

Barry Hough

reads

Down to the Sunless Sea:

A Troubled Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the Mediterranean

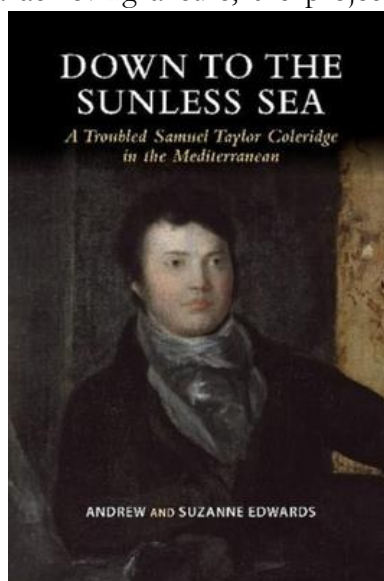
by Andrew and Suzanne Edwards¹

DURING THE WINTER OF 1803–4, Coleridge complained of the ‘Tortures of Guilt’ and the ‘Horrors of . . . sleep and Night-screams’. Efforts in the Lake District and elsewhere to liberate himself from opium dependency had so far failed, so he resolved to seek a renaissance in a warm climate. He wrote to Matthew Coates that his expected recovery abroad would be a ‘sample of the first Resurrection’ (CL II 529). If we assess his Mediterranean travel exclusively in terms of a achieving a cure, the project failed. Coleridge, in retrospect, concluded otherwise. In witnessing the ‘wicked machinery’ (CL II 1178) of colonial government he observed that his time on Malta had been ‘the most memorable and instructive period of my life’ (Friend I 533).

Down to the Sunless Sea: A Troubled Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the Mediterranean, by Andrew and Suzanne Edwards, is a welcome addition to the existing scholarly work. It provides the reader with a concise and highly engaging introduction to Coleridge in the Mediterranean, whilst also furnishing a tour d’ horizon of Coleridge’s post-Malta life and work. It further provides readers interested in tracing Coleridge’s footsteps with a guide and critical commentary. This not only includes Coleridge’s observations of landscape and people, but also sets out the social, political, and geo-political context to Coleridge’s period in the Mediterranean.

Chapter 1, ‘Departure on the Speedwell’, begins this literary journey as the authors explore Coleridge’s Portsmouth and discover there that Coleridge’s hotel had been ‘blitzed’ and replaced by a modern convenience store. As their treatment of his sea journey unfolds there are ample allusions to Coleridge’s notebook observations, which are viewed through a critical lens. The authors are, for example, unconvinced by Coleridge’s comparisons between the Spanish landscape and that of the English Lake District. His ‘lazy’ observations on Gibraltarians are also noted (16).

Their narrative progresses in the following chapter, ‘Strategising for Nelson’, in which the authors explore how Coleridge assisted in military



¹ Andrew and Suzanne Edwards, *Down to the Sunless Sea: A Troubled Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the Mediterranean* (Brighton: Sussex University Press, 2023).

planning for Nelson. In fact, Coleridge was then employed as under-secretary to Malta's Civil Commissioner, Sir Alexander Ball, who was engaged with Nelson to plot future British strategy in the Mediterranean. Of particular concern to them was the predations of the cruisers and galleys of the Dey of Algiers that continued to interfere with British supply chains in the region. Ball and Nelson wanted a military solution. Politicians in London refused to support the proposed war strategy, but by the time the critical despatch reached Ball the diplomatic situation had deteriorated. This was to present Coleridge with an onerous responsibility.

References by the authors to Coleridge's private life at Christmas 1804 include his reading of international law, which the authors attribute to Coleridge's interests as a polymath. It is more likely that Coleridge had already been instructed by Ball to appear in the Court of Vice Admiralty (which he did in January 1805 as an *amicus curiae*, rather than an advocate appointed to the Court). Coleridge was to make a complex legal submission to the Court to persuade it to acquit (from the capital charge of piracy) a crew of Algerians who had captured a British vessel at sea. Negotiations were taking place to facilitate the release from Algerian custody of British/Maltese hostages; the likely convictions of prominent Algerians on a capital charge would be unhelpful. Coleridge who, of course, had no formal legal training, appears to have won the complex legal argument and secured the acquittals. This is so because there are no records of executions on Malta in 1805. Constraint of space perhaps prevented the authors from a fuller treatment of this success, which might have been of interest to many readers.

In the ensuing chapter, 'Sicily and the Prima Donna', the authors explore more fully Coleridge's time in Sicily. Pursuing his footsteps compelled them to undertake extensive investigation, leading to their successful identification of Gould Francis Leckie's residence on Sicily, which Coleridge visited in the Autumn of 1804. The authors' informative commentary on these locations is richly accompanied by an account of the political or geopolitical, social, and economic context, and how Leckie, the honorary British consul, and Ball wished to exploit it. The authors also refer to the youthful opera singer, Cecilia Bertozzi, who tempted and fascinated Coleridge, and describe a visit to the Syracuse opera house as it is to be encountered today.

