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THOMAS MASSA ALSAGER (1779-1846): An Elian Shade Illuminated

D E Wickham

Thomas Massa Alsager appears infrequently in the primary and secondary sources concerning Charles Lamb, yet when he does so there is usually a definite implication that his name or presence was customary, expected, hardly needing to be remarked. It is not suggested that Alsager was in the first row of the Elian circle with Coleridge and Wordsworth, but there is strong evidence to show that he was easily on a par with Manning or Martin Burney or Barron Field.

The foundation for this belief can be discovered in some of the favourite or most intimate anecdotes about Charles Lamb, where Alsager's name occurs as a matter of course in circumstances of great importance. In the letter of 31 August 1817 to Barron Field which formed the basis for the Essay of Elia 'Distant Correspondents', Charles Lamb wrote that 'A', always identified as Alsager, 'is turned actor. He came out in genteel comedy at Cheltenham this season, and has hopes of a London engagement'¹. Late in 1824 Lamb was to write to Mrs Collier 'I do not know what news to send you. You will have heard of Alsager's death, and your Son John's success in the Lottery.' Each statement was 'a matter of lie' rather than of fact but such jokes are not made unless the people involved are all well known to each other. The young gowmsman who showed the Lambs all over Cambridge in 1815 had a vaguely familiar face and 'proved to be a young man we had seen twice at Alsager's.' In 1818 Leigh Hunt wrote to Shelley 'We go to plays, to operas, and even to concerts not forgetting a sort of conversazione at Lamb's, with whom, and Alsager, I have renewed the intercourse, with infinite delight, which sickness interrupted. One of the best consequences of this is that Lamb's writings are being collected for publication.' Perhaps the most obvious reference to Alsager's status in the Elian circle is Lamb's letter of 18 June 1818 to the Olliers, asking that four copies of his Works should be inscribed 'from the Author' and despatched to 'my friends', Mr Aynton, Mr Alsager of Suffolk Street East, Southwark, by Horsemonger Lane, and two in one parcel for Robert Southey and William Wordsworth.

Fortunately there are other sources available to support the contention. Alsager is not in the Dictionary of National Biography but he was a senior member of the staff of The Times, 'being especially concerned in all that respects the collection of mercantile and foreign news' (Crabb Robinson, 21 May 1842), and he appears at length in the newspaper's printed history; he was an eminent member of The Clothworkers' Company, the City of London Livery Company whose archives I have been privileged to use, where his work is still honoured, and where he may reasonably be considered as the founder of the modern Company; and he appears frequently in the Diary and Reminiscences of Henry Crabb Robinson². I was also permitted to use an astonishing cache of family records which have immeasurably enriched the following narrative.

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The history of the Alsager³ family can be traced back to the sixteenth century, but the first member we need to notice is John Alsager (1705-1768), a farmer of Audley in Staffordshire⁴. Two of his sons were apprenticed⁵ to Freemen of The Clothworkers' Company in London: Richard (1729-1791), the eldest, was made Free of the Company in 1756 as a packer, and Thomas (1738-?1790) became Free in 1764. Richard had two sons, Charles (born 1756, Free 1777 as a setter, Master of the Company 1807-8) and John (born 1759, Free 1780 as a packer), and Charles had a son Henry (1794-1859, Free 1815 as a packer, Master of the Company 1851-2).

Thomas was about eighteen, not the theoretical fourteen, when in 1756 he was apprenticed for seven years to his brother Richard in Old Jewry. He became Free as a setter in 1764 and was elected to the Livery in 1766. Probably on 22 May 1769 he married Mary Crosby of St Saviour's parish, Southwark, and they had nine or ten children in the nineteen years 1770-1789, five or six daughters and four sons⁶. Thomas died during the twelve months to 1 December 1790, just as he might have been elected a Warden of the Company. He was aged about 52 and left his widow with eight dependent children.

Thomas Massa Alsager was the fifth child and eldest son. The source of his unusual second name remains a mystery, though Massey is considered a not uncommon surname in Cheshire and the surrounding counties. He was born on 27 September 1779 and was apprenticed on 2 October 1793, aged just fourteen, to his mother Mary Alsager, described as the widow of Thomas Alsager, late Citizen and Clothworker of London. His daughter Margaret understood him to have disliked his time of apprenticeship but he served the standard seven years and was made Free of The Clothworkers' Company on 5 November 1800. His mother acted as his Test, or witness to his competence, and he was described as a setter. It was the craft of a setter to stretch full and semi-finished cloths to the width required by law on the tenter hooks of a tenter frame, an object somewhat resembling a modern football goal and kept in the open air. The Alsagers were then living in Swan Yard, Blackman Street, Southwark, which is today part of the site of Swan Street at the east side of the southern end of Borough High Street. Horwood's map of London dated 1792-9 shows that 'Mr Edwards's Tenter Ground' adjoined one end of Swan Yard and that there was another such ground nearby.

Thomas Massa's next brother was Richard, born on 11 October 1781, who probably went straight into the Royal Navy at an early age. He did not join The Clothworkers Company until August 1813, when his brothers were moving up the promotional ladder, and he did so 'by Patrimony' without the bother of apprenticeship: he is recorded as a gentleman of Kennington in Surrey. He was elected to the Livery in 1817 and became a Warden in 1839.

Thomas Massa and his brothers were born after their father was Free, so they could all have claimed Freedom by Patrimony or right of birth. The death of their father when the eldest was not more than eleven must have caused financial problems, however, and this helps to explain why one son entered the Navy and two had to be apprenticed to learn a craft, entering the Company 'the hard way' by Servitude.

The third brother, Charles (1784-1839), was apprenticed to his mother in 1798 and became Free in 1805. He was elected a Liveryman in March 1813 and a Warden in 1834.

Thomas Massa Alsager, whom we may now distinguish as plain Alsager, had been elected to the Livery as long ago as October 1804 and until 1828/9 he

continued to live in or about Blackman Street, Southwark, apparently as an increasingly successful businessman. The Clothworkers' Company records unequivocally show his address as Blackman Street, possibly meaning Swan Yard, though this could have been a business address. The anonymous historian of The Times, not always accurate in a vast field of detail, refers to him as a bleacher with a factory near Farringdon Road and a house in Suffoik Street, Southwark. Charles Lamb gave Alsager's address in 1818 as Suffolk Street East and the eastern end of the long thoroughfare now called Great Suffolk Street opens into that southern part of Borough High Street which was once Blackman Street. Alsager's daughter Margaret recorded that the site of the family business, which had ceased before her time, was on 99-year leasehold land in St George in the Fields, where a church, streets, and a square were later erected. Various other details suggest almost irrefutably that this was Mr Edwards's Tenter Ground mentioned above and that the square, which would have been called Alsager Square if the honour had not been declined because the land was merely leasehold, was named Trinity Church Square, which was built with its surrounding streets at about the date Holy Trinity Church in Southwark was erected, 1823-47.

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The main strands of Alsager's life and of this investigation - The Times newspaper, The Clothworkers' Company, music, and Charles Lamb - naturally often run in parallel, but it will be best to consider the Lamb connection first.

