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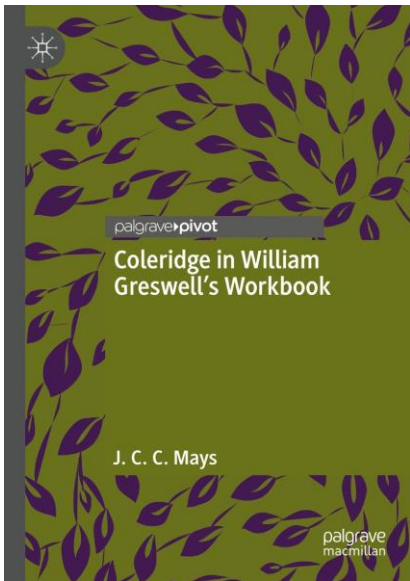
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Coleridge in William Greswell's Workbook

by J. C. C. Mays¹

JIM MAYS'S INTERESTING NEW BOOK is at heart a detective story, unravelling the secrets of an album or workbook he purchased in 2016 (1). The album contained extracts from sixty nineteenth-century periodical reviews and essays on Coleridge, some previously unknown to modern scholarship (2) and one apparently purloined from the Bristol Public Library (21). The album was professionally bound sometime between 1886 and 1889, though the final five items seem to have been added after 1893 (46).

Mays identifies the album's compiler as William Greswell (1848–1923), Rector of Doddington in Somerset from 1888 to 1913 and one of the members of the committee that worked to acquire Coleridge's cottage in Nether Stowey for the National Trust. Mays suggests that the album helped Greswell to work



through the various crises in mid-nineteenth-century Anglicanism, as it responded to the 'melancholy, long withdrawing roar' of Arnold's sea of faith ('Dover Beach', line 25). In the light of the damning conclusions of Carlyle and others, Mays suggests that Greswell rejected the Coleridgean 'metaphysical' approach in favour of 'the line that extends through John Seeley . . . , William Hale White and others, for whom faith is more important than dogma' (4).

Greswell came from a distinguished academic family, his grandfather having published on the Italian philosopher Pico della Mirandola (64) and his father having been a fellow of Balliol College from 1818 before leaving to marry—and serving as

rector at Kilve in North Somerset, where Greswell himself was born in 1848 (65). Greswell was educated at the progressive Somerset College in Bath and progressed to Oxford, where he took a second-class degree in Mods and a third-class degree in Greats, perhaps focusing more on theology than on his formal studies (65, 67). Pater was his Oxford tutor (69).

Greswell's uncles were distinguished Oxford fellows—Edward Greswell a Tractarian at Corpus Christi (67) and Richard Greswell who may have risen first to oppose Darwinism at the famous Oxford debate between Wilberforce and Huxley in 1860 (68). So far as Mays can discern, Greswell himself does not

¹ J. C. C. Mays, *Coleridge in William Greswell's Workbook* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

seem to have taken a position in the tumultuous relations in Oxford between the moderate but High-Church conservatism of his uncles, and the liberal scepticism of Arnold, Pater, and Jowett (68).

After Oxford, it is unclear what Greswell did in the years between 1871 and 1876 though he may have tutored students (70). In 1876 he sailed to South Africa, where he was appointed Professor of English and Classics at the University of the Cape of Good Hope, returning to Somerset in 1883 (70–72). He was elected to the Royal Colonial Institute in 1882 (72) and wrote a number of books and articles on South Africa, the Boer War, and British colonial policy. After 1902 his focus shifted to the local history of his beloved Quantocks (72–74).

The central argument of Mays' book emerges in chapter 6, an exercise in analytic bibliography based on an examination of the physical text. In one sense, there is not much to go on, since the extracts in the album are not annotated apart from a few dots, pin pricks, and minute dashes visible only under a magnifying glass (and the noting of publication details, sometimes inaccurately) (11, 25). Nor does Greswell seem to have commented on the issues elsewhere. Mays nonetheless suggests that there is a narrative arc in the collection—which he divides into two parts, hinging on item 29, James Martineau's Unitarian critique of Coleridge:

The earlier part develops the depressing argument about Coleridge promising more than he delivers. . . . Then Martineau's lucid condensation and critique launches the book positively into its later half [in which] contributions by Pater and Mozley resonate. (82)

More broadly, Mays suggests that while the extracts placed earlier in the album emphasised Coleridge's alleged failings as a philosopher, those later in the album, while pointing to the same alleged failings, emphasised the role of Coleridge the poet in the aestheticized world of Pater, and Coleridge's North American influence on the Unitarians and the Transcendentalists.

