

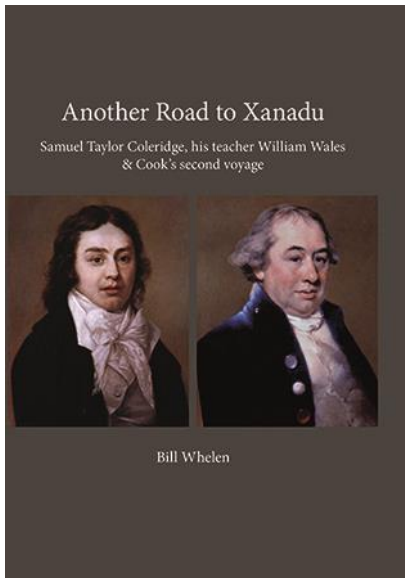
Margaret A. Fisher

reads

*Another Road to Xanadu: Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
His Teacher William Wales & Cook's Second Voyage*

by Bill Whelen¹

BILL WHELEN'S *ANOTHER ROAD TO XANADU* is an engaging work of independent scholarship and a meaningful tribute to the late Australian art historian and academic, Bernard William Smith (1916–2011). Taking his title from John Livingston Lowes's famous 1927 work, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination*, Whelen aims to build upon the connection made by Smith in a neglected 1956 article, wherein Smith identifies a previously unacknowledged link between the polar and maritime imagery found in Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and the private, unpublished



journal of William Wales—the astronomer on Captain James Cook's second Antarctic voyage from 1772 to 1775 and, subsequently, Coleridge's mathematics teacher at Christ's Hospital school. Whelen's primary argument is that Wales, his private recollections and account of Cook's second voyage, and his personal library at Christ's Hospital (chronicled extensively in Whelen's 2019 companion work, *A Catalogue of the Library of William Wales: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Mathematics Teacher*²) are rather more direct and likely sources of inspiration for the images found in the Rime than many identified by Lowes, and that Wales ought to

be reexamined as a crucial influence on Coleridge's early creativity. Though Whelen critiques Lowes, arguing that he in large part overlooks Cook's second voyage as an inspiration for Coleridge's 'Mariner', much as the greater academic community overlooked Smith's original article, he ultimately pays homage to both scholars. Throughout this brisk volume, Whelen demonstrates that he, like Lowes, 'loves literature because it is a part of life' and, in particular,

¹ Bill Whelen, *Another Road to Xanadu: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, His Teacher William Wales & Cook's Second Voyage* (New Zealand: Steele Roberts Aotearoa, 2023).

² Bill Whelen, *A Catalogue of the Library of William Wales: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Mathematics Teacher* (Petone, New Zealand: Steele Roberts Aotearoa, 2019), which was previously discussed in Jeffrey W. Barbeau, 'The Fate of Bibliography and Reviews Editorial', *The Coleridge Bulletin* 55 (2020): 65–72.

loves Coleridge's poem for the ways in which he imagines it to spring forth from life.³

Whelen's first chapter provides a brief but helpful outline of the Rime's history as a poem and lays out the broader project and argument of the book. Whelen celebrates Smith's discovery of Wales's journal and his connection to Coleridge, champions Smith's recognition of Wales and his account of Cook's second voyage as probable sources of inspiration for Coleridge's 'Mariner', and asserts the likelihood of Coleridge having accessed many of the voyage accounts identified by Lowes through Wales's personal library. He highlights Lowes's neglect of Cook's second voyage in *The Road to Xanadu*—as he continues to do at key points throughout the book—and joins with Smith in noting the surprising extent to which 'the order of sequence of events in the poem follows the order of sequence of the relevant events of the voyage'.⁴ Indeed, this seemingly shared sequence becomes the organizing principle of *Another Road to Xanadu*, as chapters three through eleven derive their names from the various segments of Cook's second voyage.

