# Eugene Stelzig[1]
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# *This Long Pursuit: Reflections of a Romantic Biographer*
(New York: Pantheon Books, 2016)
by Richard Holmes

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RICHARD HOLMES IS BEST KNOWN FOR HIS AWARD-WINNING biographies of Shelley and Coleridge, and more recently his magisterial study of the intimate relationship between poetry and the emergence of modern science in the Romantic age.[2] These books have considerable depth, breadth, and heft—the Shelley biography is some eight hundred pages, and the two volumes of Coleridge's life add up to well over a thousand. Unlike most academic critics, Holmes is a pleasure to read, because he writes with facility, grace, and wit, eschewing jargon and obscurity. With the polished style of a first-rate journalist and the zeal of a hands-on researcher, he judiciously avoids both hagiography and pathography. While consistently exemplifying his ideal of empathy and even love in tracking his subjects, he is also willing to get down into the messy nitty-gritty of their daily lives. Thus, after reading about Coleridge's student days at Cambridge,[3] where the poet lived "a kind of double life" indulging in "wild expenditure on books, drinking, violin lessons, theatre and whoring" (49), or his trip to Malta in 1804 when "the opium doses had completely blocked his bowels,"[4] one cannot help seeing the young genius in an entirely new and humanized light.

Like Boswell, "the father of English biography,"[5] Holmes is also an autobiographer. Indeed, *This Long Pursuit* is "the third in the trilogy" of books in which he engages in a genre that he acknowledges "has always seemed to [him] a perilous enterprise" (341). As he puts it at the end of the third volume, these books "are offered as an inside account of one particular biographer at work, but also include the experience (and the history) of many others I have admired" (341). Holmes' career of meta-biographical and autobiographical reflections began over three decades ago with *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (1985) with his literal retracing in 1964 of Robert Louis Stevenson's travels in the south of France, a kind of "haunting" (65) that "led [Holmes] towards biography" (69). As he then discovered, the prerequisite for the biographer is "a form of identification or self-projection," and "if you are not in love" with your subjects "you will not follow them—not very far, anyway" (67). At the same time, Holmes is aware that empathy, "the most powerful, the most necessary" of "biographical

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[1] Eugene Stelzig is Distinguished Teaching Professor Emeritus of English at the State University of New York at Geneseo. He has published widely on Romanticism, including books on Wordsworth (1975), Hermann Hesse (1988), Rousseau and Goethe (2000), Romantic autobiography (2009), and Henry Crabb Robinson (2010).

[2] Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*, 2008.

[3] Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions, 1772–1804* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

[4] Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections, 1804–1834* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 12.

[5] Richard Holmes, *Sidetracks: Explorations of a Romantic Biographer* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 371.

emotions" is also "the most deceptive" (*Sidetracks*, 4).

One of Holmes' signal strengths is that he is able to combine this necessary but dangerous empathic identification with a historian's objectivity and commitment to research as well as a fiction writer's narrative skill. This sophisticated balance defines his approach to a genre whose "appeal . . . to a wide public" comes at a time when, as he observed in his "Boswell's Bicentenary" essay, the "collapse of academic literary criticism . . . has left the old, humane Arnoldian form of commentary at the disposal of biographers and their readers" (*Sidetracks,* 375). Admittedly his approach has its drawbacks ("the Shelleys' lives were simply so much more interesting than my own") and even absurdities: "there is something frequently comic about the trailing figure of the biographer: a sort of tramp permanently knocking at the kitchen window and secretly hoping he might be invited in for supper" (*Footsteps*, 169, 144). Holmes epitomizes the unattainable ideal that informs his practice through a striking metaphor: Biography "should summon up figures like a magic photographic plate, and hold them through time, at ten foot to infinity, with the soft shock of recognition, perfectly alive" (*Footsteps,* 150). These volumes cover a wide biographical range, including an account, in the first, of a year spent in France trying to write but failing to complete a biography of Nerval. There are also some recursive doublings back, especially with regard to Coleridge, Mary Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and the Shelleys. At times he tries to cram too much into his biographical gallery, including even experimental creative writing ventures (in the second volume) like his radio plays based on the life of the poet Nerval and on "Shelley's last days in Italy."