It seems impossible to determine who introduced Alsager and Charles Lamb or where or when they first met. There were so many interlocking circles with several members in common - Southwark, The Times, Christ's Hospital - that the first meeting was probably pure chance, though E V Lucas, in a note to Lamb's letter to Wordsworth of 9 August 1815, states, without giving an authority, that Alsager was a friend of Crabb Robinson and through him of Lamb. This may only be based on the earliest certain reference to a meeting between Lamb and Alsager, which is dated 28 December 1813⁸, when Crabb Robinson noted: 'Went with Lamb and sister to Alsager's to a card party... Lamb was kept in decent order, and was very good-humoured and pleasant.' It is noteworthy that there is no suggestion that this was the first meeting or in any way an unusual occasion. Other members of the Elian circle were soon involved. On 7 June 1814 Crabb Robinson 'dined with Collier and walked evening (sic) with Mrs Collier and the Lambs to Alsager's. We spent the evening at cards and very pleasantly. Mitchell and Hazlitt were there...Lamb was very pleasant.' On 5 February 1815 Alsager gave a dinner at which the guests included Ayrton, Martin Burney, Hazlitt, and Crabb Robinson, who commented 'It was a pleasant afternoon. William Hazlitt, while he continued sober, was excellent company.'⁹

Three weeks later, on 26 February, Crabb Robinson again dined at Alsager's and the other guests were Thomas Barnes, then a reporter for The Times, and the Lambs. Barnes soon left the other four who began to play whist: 'The afternoon was not so very pleasant, on account of Charles Lamb taking too much wine. He was not so far gone as to be outrageous, and he could even play whist; but he was flurried in his manner, so as to make me uncomfortable. However, we stayed till near twelve. Lamb was uncomfortable to himself as we came home', a euphemism that can be translated as one wishes.

Crabb Robinson and the Lambs attended other parties at Alsager's, on 15

April 1815 when he stayed till near two in the morning, was scolded by Captain Burney for playing bad whist, and misguided enough to discuss Bonaparte with Hazlitt who 'was wrong as well as offensive in almost all he said'; and on 9 December 1815 when the Lambs, Hazlitt and Ayrton were all at Alsager's, and Crabb Robinson lost at cards 'as I have uniformly done'.

There is no reason to believe that 1815 was a special year for meetings between Alsager and the Lambs, and we have not yet even noticed the Wordsworth connection. On 1 February 1815 Crabb Robinson recorded that 'Alsager has become a warm partizan of Wordsworth. "The Excursion" has converted him. He declares that Wordsworth gives him more delight than any other poet. He is more enthusiastic on this than on any subject.' Crabb Robinson's remarks for 1 June 1815 are thus doubly interesting: he notes his pride at entertaining Mr and Mrs Wordsworth to breakfast in his chambers but also his vexation that the party could not exceed eleven persons, which involved his 'inability to ask others, especially Alsager, who was, I believe, somewhat offended at my inattention.' On the other hand Crabb Robinson records without further comment that he, Alsager, and Barnes had dined at the Colliers' 'with a party assembled to see the poet Wordsworth' four days before, on 28 May.

Other occasions linking Alsager with Charles Lamb are better known. It was at Alsager's in May 1815 that Hazlitt said in his famed and ferocious way that 'if Lamb in his criticism had found but one fault with Wordsworth he /the sensitive poet/ would never have forgiven him.' It was at the Lambs' in June 1815 that the 'numerous and odd set...for the greater part interesting and amusing' included so many of the lesser Elian circle as George Dyer, Captain and Martin Burney, Ayrton, Hazlitt and wife, Alsager, Barron Field, Talfourd, Lloyd, and Basil Montagu. It was at the Lambs' on 30 December 1817 that there occurred the celebrated set-piece of Wordsworth tête-à-tête with Talfourd, and Coleridge 'philosophising in his rambling way' to Monkhouse, to Manning, - to Martin Burney, who was eager to interpose, - and Alsager, who was content to be a listener.¹⁰

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After 1818, when Charles Lamb sent Alsager the copy of his *Works* and Crabb Robinson recorded a party at Monkhouse's where those present included the Lambs, the Wordsworths, a friend of Southey's, B R Haydon the history painter, Alsager, 'and several other less interesting persons', the Elian references fade out. We learn that Alsager contributed £10 to the fund raised for Godwin's benefit in 1822 but little more, and it is supremely fortunate that the references for *The Times* and *The Clothworkers' Company* now become increasingly useful.

Neither Alsager nor any of his family attended Christ's Hospital between 1771 and 1810 and we know nothing for certain of his education. Margaret Alsager understood that her father had been sent to a school at Congleton in Cheshire at the age of five and treated unkindly there. She considered him a first-rate scholar and linguist, and his own father's death when he was about eleven may have forced a change in the proposed career of the eldest son. His later successes and those of his family show such obvious intelligence that his early schooling may have provided a basis for later self-education.¹¹

This could help to explain the occasion in 1812 of his first meeting with

Crabb Robinson, an early foreign correspondent and foreign editor of The Times in the first decade of the nineteenth century, and Thomas Barnes, then a member of the paper's Parliamentary staff. The meeting has so far been traced only in the printed history of The Times but there seems to be a certain ambiguity in the report. It would be very helpful if it were Barnes who made the introduction. It has long been forgotten that Barnes' father John and grandfather Henry were members of The Clothworkers' Company, made Free by Servitude in 1736 and by Patrimony in 1775 respectively. John Barnes, the father, was an attorney in Tooley Street, Southwark, in 1775 and may well have been known to Alsager's father, who was considerably senior to him in the Company hierarchy.¹² Thomas Barnes was born in 1785, presumably in Southwark, where he was certainly baptised. At some time, perhaps long before 1812, he was known to be Alsager's dearest friend and the daughter born in 1831 was named Marianne Barnes Alsager. Crabb Robinson's opinion of Alsager at the 1812 meeting was that he was 'not very agreeable because of pretension', though he later came to like him. He wrote of Barnes as considering it odd that dealing in canvas, which Crabb Robinson called 'floorcloth', should make Alsager think he had a right to talk about pictures. If Barnes and Alsager were old friends, however, this may have been a play on words which has at some point been misunderstood.

Thomas Barnes had been a contemporary of Leigh Hunt at Christ's Hospital and often visited him in Horsemonger Lane gaol during his confinement of 1813-15. Another frequent visitor was Alsager, introduced to Hunt by Barnes and living within very easy walking distance of the gaol, whatever his exact address at that time. Hunt felt great affection for Alsager, describing him as 'the kindest of neighbours, a man of business, who contrived to be a scholar and a musician. Alsager loved his leisure, and yet would start up at a moment's notice to do the least of a prisoner's biddings.' On his release, Hunt sent Alsager a miniature of himself accompanied by a sonnet.

In or about 1809 Barron Field, then dramatic critic of The Times and not necessarily yet known to Lamb, had introduced Barnes, who had also been his contemporary at Christ's Hospital, to John Walter II, the manager of the paper. Walter began to commission reporter's work from Barnes, who succeeded Barron Field as The Times' dramatic critic. In 1811 Barnes was appointed to the paper's Parliamentary staff and, in 1817, at the age of thirty-two and with a salary of £1000 a year, he was made Editor of The Times, a post he held in insistent anonymity until his death in 1841.¹³ In the same year, 1817, the businessman Alsager was appointed the paper's City Correspondent. He was about thirty-eight years old.

