Dometa Brothers[1]
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The Coleridge Legacy: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Intellectual Legacy in Britain and America, 1834–1934
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)
by Philip Aherne

PHILIP AHERNE'S BOOK, *THE COLERIDGE LEGACY,* is ambitious both in scope and perspective; it traces Coleridgean ideas across the Atlantic Ocean from England to America during a one hundred-year timespan. The fact that a broad overview is considered "ambitious," reveals long-running difficulties inherent to Coleridge studies. Historically, scholars have struggled with the depth, breadth, and diversity of Coleridge's ideas across various genres of writing, including his poetry, political and religious essays, philosophical works, and criticism. There is a persistent temptation to portray Coleridge as omni-competent. In addition to this wide-ranging collective output, critics can point to the difficulties inherent in Coleridge's own fragmentary approaches, many revisions of texts and reversals of ideas, along with failed attempts to complete and publish works. There is a parallel, competing, critical temptation to dismiss Coleridge as a brilliant failure. Not least, Coleridge's biography is plagued by reproach for his personal life, struggles with opium addiction, and repeated charges of plagiarism. There is a long history of critics acknowledging the complexity and variety of Coleridge's philosophical legacy; moreover, while acknowledging such critical problems, many have traced specific narrow lines of influence, all the while being careful to not overextend or generalize their assertions to other critics' sometimes contradictory conclusions. Taken together, one begins to comprehend the difficulty of Aherne's task. Furthermore, Aherne's book is not a treatment of Coleridge's popular and well-studied poetry, but rather focuses on the more philosophical prose output of his later life. During the one hundred-year period covered by this project, much of Coleridge's later work remained in fragmentary or unpublished form or remained confined to the *Notebooks, Marginalia*, and accounts of oral lectures, making assertions about influence even more historically difficult to trace.

The examination of these critical difficulties forms the core of the first three chapters of this book. Aherne illustrates the problems in Coleridge studies generally, and the problem of establishing influence more specifically, by presenting assertions of Coleridge's profound evidence from his contemporaries and then contrasting that evidence with what are now common critical assertions of the uneven effect of Coleridge's work. As an example, Charles Eliot Norton is quoted, "There is scarcely one of the English thinkers of the present day who does not owe much, directly or indirectly, to the

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teaching of Coleridge" (3). Aherne explains, "The sheer confidence of these statements constitute a challenge to our current understanding of Coleridge's influence; his admirers appreciated his intellectual achievement and were certain that his ideas would have a profound and lasting effect upon a whole generation of thinkers, and yet, our knowledge of the practical nature and actual outcomes of this process is by comparison extremely limited" (3).

Aherne builds his most original idea for the reconciliation of problems associated with Coleridgean influence through an examination of the tension between the beliefs of Coleridge's near immediate successors and our own contemporary critical outcomes. Aherne reevaluates Coleridge's "Sage of Highgate" years through the lens of specific pedagogical intent. He establishes how Coleridge thought of himself as a teacher/talker during these years, holding forth as a monologuing multipotentialite. The ephemeral nature of "Coleridge the talker" would seem to set Aherne a difficult analytical task. However, using sources such as letters, notebooks, and personal accounts by his listeners, Aherne carefully builds the case for Coleridge as teacher. He analyzes Coleridge's use of fragmentary structure, aphorism, and reflective process, focusing on "what he [Coleridge] nominated as the central components of his educational legacy, and how he endeavoured to fulfil his ambitions … concentrating on the peculiar methods he adopted to disseminate his thought" (8). The research establishing Coleridge's pedagogical intent is thorough and persuasive.

It is in Aherne's discussion of the reflective process as a pedagogical tool that he posits his most helpful take on Coleridge's legacy as a philosophical reformer. As he explains, "one is a spectator to a thought process, a witness to the activity of his mind, and thereby the recipient of knowledge or instruction" (37). Coleridge's pedagogical aim then was to demonstrate his thinking process as much as it was to display his knowledge. Both through hearing him speak and through using his reflexive strategies, his "students" would carry his influence forward. Aherne rehabilitates Coleridge's monologuing as a demonstration that captures and recreates some of the habits of his busily connecting and comparing mind. Works like *Aids to Reflection* are recast not only as stores of aphorisms to provoke moral reflection, but—with their fragmentary nature, diversity of topic, and accompanying lengthy notes as tangential excursions—become important pedagogical exercises in training one's own mind along Coleridgean avenues. This insight into Coleridge's ideas of education and the intellectual projects of his later years (including *Aids to Reflection*, *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, the *Logic*, and the *Magnum Opus*) work in the book's organizational scheme to (1) explain why Coleridge's ideas are to be found in the writings of such a diversity of thinkers as Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), John Ruskin (1819–1900), Frederick D. Maurice (1805–1872), T. H. Green (1836–1882), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), and John Dewey (1859–1952) as well as others, and (2) show how those ideas are put to such disparate and even blatantly contradictory uses by these other philosophical figures.