*This Long Pursuit*, though still over 300 pages, has more focus and less sprawl than the prior volume, and also suggests a culmination of the life-writing project that has defined his long career. The first of three parts into which the book is divided, and appropriately titled "Confessions," is almost entirely autobiographical. The tone and mood of this volume that revisits some of his earlier biographical ventures is both retrospective and at times elegiac as Holmes "reflects on the whole journey, and the time left, and what if anything I have learned along the way" (5). In the first essay ("Traveling"), he revisits his involvement, "for nearly fifteen years" (7), with Coleridge's life. Because "this led [him] to "[Humphrey] Davy's biography, and more generally the relations between science and literature" (16), the next essay ("Experimenting") recounts how he came to write *The Age of Wonder* about "the creation of Romantic science—but built out of diverse biographies, with strong local colour but rich in digressions" (32). Here Holmes' feminist sympathies also come into play, because "the women had an important role in the story," though "conventional science historians had rather ignored them" (23). Thus "the central scientific story emerged as that of William and Caroline Herschel" (37). The next chapter ("Teaching") shows Holmes, who had thought of his work "as a vocation rather than a profession" accepting a position in 2001 at the University of East Anglia to teach a graduate course on biography. Despite his doubts about "whether that could be taught" (61), it's an experience he

clearly relished, and the academic ends up in this chapter providing a concise history of the genre in England, as well as "a possible canon of twenty-seven classic English works written between 1670 and 1970" (55), concluding with an "ironic" and tongue-in-cheek postscript of his "Ten Commandments for any other practicing biographers" (69), including the final injunction to "be Humble" because "we can never know, or write, the Last Word about the Human Heart" (70).

The last two pieces in the "Confessions" section, "Forgetting" and "Ballooning," focus playfully on the fascination of the "sixty-nine-year old biographer" (73) with the vagaries of memory and his "middle age" obsession with hot-air balloons, those "dragons in the sky" on which he also wrote a book.[6] His discussion of memory in the former includes David Hartley's 1749 treatise on the association of ideas that had a significant impact on the young Coleridge and Wordsworth and "whose theories strikingly anticipate much speculative modern neuroscience" (79). Holmes also acknowledges his own "nominative aphasia" as the problem of forgetting "among the late-middle-aged" (85) and points to "one particularly enigmatic feature of old age, "the fact that as old people begin to forget their immediate past, they often begin to remember their distant childhood with startling vividness" (92). In the short account of ballooning, he speculates about an "unsigned newspaper article in the *New York Sun* of 1845," possibly authored by Edgar Allen Poe, that describes the ascent of Coleridge in a hot-air balloon "ten thousand feet above the 'Exmoor confines of Devon'" (99). This may merely be fictional hot air on Poe's part, but Holmes enjoys the "brilliant hoax" (107).

In the second part of the book ("Restorations"), Holmes shifts from autobiography to biography by profiling the lives as well as the biographical treatment of five extraordinarily talented women whose contributions have been forgotten, undervalued, or maligned: Margaret Cavendish, Isabelle de Tuyll, Madame de Staël, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Somerville. The first of these, the eccentric "Mad Madge" (132), published "no fewer than twenty-three volumes" including "plays, essays, orations, fictions, biography, autobiography and letters" (124) and "became the first woman to attend one of the Royal Society's formal meetings" in 1667 (125). A "poet, polemicist, feminist, satirist, aristocrat, naturalist, stylist . . . she stands forever at the doors of the Royal Society demanding readmittance" (131). The second of these, who as a young woman chose the "sexy" *nom-de-plume* Zélide (137), became involved in a playful romantic relationship with the young Boswell during his stay in Holland. She turned down his epistolary proposal, but married and in her forties transformed herself into "the formidable . . . moralist, social commentator . . . and author of two lengthy epistolary novels" who became the romantic mentor of the young Benjamin Constant—until "she was finally supplanted in [his] affections by the turbulent figure of Madame de Staël" (141). "Largely forgotten for more than a hundred years," she found her

[6] Richard Holmes, *Falling Upwards: How We Took to the Air* (New York: Pantheon, 2013).

"unlikely champion" in a "young English architectural historian, Geoffrey Scott" (142), whose biography of her, published in 1925, was a "landmark" because "it changed forever the way English biographers wrote (or failed to write) about women" (150).

