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'THAT DANGEROUS FIGURE - IRONY'

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Irony, the Oxford Dictionary tells us, is a 'Figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used', often 'taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt'; as when Swift put forward 'A Modest Proposal for preventing the Children of Poor People from being a Burden to their Parents or the Country...' - by using them as meat. 'I grant', says Swift, 'this food will be somewhat dear but never mind, the rich can afford it'. As readers are reputed to have believed implicitly in Gulliver and written letters to him, is it perhaps possible today for a market-economy-based politician to consider quite seriously Swift's 'Modest Proposal' if other measures already taken do not have the required result?

As this example from Swift demonstrates, irony can easily misfire where writer and reader do not share the same set of values and Lamb was well aware of this. If you aim to condemn an action by praising it, you may end by being believed. This is particularly so

when the device is used with great variety and subtlety, as it often is by Lamb. 'With the severe religionist he would pass for a free-thinker; while the other faction set him down for a bigot, or persuaded themselves that he belied his sentiments. Few understood him; and I am not certain that at all times he quite understood himself. He too much affected that dangerous figure - irony'. He may have known himself better than he says but others are still misunderstanding him. Lamb is still making fools of us.

It is a telling trick that he plays on us, for example, when after a long passage of concealment, suddenly he allows his true feelings to come out. But he has been working up to this by skilful manipulation of our responses until he has us ready for the change. Wayne Booth asks, 'Where then do we stop in our search for ironic pleasures?' and comments, 'many of the great personal essayists provide experience in the art of deciding when to stop; that is, they provide subtle mixtures that require us to shift gears constantly and skilfully'. (*A Rhetoric of Irony* P.185) Consider the essay 'Poor Relations'.

In the first sentence 'A Poor Relation' is not regarded as a person but a 'thing', 'the most irrelevant thing in nature' and this continues throughout the first paragraph. That splendid phrase conveys that by an accident he happens to be connected to us by blood. Nature has lumbered us with him, but in any central concerns of his better-off relations he has no place. This is succeeded by a list of similarly dehumanizing epithets, whose wit temporarily blinds us to their callousness. Have not we all wondered sometimes at the way persons linked by family seem to have nothing in common? 'An impertinent correspondency' is a neat oxymoron ('figure of speech with pointed conjunction of seeming contradictories' O.E.D.). 'Impertinent' keeps its primary sense of 'unrelated to the matter in hand' while 'correspondency' implies close congruity. This is reinforced by 'an odious approximation' which indicates an undeniable link - which we wish did not exist. We do not *want* to be distracted from our 'getting and spending' by 'a haunting conscience', a ghost at our table. The word 'preposterous' Lamb uses in its original etymological sense from Latin 'pre', before, and 'post', after, meaning here as regards time 'back to front' or 'hindforemost', so that 'a preposterous shadow' is one that comes when it should be least in evidence 'in the noontide of your prosperity' instead of lengthening in the evening. It is a kind of *memento mori*, 'an unwelcome remembrancer', as well as a financial drain. Of course, I need not say that, with Lamb's love of puns, both 'impertinent' and 'preposterous' have their usual denigratory meanings as well.

To pay your debts of consanguinity by means of 'your purse' is bad enough but there is 'a more intolerable dun - upon your *pride*'. The Poor Relation takes the pleasure out of your success in achieving comparative wealth and status, he is 'a rebuke to your rising' and rubs in the social depths from which you have come. Then Lamb's list develops into a series of literary and biblical references which at first one takes at face value. Ostensibly they demonstrate what a nuisance the Poor Relation is. However, as soon as you pay attention to the context of these allusions you find that they tend to render the pet pretensions of the *nouveau riche* ultimately ridiculous. 'A stain in your blood' and 'a blot on your scutcheon' suggest aristocratic ancestry, which is clearly not the case here. In the Bible, when any one, such as Mordecai mentioned later, rends his garment, it is a sign of great grief, sometimes of repentance, as in *Joel* (2 v.13), where we are adjured to 'rend your heart, and not your garments'. At the same time as this echo is faintly heard at the back of our minds, we are also thinking, 'But how shocking if, like a Poor Relation, we *really* had holes in our clothes!' So the ambivalence of feeling is beautifully conveyed by Lamb in 'a rent in your garment'.

'A death's head at your banquet' again threatens one's security in prosperity and conjures up memories of Belshazzar's Feast. Agathocles rose to be tyrant of Syracuse, but his father was a potter, so 'Agathocles' pot' is a reminder of humble origins. In the book of *Esther* (3 v.2) 'all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and revered Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence'. Nor will your Poor Relation, 'a Mordecai at your gate', do to you, for he knows exactly what you are. Lazarus, the poor man 'at your door', went to heaven, while the rich man Dives went to hell and between them 'there is a great gulf fixed' (*Luke* 16 v.26). The disobedient prophet in *1 Kings* 13 (v.24) was repaid for his *failure* when 'a lion met him by the way, and slew him' and it was Pharaoh's *obduracy* that brought upon him the plague of frogs, which even came 'into thy bedchamber, and upon thy bed' (*Exodus* 8 v.3). All these disasters, to which Lamb compares the Poor Relation, were brought upon the victims by their own wrongdoing. Perhaps, though, our sins are a little more venial than those of Dives, the prophet or Pharaoh. 'A fly in your ointment' reminds us that 'Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour'. (*Ecclesiastes* 10 v.1) Only 'a little folly' and Lamb lets us off with 'a mote in your eye' though it is by now beginning to look more like a beam! (*Matthew* 7 v.3)

A 'Poor Relation' is 'a triumph to your enemy' who can crow over you for having such a one in your house and even to your friends you have to apologize for him. He is 'the hail in harvest', says Elia, remembering *Proverbs* (26 v.1). 'As snow in summer, and as rain in harvest, so honour is not seemly for a fool'. This is not the first time that Lamb's allusions have hinted that it may not be the *poor* relation who is the fool. Spenser writes that 'A dram of sweet is worth a pound of sour (*Faerie Queen* I.iii.30) but Lamb implies that 'the ounce of sour in a pound of sweet' is capable of embittering the whole. Perhaps the culminating irony in this passage is the phrase, 'the one thing not needful'. Poor Martha, 'cumbered about with much serving' (*Luke* 10 v.40-42), was told 'But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her'. Modern scholars see it differently but it was always, until recently, taken to mean that the one thing needful was not only the realization that Martha only needed to serve one dish but also that Mary had found the true necessity in listening to the words of Jesus. His words in that chapter, immediately before his visit to the sisters, are the parable of 'The Good Samaritan'. So, in calling the Poor Relation 'the one thing not needful' Lamb not only records what at times we all feel but subliminally condemns us for it.