In 1819 John Walter II, by then Chief Proprietor of The Times, assigned some of his 5/16 share in the newspaper and Alsager received a half of 1/16. In the same year he accepted the paper's Financial Department at a salary of £700 a year.

Addresses continue to cause problems. In 1820 Alsager appears in a London Directory as a cloth-setter of Horsemonger Lane, Borough. In 1821 he appears as an agent at 22 Change Alley, Cornhill, and this was implicitly the newly-opened Times City Office under Alsager's management. It was moved soon afterwards to 12 Birchin Lane. The Clothworker records probably refer to his main or main business address, for they show him at Blackman Street in December 1823, at Change Alley in December 1824 and at Birchin Lane in December 1825.

As early as 1823 Alsager was well enough known to be the subject of a caricature by Robert Dighton, dated for publication in 1824. He appears as the fine Late Regency figure 'Mr Alsope, The Mirror of the Times'.

The Times avoided an explicit money article until the end of 1825 when the public interest could no longer be ignored and the rapidity of changes and the frequency of commercial failures during the great financial crisis of that time necessitated a daily record of City events. Alsager's policy was uniformly conservative. He upheld the principle of basing the currency firmly upon gold, was slow to support the idea of the joint stock bank, and deprecated foreign investment, saying in 1825 that 'no loan can fail to be injurious which is not raised within the country for whose use it is intended'.

In 1827 Alsager and George Hicks¹⁴, who was engaged on the mechanical side at Printing House Square were permitted to purchase partnerships in The Times. By then Alsager was referred to as a joint manager of the newspaper. Hicks began a four-year period as Treasurer of The Times, after which he was to concentrate more on the direction of the printing office.

Barnes' political successes as Editor were most ably supported by Alsager's commercial enterprise verging on genius. Alsager was responsible, under Barnes, for the maintenance and extension of the paper's staff of home and foreign correspondents and he evolved a system of Times 'expresses' for conveying news which aroused the admiration of the whole world of journalism. He knew that businessmen must have details of the commercial world and, throughout his newspaper career, he gave oversight to the Market News, the Dock and Shipping News, and the Produce Quotations. He was responsible for, and doubtless wrote many of, the leading articles on City affairs, banking and currency. Occasional obituaries of notable persons in the financial world may also be traced to him. Contemporaries reported that his knowledge of monetary questions was outstanding. Financial journals sometimes drew on Alsager's articles alone for information about activities in the money market. A writer in 1837 stated that 'if private report speaks truth, he has, by means of his articles in The Times, saved the Directors of the Bank of England from some serious errors.'

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Alsager had not married until May 1821 when he was nearly forty-two. His bride was the seventeen-year-old Elizabeth Roper, of whose family nothing is known except a tradition that all her brothers and sisters had died of smallpox.¹⁵ The Alsagers were to have thirteen children in about nineteen years, eleven daughters and two sons, of whom eight daughters and one son survived infancy. The third and eldest surviving child was Margaret Alsager (1824-1898)¹⁶, the eleventh and seventh surviving child was the son, Thomas Hicks Alsager (1834-1867). Crabb Robinson was to meet him in 1853. He was to die married but childless, like his father's brothers but unlike his sisters and his father's sisters, who nearly all married and had large families. None of Alsager's children became Free of The Clothworkers' Company.

Since Alsager's election to the Livery of The Clothworkers' Company in 1804 he had accrued seniority until he was elected Fourth or Renter Warden in 1829 and Second Warden in 1830. He now became a Member of the Court of Assistants and, almost unwittingly, found a skeleton in the cupboard.

To this day The Clothworkers' Company administer a series of trusts which include payments to poor blood relations of John West, Master of the Company

in 1707-8, and his wife Frances. At the beginning of 1836, Alsager afterwards wrote, he was besieged with applications by a poor woman for such a pension and he, on asking the Clerk or Company's chief employed officer for details, received what he considered an evasive answer. Investigating further, he discovered that the West money involved not a will but a trust deed, most strictly binding on the Company: not only was an insufficient sum being paid out but no West audit had been held for four years. The Clerk continued to act evasively, even suspiciously, and it was at this moment of horrified tension that Alsager was elected Master of the Company, the highest Clothworker office, in August 1836. He was now able to insist upon satisfaction.

It is not necessary for us to consider the details of this unfortunate matter and it may be that the Clerk was the victim of an antiquated and inefficient system of accountancy. No defalcation was ever actually proved against him. Alsager at once began a programme to reform the Company's affairs 'so as to leave no doubt hereafter as to the purity of its administration'. In January 1837 the Clerk suddenly died and the difficulties encountered in untangling this mass of confusion began to seem almost overwhelming. By his enormous zeal, by his financial genius, by a sacrifice of time and energy seriously detrimental to his private affairs, Alsager formed a clear picture of the Company's trusts and started to take steps to make amends for former errors. In short, the chaos which he resolved represented perhaps the most terrible danger which the Company ever faced: if some enemy had stumbled upon the dreadful secret before the Company had had time to correct it and make amends, it seems likely that the Company would have been in grave peril of suppression by the loss of their Charter. The avoidance of this danger was due to Alsager and Alsager alone. He saved the Company's honour and set about its reorganization upon modern lines. He created order and the rule of law, remoulded the system of accountancy to include separation and strict classification of the accounts with a ledger in mercantile form, and virtually instituted a system of superintendence of the Company's general affairs by standing committees of the Court, elected for their members' talents and availability, not by mere rotation, which survives today. Without Alsager the Company's distinguished modern record of good works faithfully performed might have come to an abrupt halt.

A testimonial was entered in the Court Orders for 16 August 1837:

It was resolved: That highly impressed with the valuable and important Services rendered to this Company by the zeal and ability evinced by THOMAS MASSA ALSAGER, ESQ. whilst filling the Master's chair during a year of unprecedented difficulty...seeing that he has now so arranged the various trusts, so simplified the method of keeping the different accounts, and so brought about the fulfillment (sic) of the benevolent intentions of the respective Benefactors as to extend to a very considerable degree the bequests for the benefit of poor Members; the Court are desirous to testify the regard they feel towards that Gentleman, as well as the obligation which they think will be shared by their Successors, and therefore solicit that he will favor (sic) them by sitting to an Artist, that his Portrait may be painted for the purpose of being placed in one of their Rooms.

The artist was Henry P Briggs RA and the portrait was placed in the Hall in November 1838. It was considered an excellent likeness.¹⁷

The year 1836/7 had represented a peak for the Alsagers. Thomas Massa Alsager was Master of The Clothworkers' Company and most highly respected on The Times and in the City. His cousin Charles was a Past Master of The Clothworkers' Company and second senior Assistant. His youngest brother Charles was the most junior Assistant. His brother Captain Richard Alsager RN was MP for East Surrey and the most senior Liveryman. His nephew Henry was also among the senior Livery.