Zelide's successor as Constant's lover-mentor, the formidable literary drama queen who "once completely out-talked Coleridge at a soirée" (155), was not one to be easily forgotten, but Holmes asks "why isn't she better remembered today?" (166). With "her famous turban" as her "brand mark" (159) she could overshadow men from Napoleon to "the philosopher Fichte," getting down "his entire metaphysical system in less than 'fifteen minutes or so'" (164) for her then famous but now long "out of fashion" *de L'Allemagne*. According to Holmes, "a new crop of lively biographical studies . . . confirm that she was a truly extraordinary woman who courageously created a new role in society . . . that of the independent, freelance, female intellectual" (167). Unlike Madame de Staël, Mary Somerville, who "arguable launched the whole popular genre" (199) of science writing in her groundbreaking book *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences*" (183), has not had her star shine so brightly, though her "book was steadily republished throughout Mary's lifetime" (208) and she served as "an outstanding model for the next generation of younger women in science" (210). She did, however, gain a "kind of living memorial" with the founding of an Oxford college in her name in 1879, and "in 2016 her head appeared on the Scottish £10 note" (216).

The most impressive piece of "restoration" is the chapter on Mary Wollstonecraft, a figure who has haunted Holmes' biographical imagination since his early fascination with the Shelley circle. When she died in 1797 at the age of thirty-eight, "she was already one of the literary celebrities of her generation" (171). But in the wake of the tell-all memoir of her scandalous life by her husband William Godwin, her reputation went into a steep decline from which it did not really recover until the twentieth century. In his determination "to tell each phase of Mary's short but turbulent life with astonishing openness," Godwin created "a revolutionary kind of intimate biography" (176). The radical philosopher and novelist assumed that such "full exposure" would lead to "understanding, and then sympathy," but "he could not have been more mistaken" (180), because when his *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* appeared in 1798, it was roundly condemned in a series of "formidable attacks" (181) led by the *Anti-Jacobin Review.* Even an "erstwhile supporter" like the feminist novelist Mary Hays turned against Wollstonecraft (184). Holmes makes a good case for the *Memoirs,* "that some two centuries later it is still possible to find . . . shocking," by emphasizing how "intrepid" (196) his frank treatment is and how it anticipates "recent developments in intimate family memoirs" at a time when "the very notion of what is biographically private . . . has profoundly altered" (192).

The last third of *This Long Pursuit* ("Afterlives") returns us to the canonical ground of British Romanticism with chapters on Keats, Shelley,

Thomas Lawrence, Coleridge, and Blake. In covering such familiar territory, Holmes seeks at times to revise and supplement his earlier treatment (Shelley, Coleridge) as well as introduce new biographical perspectives (Keats, Blake). He opens "John Keats the Well-Beloved" with having "spent a week" four decades ago working in the building in Rome in which Keats died, and proceeds to consider why Keats' life "has retained a magnetic force not really matched in its personal immediacy by any other Romantic poet" (222), as evident in the fact that "there have been at least ten major literary biographies of Keats over the last fifty years or so" (227). In reviewing some of these, Holmes raises the issue of "just how important was Fanny Brawne in the overall, imaginative sweep of Keats's life," considering that their "love story … occupies only the last twenty months" (226) when he had already written most of his major poems. He also considers the enigma that has troubled Keats biographers, the mystery of the poet's relationships with other women, especially Isabella Jones, before he met Fanny. And since that relationship "was certainly not love at first sight," but was "essentially a drama of absences, longings and withholdings" (235), Holmes' skepticism about the legend of their relationship seems justified as a cautionary corrective. Instead, he suggests the formative influence of the worldly Charles Brown, eight years older and "a sort of substitute elder brother" in what became "a truly intimate friendship, emotionally more intense than either would quite admit" (239). This is a plausible suggestion in light of the fact that "Brown's influence significantly antedates that of Fanny Brawne" (239).

In "Shelley Undrowned" Holmes again throws a revisionary light on a long-standing Romantic and sentimental legend, the death of the twenty-nine-year-old poet in a storm in the Gulf of Spezia. In his 1974 biography, he "stopped the main narrative the moment the waves closed over his head" because he "could not bear witness to the long-delayed recovery of the battered body or the fantastic rigmarole of the beach cremation" (245). Forty plus years later, he deconstructs the myth of Shelley's death as the inevitable tragic fate of the angelic poet, that idealized image of cultivated by his widow and the Victorians. In fact, the drowning was a simple accident: Shelley's recently acquired boat, unknown to him, "had a "fundamental design flaw": it had been refitted and turned into "a nautical death trap" because in "heavy seas it might fill with water . . . and go straight down" (251)—which it did. Holmes proceeds to speculate, if Shelley hadn't drowned, "how might his life have continued?," and concludes his "counter-factual speculations" with the older biographer's warning that "it is still dangerously easy to wish 'Lives' to conform to archetypes, or fables, or even fairy tales" (257).