For, of course, as we read this first paragraph superficially, we smile and register that Lamb is humourously overdoing it a bit perhaps but really just recording what everyone knows to be true. We cannot deny that we have all at some time pretended not to see or crossed the road to avoid someone who is to us, as Lamb had it in his version of this essay in *The London Magazine* in 1823, 'the bore *par excellence*'. Such natural human weakness he seems to condone. Yet there is a sub-text working away subversively by the choice of words and allusions to undermine what he appears to be saying and to prepare us for his later 'coming clean'.

As the change in style and the use of the verb-ending 'eth' indicate, the second paragraph modulates into a conscious imitation of a seventeenth century Theophrastian 'Character',¹ which is still a type rather than an individual and which describes a catalogue of failings. 'He is known by his knock'. Which of us has not felt his heart sink on hearing the front-door bell, or more often nowadays that hatefully insistent summons of the telephone? We

know that to answer it will mean a drain on us, a tedium, but we determine to grin and bear it. For years I had pinned to the wall beside my telephone some poignant words of Somerset Maugham's:

I have noticed that when someone asks for you on the telephone and, finding you out, leaves a message begging you to call him up the moment you come in, and it's important, the matter is more often important to him than to you.

(*Cakes and Ale* p.1)

Perhaps on a rare occasion one has cooked a complicated meal and has just triumphantly served it. One sits down to eat it and is promptly hoisted up again like a terrified jack-in-the-box by an explosion of harsh sound. One lifts the receiver and chews one's first, and only, mouthful as one listens - and listens - and listens - and the food congeals on the plate. Or one is just reaching the crux of some obdurate piece of work, or one is at the climax of a play on radio or television, and at the very moment when all will be revealed the fatal interruption comes. Just so does the Poor Relation appear at the most inconvenient time and cause the maximum of disruption.

Oh yes, so far Lamb has us entirely, if somewhat guiltily, with him. Indeed the unwanted guests's behaviour seems utterly repellant. How devastatingly accurate is Elia's observation of those who feel themselves to be inferior and under an obligation, yet whose needs are imperative and whose longing for unaccustomed comfort will not be denied. Our very recognition of their plight, which makes us accede to them, is a trigger for an obscure irritation:

A rap, between familiarity and respect; that demands, and, at the same time, seems to despair of, entertainment. He entereth smiling, and - embarrassed. He holdeth out his hand to you to shake, and - draweth it back again.

The Poor Relation chooses to call, not on the days when the hostess has an 'at home' day and expects people to drop in, but when she has a formal dinner-party with carefully even numbers of invited guests, or on a birthday which he has remembered but pretends to have hit on by accident. 'He offereth to go away, seeing you have company - but is induced to stay'. The Poor Relation's knowledge that he is *de trop* forces him to try awkwardly to refuse hospitality, but he cannot keep it up.

He declareth against fish, the turbot being small - yet suffereth himself to be importuned into a slice against his first resolution.

By doing so he draws attention to the fact that your provision for this course was inadequate:

He sticketh by the port - yet will be prevailed upon to empty the remainder glass of claret, if a stranger press it upon him.

'Remainder' used as an adjective with food occurs in Shakespeare with the strong association of something cast-off, worthless and undesirable. In (II.vii.39) *As You Like It*, for example, Jacques speaks of the fool's brain as 'dray as the remainder biscuit / After a

voyage' and in *Troilus and Cressida*, where food imagery is frequently used to convey sexual disgust, Troilus argues against returning Helen to the Greeks, saying we do not throw away 'the remainder viands... / Because we now are full'. (II.ii.69) So the Poor Relation justifies his acceptance of the glass of wine because it is both inferior and unwanted, like himself. He can accept it from 'a stranger', one of his fellow-guests, as he would hesitate to do from his kinsman. Guests and servants do not know what to make of him:

Every one speculateth upon his condition; and the most part take him to be
- a tide-waiter.

A tide-waiter was a Customs Officer who boarded ships as they came in on the tide and Jonathan Bate notes 'one who waits to see how things go before acting' as an extension of the meaning here, Lamb making one of his favourite plays upon words:

He calleth you by your Christian name, to imply that his other is the same with your own. He is too familiar by half, yet you wish he had less diffidence. With half the familiarity he might pass for a casual dependent; with more boldness he would be in no danger of being taken for what he is. He is too humble for a friend, yet taketh on him more state than befits a client. He is a worse guest than a country tenant, inasmuch as he bringeth up no rent - yet 'tis odds, from his garb and demeanour, that your guests take him for one.

What a marvellously subtle piece of irony this is! Which side are we meant to be on? Not the Poor Relation's, whose attitudes, despite our better feelings, make us shudder. As we discover later on, Lamb has no patience with such excessive awareness of inferiority. But not the class-conscious host's, either, in his jumped-up grandeur.

The Poor Relation will not join in a card-game because he is too poor to play for money. He 'refuseth on the score of poverty, and - resents being left out':

When the company break up, he proffereth to go for a coach - and lets the servant go.