In his second chapter, Whelen provides a brief chronicle of Wales's life, detailing how the would-be navigator acquired his mathematical expertise, how he arrived at the opportunity to accompany Cook's second voyage as astronomer, and under what circumstances he would have encountered and taught the young Coleridge during his tenure at Christ's Hospital, where Wales served as Master of the Royal Mathematical School from 1775 until his death in 1798. Whelen acknowledges that Wales's personal account of his voyage with Captain Cook was never published during Coleridge's lifetime. He argues, like Smith, that Coleridge's knowledge of the voyage would have therefore come from the many volumes accessible to him and other students through Wales's library, as well as from anecdotes shared by Wales himself—as Coleridge's schoolmate, Leigh Hunt, recalls in his later writing.

Chapter three marks the start of Whelen's central project: to track Cook's second voyage around the globe while drawing parallels between what Wales recounts in his journal and the experiences of Coleridge's fictional mariner. Whelen begins by identifying Rame Head and the Chapel of St. Michael as the 'kirk' and 'hill' mentioned in line 23 of Coleridge's poem—the last view the mariner's ship has of England and the view to which he returns at his journey's close. Whelen notes the historical significance of the site as the point of departure and return for Cook's crew, highlighting the similarity of its physical description in accounts of the voyage with the images that appear in the Rime. He simultaneously refutes other potential sources of visual inspiration for this moment in Coleridge's poem, such as Watchet port in Somerset. Whelen supports this bold attack in particular by drawing attention to the 'Light-house

³ S. C. Chew, 'Review: *The Road to Xanadu*', *The Atlantic* (July 1927), accessed online May 2024 at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1927/07/the-road-to-xanadu/649615/>.

⁴ Bernard Smith, 'Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and Cook's Second Voyage', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 19 (1956), reprinted with additional material in *Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages* (Melbourne University Press, 1992), 135–71. This quote taken from 1992 reprinting, p. 170, quoted in Whelen, *Another Road to Xanadu*, 11.

top' mentioned in Coleridge's poem, pointing out that during Coleridge's stay at Watchet in November 1797—around the time he began writing the *Rime*—no lighthouse existed at the site. Rame Head, on the other hand, did feature a lighthouse during this period, the Eddystone Lighthouse, named in several firsthand accounts of Cook's second voyage as among the last sights the crew absorbed upon their departure from Plymouth Harbour—alongside the 'kirk', or Chapel of St. Michael, which remains comfortably situated upon its hill to this day. I admit I found this argument thought-provoking, although, as Whelen also addresses, J. C. C. Mays has proposed Ilfracombe as a more likely inspiration if any is to be found at all.⁵ In this early portion of the book especially, Whelen incorporates a number of creative defenses for his claims. For example, he traces the etymology of the word 'drop', noting that its first recorded nautical use is found within accounts of Cook's voyages, while its second appears in Coleridge's 'Mariner': 'Merrily did we drop / Below the kirk, below the Hill, / Below the Light-house top' (*PW* I.1 372, lines 22–24). Following this delicate connecting thread, Whelen concludes that the simplest explanation for such similar but uncommon usages is that Coleridge learned the term by word of mouth.

Chapter four follows the beginning of Cook's journey, from Plymouth to Cape Town, and introduces the secondary theme of the book: Whelen's emphasis on the anticolonial strain that runs through several first-hand accounts of Cook's second voyage—including Wales's—and his argument that such anticolonial sentiment found its way into the poem through Coleridge's contact with Wales and his library. This is also where Whelen begins to surmise how certain other influential works, proven by Lowes and others to have been read by Coleridge, might have ended up in the poet's hands by way of that same library. Where Lowes occasionally comes up empty on questions of access, Whelen finds a ready answer via a given book's presence in Wales's personal collection. In this chapter, Whelen also makes a compelling case for the weakness of Lowes's text as it regards Cook's voyages. Citing Lowes's brief but memorable mention of bioluminescence in the published account of Cook's third voyage—'Few passages, indeed, which Coleridge ever read seem to have fecundated his imagination so amazingly as that 257th page of Cook's second volume [of his third voyage]'—Whelen convincingly argues that Lowes must have been unaware that accounts of Cook's second voyage provide much more detailed and generative descriptions of the phenomenon—descriptions that are much more likely to have influenced Coleridge.⁶

Chapter five proceeds in a similar fashion, challenging Lowes's claim that Coleridge's 'Mariner' follows the trajectory of Captain George Shelvocke's 1718 voyage, noting the comparative ease of the mariner's early journey in the *Rime*—due to the presence of a 'good south wind' mentioned in line 71. This chapter also addresses the limitations of Lowes's 'Eurocentric perspective',

⁵ J. C. C. Mays, *Coleridge's Ancient Mariner* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 5–6.

