robin Schofield's paper in this Bulletin. Moreover, Vardy points out her feat of tactful ventriloquism in a letter to Pickering attempting (unsuccessfully) to negotiate a transfer of publishing rights to Edward Moxon. The letter was partly dictated to Sara by Henry from his sick-bed, shortly before his death. She placed an asterisk at the point where dictation ceased, adding: 'So far was dictated by my husband word for word—the rest is the substance of what he added in conversation' (quoted 147). At this point the tone of the letter becomes more conciliatory, the first person 'I' hovering ambiguously between Henry and Sara (147-8). This episode may reveal a great deal about Sara's methods as a writer obliged to make the best of operating within the constraints of predominantly masculine literary exchange.[5]

Vardy finds in the family's construction of Coleridge above all a 'pattern of selectively suppressing facts, denial, and dissembling as they constructed the version of Coleridge they thought most palatable to the general public' (31). This provocative thesis may well have the beneficial effect of encouraging further research on Sara Coleridge, perhaps including more extensive publication of the family manuscripts. In one of the long, detailed letters she wrote to her friend Henry Crabb Robinson in the process of soliciting his advice on editorial matters, Sara declared: 'You may have perceived how desirous I am that all my father's literary dealings his whole conduct as a man of letters should be fully and truthfully stated; that there should be no attempt either by concealment or false colouring to make it appear other than such as it really was.'[6] Was this a disingenuous ideal or a truly effective guiding principle? *Constructing Coleridge* opens that debate.

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[4] Sara Coleridge to Mrs. Henry M. Jones, 13 October 1843, in *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge*, edited by her daughter [Edith Coleridge], 4th edition (London: Henry S. King, 1875), 146. Cf. 67: 'My dear Henry, too, was deeply sensible of his [STC's] good as well as his great qualities; it was not for his genius only that he reverenced him, and it has been one of many blessings attendant on my marriage, that by it we were both drawn into closer communion with that gifted spirit than could otherwise have been the case.'

[5] At the Coleridge Summer Conference 2010, Peter Swaab ('Sara Coleridge's Manners') presented a fascinating account of Sara's private forthrightness. Her intelligence is matched with a wicked sense of humour.

[6] Sara Coleridge to Henry Crabb Robinson, 13 February 1849. Henry Crabb Robinson Correspondence 1849, 9b-11, Dr. Williams's Library, London, quoted by kind permission of the Director and Trustees of the Library. For a list of Sara's letters to Robinson in this collection, see Edith J. Morley, *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, ed. by Edith J. Morley, 3 vols (London: J.M. Dent, 1938), III, 886.