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E V Lucas' date of 'early 1825?' for the letter in which Charles Lamb tells Leigh Hunt that 'Alsager is in a flourishing house, with wife and children about him, in Mecklenburg Square - almost too fine to visit' is incorrect, for the Clothworker annual lists show him there in December 1829 only. By December 1830 he had moved to his last London home, 26 Queen Square, Bloomsbury.¹⁸

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In the Essay of Elia 'A Chapter on Ears' Lamb denies his possession of any musical sense and tells how he can get through a Vincent Novello musical evening only with a draught of true Lutheran beer. Lucas records Edmund Ollier's memory of a similar occasion when Lamb 'weathered a Mozartian storm' only with the assistance of a foaming mug. On the other hand Lucas also notes Crabb Robinson's statement that Lamb hummed tunes and we know that he was bewitched by Braham's singing (letter to Manning, 26 February 1808). As musical director of the King's Theatre, William Ayrton introduced Mozart's 'Don Giovanni' to its first English audience in 1817. Lamb found the opera 'exquisite, and I am almost inclined to allow Music to be one of the Liberal Arts; which before I doubted' (letter to Ayrton, 18 April 1817). The family records mentioned above include a note by Ayrton that Charles Lamb was devoid of all knowledge of music, had scarcely any ear for melody and none for harmony, but was not insensible to the charms of a fine or sweet voice. It therefore seems on balance unlikely that he was much involved with the serious musical side of the Alsager family, though he knew of it: 'Alsager (whom you call Alsinger - and indeed he is rather *singer* than *sager*, no reflection upon his naturals neither) is well and in harmony with himself and the world' (letter to Wordsworth, 9 August 1815).

At the age of eighteen Alsager had become passionately fond of music, for which he had never cared before. He used to obtain permission to play in the orchestra of His Majesty's Theatre for the operas, simply to gain practice, and Grove's Dictionary once stated 'It is a fact that he could perform on all the instruments in the Orchestra'. He became one of the most distinguished amateur musicians and influential musical patrons of his time with an 'intense devotion to music' which formerly justified his entry in Grove. This devotion blossomed at Queen Square, where frequent private concerts were given by 'The Queen's (sic) Square Select Society'. One of the Society's objects was to establish a taste for Beethoven's chamber music by playing it in the most perfect manner obtainable. This led to the formation of the Beethoven Quartet Society. Its organization, wrote Alsager's obituarist in The Gentleman's Magazine (January 1847), 'reflects the highest credit on his enthusiasm, taste, liberality, and industry' and he greatly influenced the wonderful advancement in the production of that style of music. 'It will be long ere his influence on music is replaced.' Grove was to praise his enthusiasm, knowledge and munificence.

Alsager sponsored the first English performance of Beethoven's Mass in D with the full score (1832)¹⁹, of Cherubini's Requiem in C (1834), and of Bach's motets for a double choir. He was an enlightened supporter of foreign artists of talent and was the host of Spohr in 1843, when the guests included William Ayrton, William Sterndale Bennett, the Bohemian pianist Ignaz Moscheles, and Charles Hallé, and of Mendelssohn, who participated in several of Alsager's musical matinées, including one in May 1844 when the boy prodigy Joachim played in a Mendelssohn quartet before the composer.

Alsager is said to have written musical criticism but it is more noteworthy that his office deputy from 1843, with responsibility for dramatic and musical criticism, was Lamb's godson, Charles Lamb Kenney. The latter retired through illness in 1846 and he or Alsager successfully recommended the appointment by The Times of J W Davison, the first professionally-trained music critic employed by any daily paper. Between about 1850 and 1875 the paper's music and drama critic was Alsager's nephew, John Oxenford²⁰.

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When William Barnes died in 1841, the youthful John Delane²¹ took over as Editor of The Times and the managerial department was administered on the Chief Proprietor's behalf by two men, the Editor's father William Delane as Treasurer²² and Alsager as Assistant Manager. Alsager continued as City Editor, spending most of his time in the City, collecting mercantile and foreign news, and writing the financial articles. In May 1842 he renewed his acquaintance with Wordsworth, being purposely sat beside him at one of Crabb Robinson's dinners, which gratified Alsager and pleased Wordsworth. By now, however, Alsager's life was more commercial than literary. He had always strenuously opposed the prevailing current of speculation and in 1845 he conducted a great campaign against the railway speculation mania, proving in a large supplement to The Times in late November that more money was being indiscriminately invested, at least on paper, than there was in the country. The City rightly continued to credit him with conspicuous ability and impartiality, and he was therefore one of the chief guests at the famous Times testimonial dinner on 2 September 1846.

The Lord Mayor presided and the last name on the list of those to be honoured was that of Thomas Massa Alsager. The proposer referred to the introduction of the first 'city article', a feature contained in every newspaper since; the great honesty, integrity, ability, and zeal with which that department in The Times had from the first been conducted; the most useful communications collected from all quarters and exhibited in a well-digested and lucid form; no other paper could approach The Times in this; moreover there was no hint of partiality in the articles; it was all due to Thomas Massa Alsager - 'to him the whole of this great merit was owing.'²³ Alsager replied in the last speech of the evening, saying that he believed that, in his twenty-eight years' work for The Times in the City, he had never betrayed a friend nor made an enemy.

This seems to have been true and seldom can success have seemed so great or the resulting fall so swift. The dinner occurred on 2 September 1846. Within four weeks Alsager had been dismissed from The Times. Within nine weeks he had cut his throat.

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The circumstances of Alsager's dismissal from The Times have an uncanny, if

perhaps superficial, resemblance to the events at Clothworkers' Hall in 1836-7. The collapse of the railway boom had caused rapid deflation. As a result The Times's revenue was known to have shrunk and John Walter II received the accounts for 1846 with unusual concern. Studying an apparent inconsistency, he found that an important routine charge, a 'rest' to meet possible contingencies, had been omitted. He assumed it to be a clerical oversight, asked William Delane and Alsager for an explanation, considered this unsatisfactory, and pressed for an investigation. Walter needed the profit and, as Chief Proprietor of The Times, was personally responsible and accountable to its other Proprietors but, when he discovered that the credit balance had been obtained only by holding back the routine charge, he concluded that his joint managers had acted in agreement wilfully to mislead him. He was so shocked by this revelation that he demanded their resignations. They defended themselves unsuccessfully and, after fifteen years' association with The Times in the case of Delane, and after almost thirty years in the case of Alsager, they left at the end of September 1846²⁴.

William Delane had 'the supervision of the department' and the main fault seems to have been his. Alsager's City Office duties meant that he was rarely at Printing House Square but he apparently acquiesced in the accounts and so could be considered guilty of a technical offence. He did not seem to regard his conduct as gravely censurable, however, never admitting to wrong-doing nor even to a mistaken action. He seems to have retained other posts and was described at the inquest as 'lately official assignee in the Bankruptcy Court of Mr Commissioner Vane',

Nonetheless, the dismissal, whatever the circumstances, must surely have played on his mind and it was considered that the simple withdrawal of work from a mind long used to such discipline had affected him deeply. Alsager seems to have bought a suburban house in the district which can variously be described as Kingston or Surbiton and there Mrs Alsager had died on 29 October 1845. Alsager now went to stay there with his children and, during the first month of his inactivity, there occurred the first anniversary of the death of his wife to whom, a newspaper stated, 'he was most warmly attached'. He had been seen to have a depression of the spirits for a fortnight or so but not to the extent of causing family discussion. Indeed, said Margaret Alsager, the only one of his children called at the inquest, he had never talked of committing suicide and had a great objection to it, which he expressed at the time of B R Haydon's death late in the previous June.