⁶ John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: a Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (1927), 90, quoted in Whelen, *Another Road to Xanadu*, 41.

which causes him to dismiss the possibility of the mariner being in the Southern Hemisphere rather than the Northern: 'Where,' Lowes asks, 'had Coleridge . . . ever seen such a concourse of strange sights and commotions in the element as that concatenation of northern lights, stars, moon, and lightning?'⁷ This is the point in the text when the structure of Whelen's project becomes most effective. He compiles a number of incidental but fascinating details from firsthand accounts of Cook's second voyage—the number of recorded albatross sightings compared to Cook's other journeys, the emphasis placed by Wales on several birds being shot and eaten around the time the first icebergs are sighted, and the wonder inspired by the phosphorescent sea and the glowing 'water snakes' writhing within it—then places these details alongside the appropriate lines of Coleridge's poem. While each of these coincidences of image and detail might be dismissed on its own, such a compounding produces a stirring effect on the reader's imagination. One comes away from these early chapters nearly as convinced as Whelen that Wales's and other accounts of Cook's second voyage must have been essential inspirations for Coleridge's *Rime*.

The next chapter marks Cook's stop at Dusky Sound in New Zealand and the expedition's encounter with the Māori. While much is made in Wales's account of a certain cascade cove and the phenomenon of 'waterspouts' or 'whirlwinds'—imagery that Whelen suggests could have inspired a number of Coleridge's writings, including works completed while he was still a student at Christ's Hospital—the weightier focus of the chapter is the negative impact of European voyages, like Cook's, on the indigenous population of New Zealand. It is here that certain limitations of Wales's journal become apparent, as he proves more reticent than the voyage's naturalist, Johann Forster, and his son, George Forster, or even Cook himself on subjects such as venereal disease—spread by Europeans with devastating effect among the native tribes. Whelen relies on these other firsthand accounts—private journals all—to demonstrate the strength, and later the censorship, of the anticolonial views of those onboard Cook's second voyage. As Whelen notes, Wales's journal falls short elsewhere as well, such as when he fails to recount a harrowing incident of being lost in a dense fog with Johann Forster (found in chapter five), and the reader may occasionally wonder how likely a man like Wales was to share a detailed, romantic, and awe-inspiring version of his travels with his pupils at Christ's Hospital. However, Leigh Hunt's recollection of a certain shoe-related incident, examined by Whelen in chapter seven,⁸ proves that Wales did, in fact, discuss his travels with the boys at Christ's Hospital, and overall Wales's journal entries reveal him to be a keen and sensitive observer of the world around him, frequently able to conjure an apt metaphor that might very well linger in the mind of an ardent, future poet.

⁷ Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu*, 185, quoted in Whelen, *Another Road to Xanadu*, 56.

⁸ Chapter seven follows Cook and his crew to Tahiti and covers their visits to Matavia Bay, Huahine, and the island Ra'iatea, concluding with the voyage's stops at several sites in Tonga and another in New Zealand.

The connections drawn between Coleridge's poem and various accounts of Cook's second voyage feel most vital in chapters three through five, while chapters seven through ten lose some direct focus on Coleridge in favor of detailing the voyage itself and drawing out the broader significance of Wales's life and work. The result is that this middle portion of the book feels somewhat more tenuously connected to Coleridge's poem than what came before, though Whelen is careful to include at least one direct quotation from the *Rime* in each of his central chapters. The only exception to this rule is chapter eight—the shortest in the book and fascinating on its own for its discussion of Wales's skepticism and then acceptance of the reality of Māori cannibalism.

