Ben Manning

reviews

*Clouds of Glory—The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

(A Film – GRANADA TV/ITV 1978)

Directed by Ken Russell, co-writer with Melvyn Bragg

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KEN RUSSELL'S 1978 TV FILM HAS BEEN AN ENIGMA to me for years. I first heard about it whilst volunteering in Coleridge Cottage. I met a Coleridge scholar from the United States who told me about a magical film he had seen in the 1980's on PBS and how the image of Sara Coleridge with part of a huge anchor embedded in her chest (having been killed by her husband), had stuck with him all these years… .

Then why haven't we heard of this film? Because of a copyright problem involving the music played in the film (by Benjamin Britten and Vaughn Williams) the film has not been repeated or ever released on video in the UK. And any suggestion that this film has been "banned" due to sexual imagery or drug taking should be ignored. It hasn't surfaced on YouTube, other than my recently posted clip. So when I finally tracked down a battered bootleg from a collector in Australia, I was delighted. The version I saw was from a 1983 Channel 9 Australia showing and is in dire condition. Despite unwatchable quality it is a testament to the films magnificence that I was transfixed and moved to tears.

But it gets even odder. There was a second film. This concentrated on Wordsworth and not a copy is to be found, even in the murky bootleg world. The titles of both films are provocative, but don't be put off. "William and Dorothy: The Love Story of the Poet and His Sister" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: The Strange Story of Samuel Coleridge, Poet and Drug Addict" are certainly to the point that Ken Russell wants to make!

The first of the two "Clouds of Glory" films concerns Coleridge's demons… drugs, and his marriage. It begins with urgent classical music accompanied by gloriously spirited and unusual title graphics. It is eclectic and bold and just a little extreme, which is in keeping with the film and the director's style. It is faithful to the facts but aims at a symbolic interpretation derived from Coleridge's prose and poetry, from which the films draws metaphors to illustrate the problems in Coleridge's life. It works superbly, and the cast is classic. There will never be a better choice for Coleridge than the late David Hemmings who looks eerily like his role, and is a dead ringer compared to Linus Roache. David Warner plays Wordsworth in both 50 minute films with some accuracy. Felicity Kendal seems a good choice as Dorothy, but perhaps somewhat overdoes the northern accent.

The opening scene shows Coleridge frantically searching for his opium "stash", in what is perhaps his Highgate home. It is nowhere to be found and he dashes here and there to retrieve it whilst a beautiful reading of the Mariner plays over the action. Some fine sequences follow, one of which is a

delightfully camp scene between S.T.C, Lovell and Southey (Murray Melvin and Ben Aris) as they are thrashing out the Pantisocracy idea. The sequences in a huge lake with Coleridge arguing whilst rowing with his wife (and complaining to the world about all his fellow artists that betrayed him) demonstrate that Ken Russell clearly knew his subject well—and as usual he delights in shocking. The lake is really a metaphor for Coleridge's intellectual confinement and sense of isolation. It is his own mind that is his prison, rather than a Lime Tree Bower and he cannot find the longed-for sympathy that would free him. However, the interplay between "I shot the Albatross" and Coleridge killing his wife are contentious, and should be considered symbolic—a dream type sequence which works surprisingly well.

It is a significant misfortune that this film remains unseen and unreleased as it is superior to Julian Temple's "Pandemonium". What is appealing is that Russell saw no need to change or embellish the facts, of which he makes full dramatic use, as he does of the outdoor scenes in the Lake District. But the film's most delightful scenes are set in Somerset (though ironically no filming was done in the West). A glorious recreation of the Nether Stowey cottage sees an excited Coleridge introduce the Wordsworth's to Sara. My favourite scene follows, in which Hemmings does a moving and superb performance of "Frost at Midnight". Another deft touch by Russell is a reading of the lines beginning "Through the fog it came", as STC gazes through the window on first meeting "Asra". The lighting and the enchanting music (fatal to the commercial release) give her entrance great power.

Of course, Russell pushes Coleridge's drug addiction to the forefront, rightly or wrongly— and this may infuriate some viewers but he also quotes an irritable Coleridge defending his prescribed medication to William and Dorothy in a picturesque Scotland. Hemmings is necessarily aged for scenes as an older man, in which he closely resembles the portrait by Washington Alston and owned by Tom Poole.

There are witty lines of dialogue between the cast and a prim and proper Sara (played by Kika Markham) who presides over STC, denying Coleridge his opium. Throughout the film Hemmings often shrieks passionately from his boat on the lake. He curses but also shouts with delight regarding his memories of Wordsworth but rues his luck too. There are telling scenes with DeQuincey also, that as always are intercut with an older Coleridge passing judgement on himself… usually for the worse. The most astonishing scene involves the spectre "Death" approaching Coleridge on a boat. It is up there with all the iconic images Russell produced in "Tommy" or his Elgar film.

The scenes at the end at Dr Gillman's house are close to the reality, and the film ends with an evocative last few lines from *The Ancient Mariner.* As the lines are read—'A sadder and wiser man/ Rose he the morrow morn'—Coleridge is sitting in his Highgate home, writing his memoirs and looking wise. Indeed, throughout the film, readings of the poem are matched with countless Freudian insights into Coleridge's life. This works to great effect and unlike Julian Temple, Russell sticks to the facts and embellishes them only with

effective hints and suggestions. The acting is by turns, comic and passionate—very Coleridgean—and Hemmings' heartfelt performance seems to create a figure in manner and appearance uncanninly like the STC we all imagine.

It is a real gem but will or would cause outrage amongst some Coleridgeans. This is Ken Russell and he thrived on outrage! But it is visually sumptuous and pretty tasteful all things considered. Russell is one of those film makers who was very patchy but when he made a great film it was better than the best of other more consistent film makers. "Rime" is surprisingly restrained, despite the focus on Coleridge's opium. The Wordsworth film might have developed a slightly off the wall interpretation of Dorothy and William's closeness, but that is conjecture, as no copy has surfaced. I am pleased it was filmed in the 70's as that was the heyday of TV drama and never surpassed. Sadly a third film about Southey was never filmed due to lack of funds. It's sad to think Russell ended up doing YouTube projects with students, and quietly ironic that *Clouds of Glory* should find a partial home there.[1]

Mrs Samuel Taylor Coleridge meets her imaginative and imaginary end at the hands of her husband. Russell uses controversial or quirky artistic licence to the full.

[1] A brief history of 'Clouds of Glory' can be found at:
http://www.mountainx.com/movies/review/clouds_of_glory_william_and_dorothy_and_rime_of_the_ancient_mariner#.UrYOmGKYbIV
IMDB(an online film catalogue) entries for the two films:
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077347/?ref_=fn_al_tt_3
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077346/?ref_=fn_al_tt_2