The dismantling of another fable also informs the penultimate chapter, "Coleridge Misremembered," based on Holmes' lecture at the Royal Institution about Coleridge's lectures there two centuries earlier. Holmes had already devoted a chapter in the second volume of his biography to this erratic lecture series of 1808 that has come down to us in literary history as a disaster with Coleridge the opium addict droning on without notes in an endless series of

digressions—and also lectures canceled at the last minute due to illness. In the *Darker Reflections* chapter ("The Lecture Shirt"), Holmes notes that this perception is based on only the opening lectures, because in those that followed Coleridge found his own style of highly personal and inspiredly impromptu presentation that held his audience spellbound. In revisiting these lectures in *This Long Pursuit*, he stresses that although "they appear to be remembered as nothing but a catalogue of disasters and disappointments" (283), they are in fact, "if history may be rewritten by biography" (286), "an intellectual tightrope act" (296) in which Coleridge was "working towards his great theory of the imagination" (297). Thus "Coleridge has been misremembered," and "the legend or the myth . . . has subtly distorted the historical record" (303). Rather, for Holmes, "the 1808 series should be considered as a triumph snatched from the jaws of disaster" and (the author here carried away by his own revisionary rhetoric) "one of the eccentric glories of the Royal Institution" (302).

All the figures featured in the three *Romantic Biographer* volumes are writers, with the exception of two painters in the "Afterlives" section ("Thomas Lawrence Revarnished" and "William Blake Rediscovered"). While taking in the "dazzling exhibition" of Lawrence's paintings at the National Portrait Gallery in 2010, Holmes "felt a kind of spreading, inward glow" (263) and thus he is happy to join in the resurrection of his reputation, which "has fluctuated in a remarkable way" from a "bravura master of Regency portraiture" to "a brash and sentimental commercial artist" (263). This child prodigy son of a tavern keeper triumphed in the London art scene, becoming "a full member of the Royal Academy at the age of twenty-five" (267). His was a spectacular commercial success with "portraits . . . prominent in the Royal Academy exhibitions" (268), and his sensuous paintings of young women of fashion. With a hint of secret bisexuality, "his name was linked romantically with many of his [female] sitters" (272), and his "meteoric career" peaked toward the 1820s when he was "greeted" in Paris "as one of the great, liberating harbingers of British Romanticism" (277). But soon "after his death in 1830" there was a "swift collapse of [his] reputation" (278). Holmes concludes his sketch with the judgment that in "the longer historical perspective" Lawrence "is worthy of renewed popular appreciation" (278).

Blake, to whom Holmes devotes his final essay, was of course a poet, prophet, and engraver as well as a painter. "There are many William Blakes" (307), but all of them lived in obscurity and poverty, unlike the aura of celebrity that defined Lawrence's career. And unlike the Blake who is "the protagonist of innumerable" (310) contemporary studies, the one Holmes focuses on is the Blake who "emerged 150 years ago . . . as a radical engraver and illustrator, or *Pictor Ignotus* . . . of the great Victorian biography by Alexander Gilchrist, first published in 1863, that saved Blake from almost total obscurity" (310). He chronicles the heroic labors of "the young writer and critic" to do the research and assemble the materials for his biography of the visionary artist whom "he did not think was mad; in fact he thought he was a genius" (313). After six

years of exhausting labor, Gilchrist's health began to fail, and he died at thirty-three. Gilchrist's "great biography" was left in draft: "only the first eight chapters were delivered; the rest was unfinished" (321). At this point his wife Anne, who had already served as his "part-time research assistant" and later as "his full-time amanuensis" (319), took the project in hand and completed the biography as "a kind of posthumous and sacred collaboration" (323). To the end of her life she "insisted that she was nothing more than her husband's 'editor'" (326), but Holmes raises the question, "who, then, finally wrote Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*?" (325). In his admiring account of her commitment to complete the book as a sacred trust, he sees her more as a co-author than an editor, concluding that "the question will always remain just how much of this first, groundbreaking text we really owe to Alexander or to Anne Gilchrist" (339). This skeptical and questioning note strikes me as just the right one for the re-visionary and restorative agenda that informs and sustains *This Long Pursuit.*