Next, in chapter nine, Whelen opens with Cook's crew reaching the antipodes of London and follows their subsequent journey through the Antarctic, recounting Wales's observation of many 'ice islands', his historic recording of perhaps the first Superior Mirage in Antarctica, Cook's secretive decision to extend the voyage another year, and the moment the expedition finally arrives at the southernmost point of their journey. The journey continues in chapter ten, where Whelen relates the voyage's return to the tropics, including Cook's revisit of Tahiti and Matavia Bay, Huahine, and Ra'iātea after eight months at sea, and the voyage's eventual return to New Zealand. Here, like Cook, Whelen retreads familiar ground, especially with regard to his argument about 'The Mariner'. However, through his accompanying discussion of Wales's visit to Easter Island, and of the violent and confused killing of a native in the Marquesas, Whelen adds narrative weight and develops the book's secondary focus on European colonial abuses, as well as the voyage's positive and negative interactions with native cultures. This chapter is also the only place in the book where the progression of Cook's voyage becomes a bit confused in the telling. Here, Cook's May 23, 1774 arrival in Ra'iātea is introduced as his second visit to the island—following his first in 1769—but the reader has already been told in chapter seven of the company's prior landing there on September 7, 1773. Beyond this minor inconsistency, Whelen's timeline of the voyage is incredibly clear, even for the uninitiated scholar.

Due to the tragic loss of the final nine months of Wales's journal, the last we truly hear from him in Whelen's retelling is at the end of chapter ten. The final three chapters of the book cover Cook's departure from New Zealand and return to England. Whelen then turns to Johann Forster's journal, Wales's terse log recorded for the Admiralty, and Cook's journal to flesh out the final details of the journey.

Chapter eleven notes further similarities between the route apparently taken by Coleridge's mariner and Cook's second voyage, referencing 'The Argument' at the beginning of the 1798 first edition of Coleridge's poem: the fact that the Mariner is said to "burst" into the Pacific Ocean from the southwest', then head northward to the equator.⁹ The chapter also relates Cook's

⁹ Whelen, *Another Road to Xanadu*, 120; cf. *PW* I.1.380, line 105.

mapping of the coast of Cape Horn and ends with Cook's return to England, once more passing by Rame Head and St. Michael's Chapel. Again, Whelen draws a comparison between the cyclical nature of the mariner's voyage and that of Cook's crew, and it is a credit to the immersive nature of Whelen's writing that the reader may feel as if they, too, have just returned from a long journey—absorbing all the satisfaction of a completed adventure, though none of the sailor's fatigue.

The final two chapters of Whelen's work recount Cook's triumphant reception in England, the various creative works inspired by his second voyage (including over fifty poems prior to Coleridge's writing of the *Rime*), and the manner in which accounts of Cook's second voyage (and his death during the third) became battlegrounds for both the pro- and anti-colonial debates of the day. In the midst of such excitement and controversy, Whelen emphasizes Wales's unflinching commitment to factual truth and accuracy in the retelling of the voyage, as highlighted via a dispute that arose between Wales and George Forster. Finally, chapter thirteen extends Whelen's argument 'Beyond the *Mariner*' to consider Coleridge's anticolonial views as expressed through his poem on Lee Boo and other writings—themselves possibly influenced by Wales's stories of Cook's second voyage, or by some of the books available in his library.

Confidently tracing the echoes of accounts of Cook's second voyage within Coleridge's writing, Whelen's text guides its reader in a fashion that celebrates Lowes's great work, even as it questions Lowes's ultimate conclusions. Whelen runs the risk of placing too much emphasis on Wales and his library as 'the' sources for Coleridge's 'Mariner', but his justification is clear: the influence of Wales has been overlooked and dismissed to such an extent that bold claims are now required, especially in the service of giving a late, great scholar like Smith his due. To this end, Whelen's text accomplishes its goal. All in all, this is an accessible and clearly written work, full of all the color and charm characteristic of a mind truly enamored with its material and sure of its purpose. *Another Road to Xanadu* will make a strong addition to the libraries of postcolonial or maritime scholars, the collections those drawn to accounts of Cook and his voyages, and the shelves of any true friend of Coleridge.