With what devastating effect Lamb repeats that construction throughout this paragraph; statement, pause represented by a dash, and reversal. In a similar way he balances his sentences with antitheses: '..too familiar..yet..less diffidence'; 'With half the familiarity..with more boldness..'; 'too humble..yet..more state'. It is comic in the telling because so recognizable but in real life such behaviour is unbearable. What a horror of a man! And yet.. and yet..? Are you beginning to feel a bit sorry for him? Are you wondering whether you yourself have not upon occasion acted similarly in a like predicament?

At the end of this paragraph the Poor Relation's tactless reminders of the family's previous lowliness and the contrast with your present affluence remind you of just what you want to forget. 'His memory is unseasonable':

He recollects your grandfather; and will thrust in some mean, and quite unimportant anecdote of - the family. He knew it when it was not quite

so flourishing as 'he is blest in seeing it now'. He reviveth past situations, to institute what he calleth - favourable comparisons. With a reflecting sort of congratulation, he will enquire the price of your furniture; and insults you with a special commendation of your window-curtains. He is of opinion that the urn is the more elegant shape, but, after all, there was something more comfortable about the old tea-kettle - which you must remember. He dare say you must find a great convenience in having a carriage of your own, and appealeth to your lady if it is not so.

The echoes of the man's direct speech, though mainly ostensibly in the third person, contribute to the exasperation we feel with him, the nasty insinuating creep! The newly acquired coat-of-arms is emphasized to embarrass you and he 'did not know till lately, that such-and-such had been the crest of the family', not surprising since it has only just been made so. Gradually we become aware that the underlying reason for the Poor Relation's being such a thorn in our flesh is that he is a living reproach to his hosts - and we begin to feel uneasy. To round off the virtuosity of the style of this paragraph the last sentence is beautifully constructed of a series of appositional clauses, at first short and elliptical like a list, then flowering out into a compound-complex sentence completing the careful rhythm of the whole. Lamb has certainly learnt from his seventeenth-century predecessors:

His memory is unseasonable; his compliments perverse; his talk a trouble; his stay pertinacious; and when he goeth away, you dismiss his chair into a corner, as precipitately as possible, and feel fairly rid of two nuisances.

How constantly in this paragraph we have been made to 'shift gears' and to doubt our own judgment.

The third paragraph, though still seemingly on the side of the unwilling host, increases our discomfort. We can pass off a male Poor Relation as an eccentric, Elia says, 'But in the indications of *female* poverty there can be no disguise. No woman dresses below herself from caprice'. The irony here is verging on the painful, particularly if we remember Lamb's Essay 'Modern Gallantry' where he throws aside subterfuge and fiercely expresses his anger on behalf of women, particularly the plain, the old and the needy. Modern chivalry, he concludes, is 'a conventional fiction'. But he will be prepared 'to rank it among the *salutary* fictions of life, when in polite circles I shall see the same attentions paid to age as to youth, to homely features as to handsome, to coarse complexions as to clear - to the woman, as she is a woman, not as she is a beauty, a fortune, or a title'. It is not so in the case of the female Poor Relation. Again her own behaviour is amusingly described in all its irritating humility. 'She is most provokingly humble and ostentatiously sensible to her inferiority'. Unlike her male counterpart she does not take unwelcome liberties. 'He may require to be repressed sometimes - *aliquando suffaminandus erat* - but there is no raising her'. The Latin comment is adapted from that of Augustus Haterius, who spoke so quickly that he needed the brake put on.² The masculine Poor Relation makes too many tactless remarks. His feminine counterpart's *faux pas* is likely to be of the opposite kind. She is too subservient. It is not at all 'the thing' for a lady, however, humble, when at your table to beg 'to be helped - after the gentlemen'. She is obviously a relation, yet disgraces you by not knowing how to behave. It is not in the least suitable for her to drink port with the men. Madeira would have been more appropriate to her sex and her circumstances. She does not know that one should ignore servants and never, never

embarrass them by treating them with respect or consideration, which are only proper for gentlefolk. No wonder the 'housekeeper patronizes her' and 'the children's governess takes upon her to correct her'. Just fancy not knowing the difference between an old-fashioned harpsichord and that new and vastly superior instrument the piano, just coming into fashion, whose presence in your drawing-room demonstrates that you have all the latest luxuries! It is like mistaking a compact disc for a 78 record. So what is she doing in your house? 'She is, in all probability, your wife's cousin': notice, your wife's, not yours. One recognizes the syndrome whereby, when the little ones are making a nuisance of themselves, one spouse says to the other, 'Can't you control *your* children?' At the end of 'Modern Gallantry' Lamb makes clear what he thinks of the man who is 'the disparager and despiser' of his 'female aunt, or unfortunate - still female - maiden cousin'.

In the next paragraph Lamb again modulates into another key. Dick Amlet, played so incomparably by Jack Palmer according to the essay 'On Some of the Old Actors', in Vanburgh's play *The Confederacy*, was a rogue who aspired to pass himself off as a gentleman and marry an heiress. Unfortunately he had a common, though not in this case poor, relation in the shape of his mother. He was hampered, Lamb says, 'by the malignant maternity of an old woman, who persists in calling him "her son Dick"'. Nevertheless, as she was a successful pawnbroker, she was able in the end to endow him with £10,000 and he achieved his ambition. This reference to the play provides an effective transition and Lamb begins to 'come clean' and demonstrate what he really thinks of the harm done by nonsensical snobberies in destroying people's lives. 'All men..' he says, 'are not of Dick's temperament. I knew an Amlet in real life, who, wanting Dick's buoyancy, sank indeed'.

Now, having prepared us for it throughout, Lamb suddenly reverses his viewpoint and we are ready to change sides, as it were, and see the situation through the eyes of the social inferior. Poor W -, as Lamb calls him, was really Robert Favell (1775-1812),³ who left Cambridge because he was ashamed of his father who was a house-painter there, so that, in a sense, this was another example of the embarrassment of having a poor relation, but it was more than this. It was the sense of his own social inferiority, as a charity-boy at Christ's Hospital or a sizar at Cambridge, which had already undermined him. Lamb is gentle with his memory but does suggest that W -'s plight was at least partly due to his own weakness.