Talfourd had described Alsager (Final Memorials. ii.206) as 'so calm, so bland, so considerate'. Now above all he needed that serenity of mind which Charles Lamb had envied in his long-ago letter to Wordsworth (9 August 1815): 'I don't know how he /Alsager/ and those of his constitution keep their nerves so nicely balanced as they do. Or have they any? or are they made of packthread? He is proof against weather, ingratitude, meat under done, every weapon of fate...I don't think he could be robbed, or could have his house set on fire, or ever want money. I have heard him express a similar opinion of his own impassibility.' His impassibility now deserted him.

On Thursday morning, 5 November 1846, Alsager took the train from Kingston to stay at his house at 26 Queen Square. His servants noted that he was in very low spirits, depressed, sitting with his head rested on his hands, or walking about the room and unable to settle to anything.

The following day, Friday, 6 November, was the first anniversary of his wife's funeral. At 7 o'clock that morning Hannah Britten the housemaid took him a cup of tea. He did not speak to her but 'he was a gentleman that never held any conversation with his servants'. Those were the words of Elizabeth Perry the cook, who went in to his bedroom at 10 o'clock, drew the curtains, observed that he looked very pale, and then saw the blood. The surgeon who was called from his house next door at No.28 thought that Alsager was already dead from loss of blood for he had thrice gashed his throat and also cut his left wrist. He revived after two or three hours, however, and the surgeon, who was to make five or six visits every day, thought that he might live for a long time, though never entirely recover.

During the ensuing week Alsager constantly asked for food and whether the wound looked better. He appeared perfectly rational and expressed no regret for what he had done. The only person he wished to see was his nephew and solicitor, John Oxenford, who had a new will drawn up at his request. This he signed on Thursday evening, 12 November. On Friday he rallied and seemed quite cheerful, then took a turn for the worse. After lapsing into a muttering delirium, during which he unfortunately cried out 'Murder', he died at 2 o'clock on Sunday morning, 15 November 1846.²⁵

An inquest was held in the house on the following day. The body was viewed and statements taken. It was established that no one had broken in and attacked him but that he had inflicted the wounds himself. The doctor said that the wounds seemed healthy, that the immediate cause of death was exhaustion from loss of blood, and, a pregnant remark in the Elian circle, that no erysipelas came on.

The deputy coroner for West Middlesex was later criticised for his uneasiness at permitting the jury to obtain or be influenced by information regarding Alsager's resignation from The Times and the depressive state which followed. The doctor had described Alsager's mind as being one of superior strength and vigour. John Oxenford said he was an excessively active man, always of remarkably sound mind, rational before and after the deed, made despondent by the ceasing of his occupation but not unhinged by it.²⁶ The newspapers report that there was a sensation when the juror who insisted on the details explained that 'I want to make the man out a lunatic'. The deputy coroner rebuked him for attempting to sway the evidence but the point was an important one. If a man destroyed himself while of sound mind, the body was then still buried at midnight with certain indignities and without the usual ritual, the remnants of a barbarous custom of which the rest had for some years been abolished. The deputy coroner admitted this and told the jury that, for various reasons, they could hardly speak of the condition of Alsager's mind. They then consulted for not more than two or three minutes without retiring. Their verdict was 'That Mr Alsager was found with his throat cut; that he did it with his own hand; but as to what his state of mind was at the time he did it, there is no evidence before us'. The deputy coroner prompted them to make this 'not sufficient evidence before us'. It was a loophole and it was enough. Thomas Massa Alsager was buried normally, in Kensal Green.²⁷

The Court of The Clothworkers' Company had no qualms. The Master, the Wardens, several Assistants, and the Clerk attended Alsager's funeral and his death was recorded in the Court Orders for 2 December 1846. It is unusual for a Clothworker to receive a testimonial like that given to Alsager in August 1837 but the honour of a second encomium is probably unique to this day. After noting the death, it was:

Resolved unanimously

That on the official announcement of the death of Thomas Massa Alsager Esq.^e This Court cannot record the mournful event, without testifying the just appreciation they entertain of his invaluable services as a Member of this Company, and the severe loss they have experienced by his decease.

This Court had for many years to remark in their departed friend and Brother, the uniform practice of the strictest integrity, blended with great ability, perseverance and zeal, which added to an unwearied devotedness of purpose, a gentlemanly and courteous demeanour, and extensive Knowledge, qualified him in an eminent degree to promote all the important and various interests of this Worshipful Company, whereby he has secured for his memory a lasting place in their gratitude, respect, and esteem.

This Court desire to offer their sincere and unfeigned condolence to the surviving Members of his sorrowing family under their melancholy bereavement, and to express a deep sympathy with them in their affliction.

Resolved unanimously

That a copy of the foregoing Resolution be signed by the Clerk and forwarded to the family of the late Mr. Alsager.²⁸

* * * *

It may be agreed that, almost by chance, this paper has shown Thomas Massa Alsager to have been an extremely important member of the London commercial world. Nevertheless, its primary purpose was to prove that he was so much one of the Elian circle that his presence was frequently taken as a matter of course and that he did not need to be named. The last, and very useful, word can lie with Crabb Robinson. He was born in 1775, the same year as Charles Lamb, but lived until 1867. On 21 January 1865 he noted an event in his Diary which, when one considers all the names he might have mentioned, could be regarded as proving the contention without other support. 'After dinner a very remarkable call was announced. The name I could not at first recollect - Allsop, whose name has long been forgotten by the public. An extinct volcano. Our acquaintance was never intimate. He was first known only as the generous, though not high-born friend, of Coleridge and Lamb. He knew Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, Alsager, Southey. He was an admirer of great men.'

* * * *

Seven weeks before this paper was to be read, when it seemed to be in final draft and the underestimated importance of Thomas Massa Alsager as a member of the Elian circle suitably proved, there occurred an extraordinary piece of good luck. By pure chance my colleague the Assistant Clerk invited me to meet a friend of his, a descendant of Alsager's. The surname of the gentleman from Crouch End did not strike a chord until just before we met and the likelihood of the obvious connection being true or quickly provable seemed remote.

The gentleman from Crouch End was Alsager's great-great-grandson. He produced numerous family relics for my inspection: newspaper cuttings and a few family letters assembled by his great-grandmother Margaret Alsager to illustrate particular matters of genealogical detail, a book of family extracts compiled by his grandfather, the Dighton caricature of 'The Mirror of the Times' and, at a later meeting, a large family tree.

Perhaps the most fascinating document was the set of extracts copied from

the diary begun by Margaret Alsager at her father's suggestion on 1 January 1838 when she was thirteen years old. If the first sections are indeed the totally unassisted work of a girl in her early teens, they provide a dazzling reflection of Alsager's intelligence. We learn that Mrs Alsager was an invalid for some years before she died at the age of forty-one 'so a great deal devolved on us girls' and that the thirteen-year-old Margaret, as the eldest daughter, felt it a great distinction to be allowed to take an active part in superintending the household duties. There are long references to the Clothworkers' portrait, to her father's remarks, and to the concerts at Queen Square. There are great set-pieces describing Queen Victoria's coronation and marriage, and verbal snapshots of going to a juvenile party in an obsolescent sedan chair; of her mother's being visited by her friend Mrs Payne, Admiral Burney's daughter; of her own introduction to Mr (Benjamin) D'Israeli; and how, in 1843 at the Ayrtons', 'we were very glad to meet there our old school companion Georgina Hogarth, she is wonderfully grown, and was quite glad to see us, she introduced us to her sister Mrs Dickens, the wife of the author of Pickwick & c.'