In the following chapter, 'A Hand in Maltese Affairs', the authors describe Coleridge's official role in the administration of Malta. This focuses on the highly burdensome and uncongenial role Coleridge was required to fulfil when he was appointed as acting Public Secretary on Malta—the second most important post in the British administration on the island. The overarching strategic goal of the British administration under Sir Alexander Ball was to establish its popularity with the Maltese people to ensure that Malta could remain as a stable British possession if negotiations after the war eventually led to that outcome. It was also a priority that Malta was not to become a drain on the British Treasury. Ball had reported to London in 1800 that the island would provide a financial surplus, but this information proved inaccurate. By

Coleridge's period in Malta, the administration was under pressure from London to address the drain on Imperial funds. This was far from straightforward because the British had promised the Maltese that their pre-1798 constitutional and administrative arrangements would continue. These not only included access to subsidised staple food and the right not to be taxed, but also that there would be no diminution in welfare benefits. When Coleridge arrived on Malta, tensions between the population and the administration were rising. An erosion of public confidence in Ball's administration was caused by, amongst other matters, the quality of bread (the grain imported and paid for by the British having been officially assessed as being fit only for hogs)² and widely held objections to British policies on immigration.

When the former Public Secretary suddenly died in office, Ball turned to Coleridge as a temporary replacement. Ball believed that Coleridge could not only be employed in overseeing the labyrinthine Maltese administrative institutions but also use government communication as a tool for presenting government as benign, thereby maintaining Maltese consent to British rule. Coleridge's role would potentially be crucial to British prospects, and it was in this function that the British administration eventually considered that Coleridge had been most useful.

However, the manipulation of public opinion through 'spin' or misinformation prompted Coleridge's moral dilemma about government communication. How government information should be provided within an ethical framework is perhaps one of the most interesting of Coleridge's reflections on his time in office. It also partly explains Coleridge's own assessment of the importance of his Malta period.

The authors furnish a concise but effective account of the administrative context of Coleridge's public duties, noting his wisdom in declining any responsibility for the Maltese Treasury. They introduce the reader to some of the legislative and administrative measures that emerged under Coleridge's signature and explain something of their significance. They point out, for example, that more severe judicial sentences were sometimes imposed at the direct intervention of Ball in violation of any respect for the separation of judicial and executive authority, which somewhat undermined the propaganda strategy.

This chapter continues the authors' efforts to identify and describe places associated with Coleridge on Malta. These include the governor's palace, the Treasury building, (where Coleridge lived), San Anton, as well as lesser prominent locations in the so-called casals or villages that Coleridge visited either alone or with Ball. Readers who travel to Malta to walk in Coleridge's shoes will find this chapter an interesting and helpful companion.

Coleridge's replacement in public office arrived on Malta in September 1805. Coleridge quickly resigned and departed the Island to commence his journey home, as the authors describe in Chapter 5, 'The Grand Tourist

² Borg to Eton, 30 May 1806, Kew, CO 158/12.

Returns Home'. Coleridge arrived first on Sicily and thereafter mainland Italy. He visited places of general interest as well as the hangouts of artists and scholars, such as the Antico Caffè Greco, Rome. It was here that the expatriate communities of artists and authors gathered. To aid the modern traveller in pursuit of Coleridge, the authors identify these locations and provide contemporary descriptions to supplement those that Coleridge provided. Those wishing to retrace Coleridge's steps in Sicily and Italy, as far as they are known, will find this research invaluable.

Notwithstanding the title of the book, which suggests a focus on Coleridge in the Mediterranean, in its final chapter, 'Lectures and Legacy', the reader is helpfully introduced to the literary endeavours and principal vicissitudes of Coleridge's life after Malta. Readers who are, however, familiar with this period will encounter oft-visited terrain. In contrast to the earlier chapters in this book, the authors seem less committed to literary tourism. Coleridge had an itinerant life in the years before settling at Highgate (which the authors investigate). Coleridge's story at this time includes, as examples, Greta Hall, Allan Bank, Coleorton and the Morgan's house in Hammersmith. It might have been consistent with one of the themes of this monograph to identify and explore, for those pursuing Coleridge's steps, some of these locations associated with him in that difficult decade.

As mentioned above, Coleridge claimed that the Malta period was the most instructive of his life. In *The Friend* he excoriates politicians for resorting to misinformation and even deception to avoid short-term political problems. Effective government was, he argued, inextricably linked to a moral requirement to communicate truthfully. In *The Friend* Coleridge was to devote four essays to ethics in government, including an essay on the nature of truth as well as the demands of truth telling. In our present post-truth age, Coleridge's ideas would stimulate discussion amongst a modern readership. Regrettably, apart from the famous eulogy on Ball, the authors did not make any sustained engagement with these incisive essays.

In all *Down to the Sunless Sea* is, especially for the non-specialist reader, a valuable addition to previous studies of Coleridge in the Mediterranean. Its particular contribution is to literary tourism. The books' few weaknesses include the unexpected lack of detail on locations associated with Coleridge *after* his return to England (about which this reader wished to learn more) and some omissions on Coleridge's achievement in public office. The authors, however, accomplish their goal of setting Coleridge's journey within its geopolitical, social, political, and economic context whilst referencing in interesting ways much of Coleridge's literary, political, and philosophical work.