Poor W - was of my own standing at Christ's, a fine classic, and a youth of promise. If he had a blemish, it was too much pride; but its quality was inoffensive; it was not of that sort which hardens the heart, and serves to keep inferiors at a distance; it only sought to ward off derogation from itself. It was the principle of self-respect carried as far as it could go, without infringing upon that respect, which he would have every one else equally maintain for himself. He would have you to think alike with him on this topic.

But Lamb refused to do so. This may not have been the class-consciousness of those who scorn inferiors but it was damaging and unnecessary all the same:

Many a quarrel have I had with him, when we were rather older boys, and our tallness made us more obnoxious to observation in the blue clothes, because I would not thrid the alleys and blind ways of the town with him

to elude notice, when we have been out together on a holiday in the streets of this sneering and prying metropolis.

The last words of this passage indicate that Lamb was aware of hateful discrimination but he was determined not to pay it the compliment of being affected by it. This takes courage but is the only way to deal with it without being corrupted oneself. W - was a born scholar and 'found shelter among books, which insult not'. One is reminded of Lamb's statement that, because of Mary's illness, 'we are in a manner marked' and of the ways he found to counter this. The pauper's gown, which to W - was a shirt of Nessus flaying him alive, had been worn with pride, Elia suggests, before him by such great men as Latimer, a sizar at Cambridge, and Hooker, a servitor at Oxford.⁴ Indeed there came a time when even W - began to relax. 'The healing influence of studious pursuits was upon him, to soothe and to abstract. He was almost a healthy man' - when his father came to live and work actually in the city and to be employed by the university. Lamb explains the social circumstances which made this situation impossible. Despite his awareness of his friend's own weakness, Elia here sympathises with him entirely:

The temperament of W -'s father was diametrically the reverse of his own. Old W - was a little, busy, cringing tradesman, who, with his son upon his arm, would stand bowing and scraping, cap in hand, to anything that wore the semblance of a gown - insensible to the winks and opener remonstrances of the young man, to whose chamber-fellow, or equal in standing, perhaps, he was thus obsequiously and gratuitously ducking.

The narrator, finding his friend seeming 'thoughtful and more reconciled', tried to jolly him along and help him to be pleased at the growing success of his father as shown by 'a representation of the Artist Evangelist, which the old man, whose affairs were beginning to flourish, had caused to be set up in a splendid sort of frame over his really handsome shop'. St. Luke was by tradition a painter, though as Frederick Page says, 'not a house-painter!' as well as a doctor. But the effect on W - was not what Elia expected. Lamb adapts lines from *Paradise Lost* (IV 1011-4), where Satan sees God's golden scales hung up and at 'Yon celestial sign..' he 'lookt up and knew / His mounted scale aloft: nor more, but fled'. After the humour of this mock-heroic touch, Elia abandons entirely his ironic stance and tells how W - left university, joined up and was killed in the Peninsular War. Captain Robert Favell was indeed lost in this way, though at Salamanca in 1812, as Lamb tells us in 'Christ's Hospital Five and Thirty Years Ago', where he describes him as 'ill capable of enduring the slights poor Sizar's are sometimes subject to in our seats of learning'.

At length Elia disingenuously wonders 'how, upon a subject which I began with treating *half* seriously, I should have fallen upon a recital so eminently painful' and points out the 'tragic as well as comic associations' of his theme, as, of course, he fully intended to do from the beginning. This leads in to his portrait of a real-life flesh-and-blood Poor Relation. Gone are the abstractions which alone can make the cruel generalisations of the early paragraphs possible. One is reminded again of Swift who said, 'I have ever hated all nations, professions and communities; and all my love is towards individuals'.⁵ So the essay ends with a portrait of an individual which contrasts with the Theophrastian so-called Character of the second paragraph. Mr Billet has both a name and a personality.

For his purposes here Lamb again manipulates the point of view, seeing not through the adult's corrupted eyes but through the eyes of a child. 'The earliest impressions which I received on this matter, are certainly not attended with anything painful, or very humiliating, in the recalling'. The reason begins at once to become clear. First we are told that Elia's father's table was 'no very splendid one', a contrast with the parvenue pomp of the family described earlier. Where there is no pretension there can be no consequent humiliation. Then the description of the guest, as the child observes him, is very different, 'the mysterious figure of an aged gentleman, clothed in neat black, of a sad yet comely appearance'. The word 'sad' retains its sense of 'sober-coloured' and Lamb is remembering the *Song of Solomon* (l.v.5-6) 'I am black, but comely' and the request there not to despise the speaker for this dark hue. Nor does he. To the child the old gentleman is a focus for awe and respect. 'His deportment was of the essence of gravity'. Unlike the Poor Relation earlier in the essay, he does not need a brake on his speech, 'his words few or none', and he is treated with special consideration. 'I was not to make a noise in his presence. I had little inclination to have done so - for my cue was to admire in silence'. What a contrast Elia provides between the humiliation meted out to the Poor Relations in the pretentious home described earlier and the treatment received by Mr Billet. With what a bad grace the previous host sees his 'visitor's two children .. accommodated at a side table' to make room for the Poor Relation, whose chair was banished with relief to a corner, thus getting 'rid of two nuisances', as soon as he was gone. For Mr Billet, on the contrary, 'A particular elbow chair was appropriated to him, which was in no case to be violated. A peculiar sort of sweet pudding, which appeared on no other occasion, distinguished the days of his coming. I used to think him a prodigiously rich man'. This was partly because of the child's confusion of work at the Mint with ownership of it! But the implication is that it was as much because of the old man's privileged position in the house. Because the Mint was on Tower Hill, the little boy imagined Mr Billet as imprisoned there and only let out on Saturdays. This, of course, explained his 'eternal suit of mourning' and pervaded him with 'A sort of melancholy grandeur'. Note, instead of grudging left-overs, a special sweet is provided.