Margaret was only twenty-two when Alsager died. She remembered that 'he was 6 feet high, and one of the handsomest men I have seen, such a good noble face'. She also recalled 'the keen delight when I was sometimes allowed to sit up late, when 14, and then later, to write articles from his dictation, as he walked up and down the room, the words flowing so smoothly from his lips, and my anxiety to keep up with them, that I might not interrupt the current of his thoughts by asking for a repetition.' She regretted that the children had been so young when he died for 'My dear Father was one of the most modest men as regards his good and clever deeds in life, he very rarely mentioned them to his family, and it was only by chance they were heard of, and questioned by us.'

I had not yet seen the family tree but felt sure that such a quantity of knowledge preserved would include the source of the surname of the gentleman from Crouch End. In a few words he supplied the details that alone might be used to prove Alsager's importance in the Elian circle. For Mr R E Ayrton of Crouch End confirmed that, in 1847, Margaret Alsager had married his great-grandfather William Scrope Ayrton, sometime Commissioner of Bankruptcy for the Leeds District. In other words, the eldest daughter of Thomas Massa Alsager had married the eldest son of William Ayrton, 'the Will Honeycomb of our set', musical critic, writer and director, intimate friend of Charles Lamb, and the brother of that Mrs Paris at whose house in Cambridge in 1820 Charles and Mary Lamb had first met Emma Isola.

* * * *

Notes

- 1 The historian of The Times records this (I.415.n) and adds carefully and correctly 'The last statement was probably facetious'.
- 2 Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers, edited by Edith J Morley, 3 vols, Dent, 1938. Minor additional items of interest may be found in Thomas Sadler's edition of Henry Crabb Robinson, second edition, 1869.
- 3 Richard Alsager (Free 1756) is noted in a Clothworkers' Company record as 'Allsager' and Lamb refers to 'Alsager (whom you call Alsinger...)'. This suggests that the name was pronounced 'Awl-sage-er' rather than

any syncopated alternative. The name of the town was (formerly?) commonly pronounced 'Auger'.

- 4 Audley is near Alsager and Alsager's Bank which are between Crewe and Newcastle under Lyme, all on the Cheshire/Staffordshire border. Margaret Alsager understood that the three Alsager ladies who were the last manorial Alsagers were John Alsager's cousins.
- 5 The Freedom of the City of London was once essential to every person who desired to exercise a trade or handicraft within the City. Until 1835 no one was admissible to the Freedom of the City unless he or she was a Freeman of a Livery Company or of one of the very few Companies of a similar kind without a livery. At about fourteen, a boy would be apprenticed by strict indentures and usually for seven years to a master, who might be his father, who was a Freeman of the desired Company; very occasionally the boy might be apprenticed to his mother if she were the widow of a Freeman. As an enrolled indentured apprentice he would be taught his master's craft which might, but need not, be connected with the Company of which he was Free. Thus a Clothworker might teach his apprentices setting or shearing or packing - or he might earn his living as a cook or a porter or a writing-master and teach that. At twenty-one the apprentice would become a Freeman by Servitude and would hope to become a Liveryman soon afterwards. He was eligible in time to be elected a Warden for two years. He would then be a member of the Court of Assistants and would assist the Master to govern the Company until, by seniority, he achieved the post of Master for one year. He then reverted to being an Assistant.

A boy born the son of a Freeman could claim Freedom by Patrimony and it was usual to do so whether or not he wished to set up in business.

The Clothworkers' Company were incorporated by Royal Charter in 1528 and are twelfth in precedence among the London Livery Companies, the last of the 'Great Twelve'.

- 6 The family papers include a modern copy of an Alsager family letter addressed to Mr Thomas Alsager, Swan Yard, Blackman Street, Southwark, and dated from St Germain in France, 20 January 1776. It is signed 'E. Green'. The writer speaks of herself as 'Betsy's aunt' and refers to an otherwise unrecorded Alsager daughter born in the three or four weeks preceding her letter.

Other family letters permit an extraordinary chain of identification. Mrs Thomas Alsager's parents, Richard Crosby and Elizabeth (née Hill) of St Saviour's parish, Southwark, died young, leaving three orphan daughters in the guardianship of Joseph Hill, presumably their maternal grandfather or uncle, who had landed property and several houses in Southwark. He was a Quaker and, when his ward Mary Crosby married Thomas Alsager against his wishes because 'outside the pale', he ensured that she received a smaller marriage portion than her sisters who became Mrs Hooper and Mrs Green. The eldest child of the non-Quaker marriage, Thomas Massa Alsager's eldest sister, was named Elizabeth and considered to be her aunt Green's heiress; she would have been 5½ at the time of the letter.

In the letter of 1776 'E. Green' makes a passing reference to owing no money to 'my uncle Home' and others to 'my aunt Home' and to 'my

sister Hooper'. The Horne family has one of the longest current connections with The Clothworkers' Company, unbroken since Thomas Horne was apprenticed in 1742. The family has provided eleven Masters of the Company and two more 'excused service'. The mid and late 18th century Hornes were Clothworkers, Quakers and coal merchants of St Saviour's and Bankside in Southwark, and it is noteworthy that, in 1753, the abovementioned Thomas Horne (1726-1802; Master 'excused service' 1782) married Mary, daughter of James Hill, of St Saviour's, Southwark. In 1807 Thomas and Mary's grandson, William Horne (1785-1848; Master 1840-1) married Mary, daughter of James Hill Hooper of Tooley Street, Southwark. It seems likely that he was the son of the abovementioned Mrs Hooper, whose maiden surname had been Hill.

In the circumstances one must recall Charles Lamb's interest in Quakers, his admiration for John Woolman's Journal, his love for Hester Savory, his friendship with the Lloyds and Bernard Barton, and the Essay of Elia 'A Quakers' Meeting'.

- 7 Alsager's Southwark is ruined. Swan Street and Great Suffolk Street are a desert of modernity and the southern end of Borough High Street covers Blackman Street. The Inner London Sessions House and County Court stands on the site of Horsemonger Lane gaol, together with a modern exercise yard, the asphalted 'playing field' on a nearby school. Holy Trinity Church and its square are well cared for. Nelson Square is discussed below (Note 13).
- 8 This is despite a letter from Godwin to Mrs Godwin dated 3 August 1815 (Lucas: Complete Letters: II.171.n): 'Miss Lamb has just called in to ask me to sup with them on Saturday evening at Mr. Alsager's, in the Borough /i.e. Southwark/, a clever man, she says, a bachelor, a whist player, and a new acquaintance of theirs.'
- 9 Crabb Robinson spent the evening of 10 February 1816 at Alsager's and left after midnight. 'As usual, Hazlitt stayed behind. Alsager had liquor behind which Hazlitt wished to drink, and Hazlitt's sense Alsager enjoys and appreciates.' (See also Note 14.)
- 10 Earlier that year, probably in July or August 1817, Alsager had stayed at Rydal Mount as the Wordsworths' guest. Another guest at that time, perhaps accompanying Alsager, was Tom Monkhouse, Mrs Wordsworth's cousin.
- 11 Alsager was the owner of the copy of George Chapman's 'Homer' which in 1816 would inspire Keats to compose 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' and he was the member of the Surrey Institution probably most responsible for Hazlitt's coming there in 1818 and 1819 to deliver what were afterwards published as 'Lectures on the English Poets', etc.
- 12 'E. Green' asks in her 1776 letter for news of various family members and friends by name; 'as for...Barnes, &c, I shall quarter /my enquiries/ on my sister Hooper.'
- 13 In 1821 Thomas Barnes went to live only a few minutes' walk across the Thames from The Times office at Printing House Square, Blackfriars, at 49 Nelson Square, Southwark, just off Great Suffolk Street. It was the most desirable house in what was then probably the most attractive residential square south of the Thames. The area has not merely 'gone