In coming to a more balanced and favourable view of Coleridge, the second half of the album answers (according to Mays) more closely to the needs of Greswell's own time—and the debates within Anglicanism of the 1860s and 70s (36, 39, 67, 76), which focused more on faith than on dogma and on how to believe rather than on what to believe (71). While the extracts by no means appear chronologically, Mays suggests that the extracts in the first half address the rather different debates of the 1840s, debates that were perhaps more metaphysical and in which Coleridge's failings weighed more heavily (67, 71, 97).

Apart from finding a narrative arc in the collection, Mays also brings to bear a wide-ranging familiarity with the context of Victorian Anglicanism in explaining the significance of the extracts. Thus, the first item concerns Coleridge's time in Shrewsbury, when he was contemplating becoming a Unitarian minister (77, 80). But while the entry may appear slight, Mays is alert

to the ways in which it prefigures the turn to Unitarianism in Martineau's essay in the middle of the album (80).

Items 2 and 3 continue the biographical approach, moving to Coleridge's middle years with letters written from Calne in 1815–16 (77–78). While these again look innocent enough, they concern the local doctor, Dr Robert Brabant, who later 'became a core member of the freethinking "Rosehill Circle"', which did much to bring Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu* to British attention (78). And Mays suggests that the letters' unsuccessful attempt to convert Brabant will have resonated with an audience aware of Coleridge's role in persuading John Sterling to commit to holy orders, a commitment that Sterling later regretted (78). While Carlyle is not represented in the extracts, Mays rightly points out that his savage attack on Coleridge in the *Life of John Sterling* will have been in the mind of Greswell and of any contemporary reader. Mays' book is rich in this kind of contextual reading, and he goes on to point out that the Unitarian Priestley wrote several works while living in Calne (80).

Mays then goes on to discuss the Unitarianism of Martineau, noting that Martineau had followed Coleridge in 'throwing off . . . Necessitarianism, studying Kant and the German Idealists, [and] making the idea of conscience the foundation of his ethical beliefs' (80). Martineau discussed these similarities in extract 29, entitled 'Personal Influences on our Present Theology', a text which 'sandwiches Coleridge between Newman and Carlyle' (81). For Martineau, Newman lacked the necessary foundation of faith in conscience, while Carlyle, 'finding the idea of the divine in everything, made the supernatural natural and ended in despair' (81). Martineau thus presents Coleridge as closer to his ideal, though 'too mystical' (82). Mays points out that it is Carlyle's 'natural supernaturalism' that went on to dominate twentieth-century accounts of the imagination, particularly in Abrams' influential but misguided work (102).

It is harder, however, to draw conclusions about Greswell's attitudes to all of this, and I was left puzzled as to why the Anglican Greswell was apparently so keen to foreground Coleridge's Unitarian experience. And while Mays places Martineau's relatively positive essay at the heart of Greswell's album, Mays also draws the conclusion that

Greswell was intent on displaying [Coleridge] as deeply duplicitous, and he sets Coleridge up as a fraud from the moment the latter abandoned his plan of becoming a dissenting minister. (63)

Mays thus suggests that Martineau's essay 'dismisses Coleridge because the latter could only say, "Try it"' (as he did in *Aids to Reflection*, when it came to faith) (64). But in saying this, Mays may be putting his thumb on the scale, since he also admits that Martineau's essay is deeply ambiguous (64).

And this points to a broader problem with Mays' book which, for all its learning, is ultimately left to speculate on Greswell's views in the absence of actual evidence. None of the entries were annotated thematically by Greswell.

Nor indeed could we speculate on Greswell's identity were it not for an address ("The Rectory / Dodington") accidentally embossed on one of the sheets of paper pasted into the album (18). It is possible, as Mays suggests, that the album helped Greswell to clarify his views at a time when he was considering entering holy orders (3), perhaps allowing him to base his beliefs on faith rather than Coleridgean dogma. And Mays may be right in judging that a Coleridgean approach would have landed Greswell 'in a life-long mess' (5) since Coleridge's later writings like the *Opus Maximum* were not at the time available to confute the accusations of philosophical fraud set out by Carlyle and others (6). The problem is that we simply don't know. I wondered, for instance, if Greswell was putting together a manuscript for an anthology of critical reviews, with a view to publication.

I enjoyed winding my way with Jim Mays for a couple of days through one of the more obscure byways of Somerset and its Coleridge connections. Mays, as one of our most senior Coleridgeans, is a well-informed guide though the book assumes that its readers will be familiar with the leading figures in the mid-nineteenth-century Anglican debates. I struggled in places to remember my reading of Stephen Prickett's *Romanticism and Religion* from nearly forty years ago and would have appreciated a little more context. It must be said that Mays' book is at once both interesting and maddening, a miscellany almost as broad as the album it describes and containing some textual oddities. If your taste doesn't run to minute bibliographical descriptions of the text, you may wish to skim chapters 2 and 4.