'He and my father had been schoolfellows a world ago at Lincoln' and

Often have I wondered at the temerity of my father, who, in spite of an habitual general respect which we all in common manifested towards him, would venture now and then to stand up against him in some argument, touching their youthful days.

On the hostility of the *Above Boys* and the *Below Boys* at Lincoln - the only topic 'upon which the old gentleman was ever brought out' - 'many and hot were the skirmishes'. Though in reality Lamb's father probably left Lincoln at quite an early age, the mythology of this warfare obviously flourished in the family and in 1912 Lucas reported that though 'the old feud between the Above and Below Boys seems now to have abated .. a social gulf between the two divisions of the city remains'. In calling the boys 'young Grotiuses' in their code of battle Lamb is delightfully apt, for the work in which Grotius initiated international law was entitled *De Jure Belli et Pacis*, concerning the law of war and peace.

We notice the contrast between Elia's father, 'who scorned to insist upon advantages' and managed, when the argument became too heated, to turn the conversation to Lincoln Cathedral on which both parties could agree, with the one-up-man-ship of the hosts at the beginning of the essay. By means of these repeated opposing echoes tentacles stretch back,

reminding the reader of the earlier ironies and unifying the structure of the work of art. Moreover, in the next sentence the tactless aunt provides the only instance in this household of the condescension regularly meted out to the Poor Relation in the earlier one. Even this is not intended with any malice but is a misguided attempt at kindness in one who 'would sometimes press civility out of season'. In saying 'Do take another slice, Mr Billet, for you do not get pudding every day', the aunt fails to minister to something in her guest more important than food, his self-respect, which, unlike poor W -'s was clearly not a case of 'too much pride'. The boy's reaction to seeing the visitor ruffled is anguish, at the thought 'Perhaps he will never come here again'; demonstrating that even a Poor Relation may seem to come to your table like an angel unawares. Nor was Mr Billet easily downtrodden. In an argument later in the evening he was able to turn the tables completely, when he uttered 'with an emphasis which chilled the company, and which chills me now as I write it - "Woman, you are superannuated"'. For, of course, the aunt was herself living as a pensioner in her brother's house and had, perhaps, outlived her usefulness. Elia's friend W - could have benefited from some of Mr Billet's spirit.

It is made plain, too, that John Billet had every right to his self-respect.

He died at the Mint (Anno 1781) where he had long held, what he accounted, a comfortable independence; and with five pounds, fourteen shillings, and a penny, which were found in his escritoire after his decease, left the world, blessing God that he had enough to bury him, and that he had never been obliged to any man for a sixpence. This was - a Poor Relation.

He may not have had servants, a coat of arms or a new piano but he was indebted to nobody. Years ago, I had a friend whose theory of philosophy was the desirability of living on tick. When I demurred at this, she said with the utmost scorn, 'What sort of justification will that be to say to St Peter at heaven's gate, "I paid me way"?' Secretly I thought, 'You might do worse'. Lamb thought so too, and acted on it. So he ends his essay with a portrait of a man who receives and is worthy to receive consideration and respect and who, above all, is entitled to respect himself. 'This', says Elia, 'was a Poor Relation'.

So, to sum up Lamb's achievement in this essay, let us look first at his technical skill and then at his message. First of all, let us pay tribute to the brilliance and versatility of his prose style, which he neatly adapts to his purposes. He is equally at home with the short, sharp statement by which, sometimes using also that significant pause, he can make his pointed comments, and with the carefully constructed long sentence, whose balance and rhythm give it the quality of poetry, as demonstrated by his beloved predecessor, Sir Thomas Browne, or by his successor, Virginia Woolf. As they do, he also uses a combination of the two modes for flow and for emphasis. The beauty of Lamb's prose impresses itself on us as we read it aloud. Then there is the manipulation of the point of view. Reading the six Booker short list novels, as I had to do last year, I was a little disappointed to find that all except one of these novels were written in the first person and the exception might as well have been. Not that I have anything against first-person narrative, which can be, and in some of these cases was, used with great sensitivity and sophistication, especially with the help of irony. But variety is the spice of life. In this essay we are at first firmly placed behind the eyes of the host having to entertain a Poor Relation. Ostensibly we see as he sees, and to an extent we do, but, partly by his self-betrayal, partly by more subliminal means, as we have noticed, we are rendered not quite

comfortable with our stance. With the entry of Robert Favell the viewpoint is seemingly reversed so that we are looking at life from the position of the inferior. But, here again, we cannot fully identify with W - and Elia's intervention in refusing to share his humiliation, introducing another angle of view, supports our doubt. Yet there is a shift again when the old father's behaviour is described and we sympathize with poor W - completely. Finally, we have the child's-eye-view, a more healthy one in general, but we are not protected from recognizing *his* mistakes either. Though they are harmless infant misconceptions, they are enough to show that the child does not see entirely truly either.

This leads us to the use of irony. Swift's 'Modest Proposal', with which we began, draws a very cut-and-dried, black-and-white picture. It is unequivocal in its condemnation of the Irish Landlords and I think not even the most hardened market-economist could continue to mistake irony for fact when he comes to this sentence.

I grant this food will be rather dear, and therefore very *proper* for *Landlords*: who, as they have already devoured the Parents, seem to have the best title to the Children.

With Lamb, in his essay, the irony is much more subtle. It is a kind of irony within an irony. We are not asked to paint anyone entirely black or white. Even when we most condemn we are sneakily wondering if we are condemning ourselves. The irony cuts both ways. The Poor Relation's behaviour *is* abominable. We have all suffered from people who drain us dry and give us nothing. But that is only half the story. What of the ethos that places the acquiring of wealth and status symbols above love and compassion and seeks 'value for money' and 'successful business management' to the exclusion of care for the poor, sick and old?