down' but plummeted and Nelson Square is today surrounded by blocks of nine-storey flats, except for one short length of 18th century terrace in the south east corner. It is annoying that No.49, which survived at least part of the last war, was the next house along on the south side.

In 1836 Barnes moved to the large and handsome No.25 Soho Square, demolished in the 1930s.

- 14 The historian of The Times calls Hicks Alsager's brother-in-law (I.183) and his son-in-law (I.418). He seems to have been neither. The names of the husbands of all Alsager's married sisters and daughters are thought to be known and Hicks is not among them. Mrs Alsager was a Roper and understood to have no surviving brothers or sisters. Alsager's brother Charles married a woman whose maiden name is unknown. Mr and Mrs Hicks were obviously just close friends of the Alsagers: a letter from Alsager to Mrs Hicks, dated June 1834, notes that she is one of the friends Mrs Alsager would like to see at this early time after her confinement and that Mrs Hicks is to be a sponsor for Alsager's son, the newly-born Thomas Hicks Alsager. Similarly Alsager named a daughter after his great friend Thomas Barnes.

The word 'sponsor' is an alternative to godparent. It is not clear whether Alsager used it because he was one of those people who thought that God's name should not be mentioned in ordinary conversation, and so wrote of 'fathers' and 'mothers' in impossible relationships since the writers meant 'godfathers' and 'godmothers', or because of his religious attitude mentioned by Crabb Robinson on 30 June 1816: 'Alsager really thinks religious feelings hurtful instead of helpful, and prefers the hard understanding of a man like Hazlitt to the delicate sensibility of a man like Wordsworth. This I think is a bad turn of mind.' Or perhaps the businessman preferred Hazlitt's commonsense to whatever Wordsworth offered.

- 15 A letter of 16 September 1823 from William Ayrton to his wife describes the ex-bachelor's present state:

'...on Sunday, I went to Alsager's. House, garden and everything but himself metamorphosed! There I found his wife! - aye, his legitimate spouse: a remarkably fine young woman, of about 3 or 4 and twenty, and *beautifully pretty*. She has not what are called perfect features, but the ensemble is *exquisitely* pretty and engaging. She is, as yet, quite unlearned, and this is the reason why A. did not show her to me: - "for, my dear Ayrton," he said, "you mix with such brilliant women, and are so fastidious, that I have been afraid to let you see my choice." - There I found a little girl of about 6 months; very ugly at present, & therefore destined to be exceedingly handsome hereafter.

I told her that you would call the first week after your return. This *really* delighted A. who insists that you, and all the brats, shall pass a long day there. He seems thoroughly contented, and disposed to enjoy domesticity in its most literal sense.'

Mrs Alsager was in fact not more than nineteen and the child was Mary Ann, who died in December 1824 aged two years. There had been an elder daughter still-born.

- 16 'On further enquiry, Alsager is not dead, but Mrs A. is brought to bed.'

(Lamb's postscript in his 'matter of lie' letter to Mrs Collier, 2 November 1824).

- 17 The portrait was a full-length, painted between February 1838 and 8 May 1838 when Margaret Alsager and her parents saw it hanging in the Royal Academy exhibition (Item 282 in the Middle Room). She recorded in her diary that 'The design exhibits Papa with a table on /sic/ his right hand, on which are placed the books of accounts and charities which it seems he was of service to the Company in bringing into a regular state. On the left the Chair of Office and the gown /he/ wore as Master.'

Later she noted that the portrait was put up in Clothworkers' Hall 'in the most honourable place that could be found for it, immediately over the Master's Chair and between the statues of James the first and Charles the first.'

This enabled me to re-identify the portrait sketchily represented in that position in a surviving watercolour of the Company's pre-Victorian Hall. The original has disappeared, perhaps long since. It was recorded in Clothworkers' Hall in 1870 but is not remembered as having been there just before the building was destroyed in 1941 and 'the portraits, with one or two minor exceptions' were noted in the official report as having been saved. No photograph of the portrait exists. This re-identification has cast doubt on the source, artist, subject, and all other matters concerning the Company's head and shoulders portrait of a man in informal dress long, and perhaps correctly identified as Alsager and formerly understood to be Briggs' testimonial portrait. On the back is a label intriguingly describing it as 'Alsager (2)'.
 18 William Morris, the poet, artist, manufacturer, and socialist, moved from Red House, Bexleyheath, to 26 Queen Square in 1865 and it was the headquarters of his work for the next seventeen years. In his biography of Morris, J W Mackail writes of 'a large ball-room which had been built at the end of the yard, and connected with the dwelling-house by a wooden gallery'. This was perhaps Alsager's concert room and it became Morris' principal workshop. The house was demolished by 1899 and the site is now covered by The National Hospital (for Nervous Diseases), Queen Square. A handful of houses, which survive from the period and are scattered round the square, suggest the likely appearance of Alsager's house.

- 19 Alsager received a substantial entry in the 1878 edition of Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians. In more modern editions he receives a passing mention only, under 'Vincent Novello', because the latter's daughter Clara sang in this 1832 performance at Alsager's house, two years before her London debut.
- 20 He was the son of William Oxenford and Alsager's youngest sister Caroline, and was also a solicitor.
- 21 The Clothworkers' Company Court Orders show that the Company granted an 'additional Pilsworth exhibition' of £20 a year at Magdalen Hall, Oxford, from Christmas 1837 to August 1840, when it was resigned, to William Delane's second son, John Thadeus Delane. He took his degree in 1839, joined The Times in July 1840 and was to be Editor of The Times 1841-77.