This book also makes much of Coleridge's Kantian-inspired creation of a "clerisy" as part of his pedagogical project. Aherne argues that Coleridge believed that by training young aristocratic/intellectual men in the habits of mind and processes of reflection, great strides might be made in art, politics, religion, and all the structures of society. This training in independent thought and the creation of a clerisy control the arguments in chapters four through eight of the book. Coleridge's own pedagogical plan combining faith, art, and politics complicates any discussion of how ideas are passed on. In effect, Aherne makes the case that these two pedagogical approaches create a broad historical context in which Coleridge's thinking process becomes a medium of influence for men[2] across a wide spectrum of philosophical schools. In such a scheme, a British empiricist and an American idealist can both claim Coleridgean inspiration.

One effect of this type of entwined discussion is that Aherne shows, for instance, how philosophers across a spectrum of thinking picked up, expanded, and sometimes transformed Coleridge's ideas. Using the idea of Coleridge as model thinker and molder of the clerisy, Aherne deftly exhibits in chapter seven how members of the Oxford Movement, the Broad Church movement, and Christian Socialist thinkers can all accurately be called Coleridgean despite their sometimes contradictory conclusions. As a result, "The political ideas of Coleridge's Clerisy become the political ideals of the age through the dissemination of this model" (202). Due to this cross-movement influence, discussion in the book necessarily crisscrosses between schools of philosophy, writers (creative and critical), and educational and societal reformers on both sides of the Atlantic. For those readers not already well-versed in the writings of the various schools of philosophy being discussed, some confusion might be inevitable. Aherne chooses to follow the transformation of individual ideas across movements via personal influence rather than only map ideas linearly and chronologically through a movement.

To identify that such organization might be confusing is not necessarily a criticism, because it is a perfectly logical arrangement to express the Coleridgean nature of the argument. Tracking ideas across time, movements, geographical distance, and fields of study means that Aherne's task is to reweave a simulacrum of the historical tapestry, rather than pull out and closely examine a single thread. The admission of possible confusion is merely a caution for the reader. In the conclusion of the book Aherne acknowledges this difficulty when he presents his lengthy template of an ideal Coleridgean admitting, "The summary … amounts to the ultimate rendering of that figure.

[2] The gendered term "men" is chosen here for two reasons: 1. All the Coleridgean philosophers addressed in Aherne's book are male. 2. Probably most importantly, Aherne's presented evidence shows that Coleridge specifically addresses his pedagogical intentions to men in an 1822 letter to Daniel Stuart when he says, "I might form a Class of five or six men, who are educating themselves for the Pulpit, the Bar, the Senate, or any of those walks of Life, in which the possession and the display of intellect are of especial importance" (CL V 220). This approach rests on the historical fact that the members of Coleridge's targeted Clerisy would have been entering professions such as law, the professoriate, and the clergy, which were then entirely closed to women in the UK and the USA—and would remain so for decades.

The preceding chapters have detailed the startling variety of methods and modes through which that proposed model was engaged and how those engagements incorporate the adjustments made to the model as it was implemented" (280). In other words, one cannot separate the diffuse nature of the influence from the acts of the process of influence.

This book is a broad treatment, and, does not claim otherwise. There are moments where one would wish for more chronological, linear organization (this reviewer at one point made a chart to trace ideas across the philosophical schools of England and America!). Paradoxically, there are other moments when one might wish for a more in-depth analysis of particular texts. For example, chapter six covers Coleridgean influence within utilitarianism and transcendentalism, across America and Britain—a large topic difficult to confine to its boundaries; admittedly however, a more narrowly focused discussion could easily burgeon into its own monograph. There do seem to be some missed opportunities for lines of development. Aherne does a good job linking Coleridge's influence to American Transcendentalism via James Marsh, William Shedd, and William James, but he could widen the discussion of pragmatic philosophers beyond James and Dewey to include the pragmatacist[3] Charles Sanders Peirce. Surely Coleridgean thought guided some of Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotics.

Of course, it is unfair to quibble, as no book can cover every subset of a topic—and, it is certainly no flaw, but a merit in the writing, that makes one wish the author had written more on a subject. In fact, one of the great strengths of Aherne's book is that the pedagogical context acts as a connective tissue linking Coleridge across wide fields philosophically, geographically, and chronologically. Aherne's lucid, straightforward prose, and the strong central tenet of the text substantiates these links with empathy while avoiding hagiography. He is cautious in his claims and methodical in his research. The book thereby manages a balance, restraint, and delicacy difficult to achieve in the labyrinthine world of Coleridge studies. It also helps to rehabilitate the figure of Coleridge as a steady and important shaping force in the resultant philosophical / educational systems of Britain and America in the one-hundred years following his death.

[3] The term "pragmatacist," although unwieldy, was used by C.S. Peirce.