Yet, Lamb says, there is a caveat needed here too. Recently someone I know had a job making delivery of a Porsche car and, in doing so, had to drive it some distance. She and her family live very modestly, she is a Quaker and one would have said among the least prone to materialism. But she reported that, as they drove, they were aware of admiring looks, the car went like a bird, overtaking everything in sight, and she soon caught herself joyously thinking, 'We are special. We are important. We are better than everyone else!' She told me this as an object lesson and that is what Lamb is doing. A taint of that particular kind of lust is in all of us, however, much we think we avoid it. So when we consider Lamb's equivocal use of irony we can no longer separate the medium from the message. By the very nature of his use of the device he is making his point.

So what is his message? Do you think, perhaps, something like this? We are all human, we all feel irritation with others who batten on us, we are all insecure and believe ourselves inferior, we are all tempted to compensate for it in different and sometimes opposite ways. We are all subject to the temptation to equate possessions with happiness. Just look, Lamb says, at the monstrous behaviour all these tendencies lead us into! Life is hard enough without creating artificial divisions through our snobberies and discriminations. Let us respect ourselves and others for the right reasons and not for those which add to the sum of the world's misery. The contrast between the first and the last paragraphs of the essay epitomize Lamb's attitude. The first paragraph sees a man as 'a thing' and puts him into an artificial category, that of the Poor Relation. The last paragraph sees him as an individual. Avoid abstract categories like the plague, says Elia. The minute you use them you tend to oversimplify and thus falsify. Classification is no doubt necessary in science.

In art, as in human life, it needs to be approached with great caution. That is why you have not heard me mention 'Romantic Irony'. I have tried to talk about one particular example of the irony of Charles Lamb.

NOTES

1. Theophrastus (c. 172-287 B.C.) Greek philosopher, whose *Characters* consisted of types demonstrating particular faults, including the toady and the over-proud, particular relevant here. English translations of these, as well as contemporary English 'Characters' were very popular in the seventeenth century. Best known writers of these are Joseph Hall, who published his in 1608, Sir Thomas Overbury (1614) and John Earle (1628).
2. 'Haterius noster sufflaminandus est' - 'Our Haterius needs the drag'. Seneca - *Controversiae* 4 Preface, 7.
3. As Claude A. Prance points out, there is a difference of opinion about Favell's Christian name, but I have followed Mr Prance who says, 'Both his contemporaries, who should know, Coleridge and Leigh Hunt, call him Robert, and they are followed by the reliable James Dykes Campbell'. *Companion to Charles Lamb* p113.
4. Hugh Latimer (?1492-1555) became a famous preacher and Bishop of Worcester but was put in the Tower when Mary came to the throne and was one of the Oxford Martyrs burnt on 16 October 1555.

Richard Hooker (?1554-1600) became fellow of his College, Corpus Christi Oxford, and deputy professor of Hebrew. He is famous for his book *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Politie* which came out in five volumes between 1593 and 1597. His *Life* was written by Izaak Walton and published in 1665.

5. Letter to Pope of September 1725.

NOTES ON THE PLACE OF COMPOSITION OF 'KUBLA KHAN' BY S.T. COLERIDGE

Michael Grevis

What follows is, essentially, a footnote to a footnote in literary history: it is an attempt to unravel the enduring puzzle of exactly where Coleridge first sat and composed his famous poem 'Kubla Khan'. This concern would probably not matter at all if the poem did not contain so much of power and of mystery, and if the area of the West Country from which it sprang were not also full of a brooding power and elegiac charm. There may never be absolute certainty as to the place of composition, but it is at least a point of interest to the literary tourist to know that individual intuitions may still have a part to play in deciding the matter.

The precise date of the poem's composition is still a matter of dispute. All the dates assigned to it fall between August 1797 and May 1798, with the exception of one

suggestion of October 1799. No first draft of the poem is extant, but we do have a copy of the poem in Coleridge's hand, almost certainly written during the lengthy period leading up to its first printed publication in 1816.

In reading the following notes, it is important to bear in mind that the critic's choice has invariably been Ash Farm, with the odd side-long glance towards Broomstreet Farm. I am not aware that Silcombe Farm has ever, previously, been mooted.

Topographical clues

During the 1790's, the most appealing route available to travellers between Porlock and Lynton, and the only route shown on small-scale maps for the succeeding fifty years, was the coastal coach road. Westwards, it ran from Porlock to Porlock Weir, Worthy, Culbone, Silcombe, and Broomstreet (along the route now designated the Somerset and North Devon Coast Path), and over Yenworthy Common to the high moor road at County Gate.¹ (Today, there is evidence of at least one well-made track linking Culbone and Broomstreet closer to sea-level, but this way through Culbone Wood was created by Lord Lovelace in 1840.)² The only deviations existing in the 1790's which led off from the coastal coach road were both steeper and less scenic. One ran from Porlock Ford to Yarner, the other ran from Worthy to Yarner. From Yarner, the connecting track to the coastal coach road at Silcombe skirted, then as now, Ash, Culbone Vicarage (now Parsonage Farm), and Withycombe (in the 1790s a farmhouse but long since destroyed by fire). Ash Farm has customarily been approached from this southerly track. A footpath linking Ash with Culbone hamlet may have existed then, although there is no cartographic record of it until the recent OS Maps. The footpath from Ash may have linked up with the essential path linking The Vicarage with Culbone Church, which followed the course of the stream on its western flank.