- 22 The Clothworkers' Company's Gregory Collection includes a note from Alsager asking for an invitation to a forthcoming Hall dinner to be sent to Mr W F A Delane.
- 23 The Alsager obituary in the 15 November 1846 issue of the Weekly Dispatch, no friend of The Times, included the words 'by his almost unaided exertions he raised The Times to a point of commercial eminence, envied only by other journalists, who have sought in vain to build a reputation following Mr Alsager's example'.
- 24 The immediate circumstances of Alsager's death and the reports in the sensational Press dealt such a blow to Walter's pride and so shook his twenty-five years' unqualified belief in the complete efficiency and utter trustworthiness of his staff that, early in 1847, he resigned as Chief Proprietor in favour of his son, John Walter III.
- 25 Admiral Burney's daughter, Mrs Sarah Payne, wrote Margaret Alsager an enchanting letter of sympathy, referring to Alsager's bestowal of 'so much happiness' and recalling how kind he had been to her own father. Wordsworth wrote to Edward Moxon (apparently mis-dated 13 November 1846 in de Selincourt's edition of the Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth): 'The death of Mr Alsager following upon that of poor Haydon has shocked me much; I became acquainted with him through Charles Lamb, in whose chambers I have not infrequently seen him, as well as in the City. I always looked upon him as a man of sober mind and sound judgement, and that he was so in other respects makes this Catastrophe the more deplorable.'
- 26 Compare a passage in Charles Lamb's melancholy letter of 25 July to Bernard Barton: 'I pity you for over-work, but I assure you no-work is worse. The mind preys on itself, the most unwholesome food. I brag'd formerly that I could not have too much time. I have a surfeit.'
- 27 The grave at Kensal Green is Plot 5778 in Section 102 and here are buried Alsager, his wife Elizabeth, their son Thomas Hicks Alsager, and their married daughter Mary, Mrs Jervis. The memorial consists of a tall plinth on which stands a statue of St Helen carrying a cross-shaft and with her other arm raised. It can be reached but is surrounded by high brambles and the less intrepid may prefer to walk along the northern radius of the great circular path while keeping their eyes fixed on the temple-like building to the west: St Helen's raised arm will then break their line of sight.
- 28 The signed copy and the draft reply survive in the family collection.

*Based on a talk given to the Society in November 1980 by D E Wickham MA
Archivist of The Clothworkers' Company*

BOOK REVIEW

Kathleen Coburn: *Experience into Thought: Perspectives in the Coleridge Notebooks*. University of Toronto Press December 1979 \$7.50

A delightful American boy, over here as an exchange student, after attending my seminars on the older Romantics, once said to me, "Of course, it's easy for you: you knew them all personally". If there is anyone alive who, without being two hundred years old, can truly be said to have known Coleridge

personally, it must be Kathleen Coburn, who has lived with the Notebooks containing his most intimate thoughts for so long. The magnitude of this wonderful work of scholarship must still make us all gasp every time we contemplate it.

Now, in the Alexander Lectures, we have a slim little book in which is distilled some of the essence of Professor Coburn's discovery of Coleridge's mind as seen in these Notebooks. In an introductory lecture, she illustrates his myriad-mindedness, the "sense of contradiction...between the world within him and the world without", which "seems to have fostered a capacity for asking questions that went on developing throughout his life", the feeling of isolation which "did not destroy him" but "fostered creative activity" and the personal suffering and loneliness, going back to childhood, which yet so often he managed courageously to turn "to creative use".

In the second lecture, Professor Coburn traces "some of the strange paths" along which Coleridge was led by his interest in such figures as Behmen, Paracelsus and Bruno. She confesses that Behmen's "arguments are baffling... to the point of despair" before giving a splendidly cogent account of some of what "Coleridge's marginalia helped me to grasp" about them. She goes on to Paracelsus who "next to Behmen must be one of the more unclear of writers. He was unclear to himself". In due course we hear of Bruno whose works, Coleridge said, were "full of what seemed 'impenetrable obscurity'". But "Coleridge was willing to work for his gains from a difficult writer" and indeed found in Boehme, as John Beer has elsewhere demonstrated and as Kathleen Coburn makes clear here, some not only of his most characteristic themes but also of his central images. He discerned the greatness beneath the obscurity. "One may safely conclude that Coleridge chose his intellectual heroes and allies, if Behmen, Paracelsus, and Bruno are a fair cross-section, for their daring, their doubting, and for the general snobbish and frightened neglect of their magnitude". He found in his own day the same attitude towards such figures as Mesmer or Spurzheim. While reserving judgement about their theories, Coleridge continued to think them worth examining, despite "a great deal of popular mockery". "Gold was separated from dross in each case." Though well aware that "Imagination frightens people", Coleridge never failed to approach "visionaries" with a discriminating respect.

In the third lecture, Professor Coburn relates what she has said about Coleridge's qualities and influences to his poetry and notebooks. She affirms that, far from "the metaphysician having killed the poet" in him, "The poet and the philosopher in Coleridge were one and the same man." Metaphysical ideas are incorporated in the poems without damage to either. If he did not leave "a systematic philosophy in the accepted sense", his aim was to see "the primary laws of our nature" in relation to "the origin and primary laws of the world". Professor Coburn says, "Possibly working constantly in the notebooks gives one a more vivid impression of the struggling process than of the ultimate whole" but nevertheless, she says, "Coleridge's thought was not really fragmentary. It was organic, not a mechanical construction". She uses a number of quotations from the notebooks to illustrate this and to demonstrate his conviction that, since "philosophy and religion arise out of human need"; man's inner world, which is not entirely rational, must be explored in conjunction with the outer social and physical worlds. "It is the constant response and re-adjustment to these, the truly systolic-diastolic movement of heart and mind that constitute the endless fascination of Coleridge."

Whether as a clarification and drawing together of many apparently disparate threads in Coleridge scholarship, for readers familiar with this complicated and sometimes bewildering field, or as an introduction to the Notebooks for those not already hooked on them, this little book is invaluable.

MW

NOTES

ERRATUM

We apologise to readers that a date was omitted in the April *Bulletin*. On page 41, in the reference to 'This England', "the Spring issue" should read "the Spring 1976 issue".

THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting of the Society was held on 9 May 1981 at the Mary Ward Centre, London WC1.

After the reading of the Minutes and the passing of the Annual Report and Accounts, the Hon. Treasurer explained that greatly increased expenses due to inflation had made it essential for the Council to recommend an increase in subscriptions for 1982. These were agreed as follows:

Corporate Members Overseas	\$18
Other Corporate Members	£7.50
Individual Members: London	£4.50 (doubles £6)
: Provincial	£3.00 (doubles (£4.50))
: Overseas	\$12

Tribute was paid to Miss Ezard, who was resigning after many years from her task of sending out the *Bulletin* because of ill health. The meeting expressed admiration and gratitude for her devoted work over the years and our hope that she will soon be well again and able to be with us at our gatherings. Miss Stutfield generously offered to take on this job for the coming year.

The programme for the next season was presented by the Hon. Secretary and we hope to include it with this *Bulletin*.

FOR YOUR DIARIES

Members may wish to book the date of the Ernest Crowsley Memorial Lecture, 3 October, so that we provide a worthy audience for Professor Alan Hill, who will talk on Lamb and Wordsworth.

THE ENGLISH SPEAKING UNION (North London Branch)

By invitation of the Secretary (and one of our members), Mr Donald Potter, Miss Reeves and Mrs Huxstep spoke to the members of the Branch on 5th May. Miss Reeves spoke on Lamb's life, based on the various places he lived in, and Mrs Huxstep concentrated on an account of Lamb's schooldays. The talks were followed by a most lively discussion (helped no doubt by glasses of wine and delicious refreshments). The most interesting (to us) contribution was from a lady who formerly worked in an office in the very house Lamb lived in at 20 Russell Court, Covent Garden - his letter to Dorothy Wordsworth dated 21st November 1817 describes their move to Covent Garden. "We are in the individual spot I like best, in all this great city".