In Coleridge's day, none of the farms clustered around Culbone on the edge of Exmoor, with the exception of Silcombe, would have been readily accessible to travellers on the coastal coach road - which happily took a less undulating and more direct line than the farm access tracks. Setting out from Porlock, and intending to give Culbone a miss, travellers in the 1790s could have risked one of the steep climbs onto the high moor road (now the A39). They had three choices: to go up Parson Street and Hawkcombe to Bromham, to take a shorter version of the current Porlock Hill, or to turn left at West Porlock and proceed to Birchanger and Whitestones.¹ All these routes are so different from the roads and paths used now, that there has been much confusion in picturing the realities of travel in this rustic corner in those far off days. (See Note A)

Aesthetic and socio-historical clues

During 1797, Coleridge had been composing his verse play *Osorio* and there is a distinct visual echo with his description of a 'purple-headed mountain' and the view of North Hill, on the coast near Porlock, to be found in the vicinity of Culbone. It is a particularly apt description during the season of the heather in late summer. (The seaward extremity of North Hill was then known as 'Horse down Point'.¹) As for 'Kubla Khan', the two most likely dates of initial composition are October or early November 1797, when Coleridge could have written it while returning to Stowey after an excursion to Lynton - on the latter occasion, in the company of William and Dorothy Wordsworth.³ The Wordsworths could conceivably have sent back supplies to Coleridge by the agency of a 'person...from Porlock'

following his sudden illness. The fact that he was taken ill in the area under discussion could well have been caused jointly by the deep spiritual matters which were in his mind (the composition of a prose tale: *The Wanderings of Cain*, concerning the origin of evil, was being planned³) and the extraordinary power or spirit of the place itself to which Coleridge would have been psychically, even physically, attuned. Aesthetically speaking, the most elegant and commanding views of North Hill over the combes, the 'hanging Woods'⁴, and the sea, are to be had from the track by Silcombe Farm to both east and west. The present farmhouse at Silcombe has a magnificent view of North Hill from its windows, but, perhaps, the original farm buildings of Coleridge's day were on the eastern side of the tiny valley.⁵

'Culbone Vicarage' and Ash Farm are mutually visible across Culbone Combe, as well as being linked by track. The Culbone vicar from 1759-1809 was William Clare.⁶ It is feasible, should Coleridge have found himself on this higher track, that he might have preferred to call on the hospitality of the Reverend Clare with whom he may have had more in common than the tenant farmer than at Ash. Culbone at that time was a modest hamlet of about forty people (44 in 1818, 31 in 1891 in six houses).⁷ Ash Farm feels very much a part of Culbone geographically, and is noticeably less 'lonely' than other farms along the way. Loneliness is one of the contentious points raised in the following sentence from the poem's published preface: 'In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire'.

Coleridge, in a verbal recollection made over thirty years after the event, is reported as stating, 'I wrote "Kubla Khan" in Brimstone Farm between Porlock and Ilfracombe - near Culbone'.⁸ The use of the word brimstone receives a fuller discussion below, but it is also curious to note that it has a remote echo in the historical curiosity that Stephen Hales (puningly 'hailstone'), rector of Porlock 1717-1723, and the last incumbent until the post was re-occupied in 1813, invented a method of fumigating wheat using brimstone to preserve it.⁹

Linguistic clues

The farms around Culbone have a slightly sinister ring to their names. One recalls the ancient use of Culbone Woods as a leper colony, cut off comprehensively from normal social congress, as well as the use of Culbone Combe as a shelter for a small monastic cell during all its known history.¹⁰ Also, for many years, Culbone Combe was a centre for charcoal burning. It is possible Coleridge could have summoned the name of 'Brimstone' (from Broomstreet) by making a sort of hellish connection between Ash (fire, brimstone, ash) and, even, Pitt (another local farm). In distant days, the native plants Broom and Ash probably gave their names to the farms. In this traditionally remote area, and before signs or maps were common, it is likely that not every farm title would have been commonly remarked. In this area, even fifty years later, some visitors had to be escorted by guides.¹¹ Of them all, Silcombe and Broomstreet would have been most noticed because they were passed inescapably en route.

It is possible to link Broomstreet and Silcombe further in terms of both structure and syllabic meaning connotations: BRIM + one syllable, SILL + one syllable. (The local dialect may well have presented broom to the ear as 'brim'). This word association gives scope for confusion in recollection, and Coleridge was known to be often vague about place names.¹²

A manuscript copy of 'Kubla Khan' drafted by Coleridge is almost certainly dated prior to publication (1816) and could be as early as 1800. It came to light in 1934 and is known as the Crewe Manuscript as it was once owned by the Marquess of Crewe, and it has been in the British Museum since 1962. This important document foregoes a lengthy preface but has instead an appended note which, despite its brevity, contains more geographical detail and a shift in seasons compared with the published preface. It runs: 'This fragment with a good deal more, not recoverable, composed, in a sort of Reverie brought on by two grains of Opium, taken to check a dysentery, at a Farm House between Porlock and Linton, a quarter of a mile from Culbone Church, in the fall of the year, 1797'. This has led, naturally, to the uncontested assignation of Ash Farm as the poem's place of birth. (For a full analysis of the course of literary research on this issue, see Note B). Possibly, Coleridge could not recall the actual name at all as he was writing the appended note some years after the event it describes. However, as to the crucial matter of distance, to a man habituated to walking thirty miles in a day, there is not a marked difference between $\frac{1}{4}$ mile (Ash) and $\frac{1}{2}$ mile (Silcombe).

The word Silcombe contains some astonishing and tantalising associations with Coleridge's life in the three years or so leading up to his possible familiarity with it. The farm was mapped in 1782 as Silk Combe.¹ There was, perhaps, a dye house in Alfoxden Combe, near Holford, used by a silk-mill owner,¹³ but it would have been possible for Coleridge to weave around this name an intellectual web of earlier romantic ideas. He may, at least unconsciously, have been reminded of his personal pseudonym as a private in the 15th Light Dragoons three years earlier: Silas Tomkyn Comberbache, which happens to contain all the letters of Silk Combe in their proper order! Following Richard Holmes' analysis of this pseudonym¹⁴, one is led to Coleridge's admired brother Frank Syndercombe Coleridge, who was once based in India and was a focus (to S.T.C.) for a whole train of fantastic speculations about the East, which embraced *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments* and *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (1614)...not to mention 'The Silk Road' of legend.

Mythological and literary clues

The wealth of imagery and allusion in 'Kubla Khan' cannot be more than touched on here, but it has been treated fully by John Beer^{15 & 16}, and others. What is relevant here is Coleridge's concern with the myths of Cain. 'For Cain is a natural emblem of the daemon in humanity turned to destruction...In eighteenth century lore, it was commonly supposed that the widespread cults of sun-worship and enclosures sacred to the sun had been initiated by Cain and his descendants in their attempts to recreate the Eden that had been lost...As the activity of creation goes on, sometimes manic in its intensity, the ultimate aim is always to recreate and repossess a former state of wholeness - a state which, though lost, is still sensed in the subconscious'.¹⁵ The sun worshippers' monuments were often placed close to rivers (as are the structures of Ash and Silcombe Farms). The name of Ash Farm could perhaps have suggested 'some ancient and fiery disaster'¹⁶ to Coleridge and resulted in the belated recollection of the name as 'Brimstone Farm'.⁸ The sun worship theme was first set down in ancient Egypt where the creation story is depicted in the myth of Isis and Osiris. The aspect of this story which concerns the polarity between male and female is also dealt with in the Greek myth of Alpheus and Arethusa to which the poem alludes.¹⁵ Some of the philosophical ideas which connect Goethe and Schiller with Coleridge can also be explored in the work of Rudolf Steiner. In connection with Osiris, for instance, see his *Egyptian Myths and Mysteries*, in which he says, the divinity which man 'bears within him, hidden under a spell, was to become manifest in him' as a result of the initiation into Osiris mysteries.^{17 & 18} This spiritual insight is poignant when one remembers the lepers. To

Coleridge's mind, '*all things counterfeit infinity*'. This phrase was contained in a letter to his radical friend Thelwall of 14th October 1797.¹⁶

The Culbone area seems to be steeped in the eternal conflict between life and death, spirit and matter, glory and tragedy. When the full moon hangs over 'Horse down Point', a finger of land poised between sky, sea and vale, a mood in nature is created which fits well with Xanadu. It could even suggest the sacrificial fertility rite described in the latter half of the paragraph in Purchas' *Pilgrimage* referred to in Coleridge's preface:

'He hath a Herd or Drove of Horses and Mares, about ten thousand, as white as snow; of the milke whereof none may taste, except he be of the blood of Cingis Can... According to the directions of his Astrologers or Magicians, he on the eight and twentieth day of August aforesaid, spendeth and poureth forth with his owne hands the milke of these Mares in the aire, and on the earth, to give drink to the spirits and Idols which they worship, that they may preserve the men, women, beasts, birds, corne, and other things growing on the earth'.¹⁴

Conclusion

I have not been able to trace any vestigial local knowledge on the whereabouts of Coleridge's retirement(s). However, when the implications of the Crewe Ms. became more widely known, perhaps after 1948 (see Note B), the then owner of Ash Farm began to charge visitors to sit in his kitchen where, he claimed, the poet had sat and composed 'Kubla Khan'.⁵ The Richards of Broomstreet quietly believe their Farmhouse has the right to claim the laurels, but lack any proof.

Unless further factual information comes to light, I contend that it is reasonable to believe the poem had its genesis in an upstairs room of either Ash or Silcombe Farm. (The ground floor accommodation of both these houses would have been quite noisy and smelly, as horses, cows, bullocks, and pigs nestled in close proximity to the human inhabitants. Silcombe, although smaller than Broomstreet, was a larger property than Ash, boasting two kitchens, and a small cottage across the yard enclosing a malt-house.²)

Some literary experts now interpret the 'person on business from Porlock', whom Coleridge claimed in his preface to have interrupted his reverie, as a nice literary device. Coleridge evolved a genre of the 'preface plus poetry-fragment' as a device to make the reader work to find the real meaning.¹⁹ The mystery of why the precise place of composition was not communicated (so far as we know) to Coleridge's friends, including Hazlitt and the Wordsworths, when they also passed that way at various times in 1798, remains. What does this secrecy tell us of the value Coleridge placed on the poem? One is left thinking that the poet may have been both awed by, and slightly reticent in revealing, the more effusive and divinely irrational elements of 'Kubla Khan'. So much so that, although willing to share the poem privately¹⁴, he preferred, for some considerable time, to hold it to himself. When it was published, he chose to call it a 'psychological curiosity' only. The '*causae causarum*'²⁰, the ultimate source of life and so of art, will always be the mysterious goal of a quest which lies outside the minute focal point of a literary map reference.

Note A (Attributable to ref.2)

The famous house called Ashley Combe, near Worthy, began life as Ashley Lodge, completed in 1799. It may have been a simple cottage in Coleridge's day. The property was part of the large estate of Lord King, which included Yarnor Manor and Culbone Manor, together with every farm mentioned in this article, and the coastal coach road. The current Ashley Combe Toll Road makes a bee-line for the A39 but this route was not established until this century.⁵ Ashley Combe was essentially created in 1835-40 by Lord Wentworth (Lovelace) and Countess Lovelace (Byron's daughter, Ada), extending the building into a masterpiece of Italianate country-house design. A track up Ashley Combe itself to Pitt Farm and from there up onto the hill was made in 1836-7, thus initiating the decline of the coastal coach road via Culbone as a thoroughfare. Ada Byron kept a book by Coleridge in the library of this beautiful house. The house was demolished during the 1970s.

A further literary by-line is the fact that in 1840 both Ash and Broomstreet were tenanted by the Red family. These were the original Ridds of R.D. Blackmore's 'Lorna Doone', and many are buried in Culbone.

Note B Chronology of literary researches

1. The Crewe Ms: Alice Snyder first drew attention to this ms. in the TLS, 2nd August 1934, p.541.
2. Wylie Sypher gave credence to Ash Farm in the *Philological Quarterly*, XVII, 1939, p.365.
3. Geoffrey Grigson also posited Ash Farm in a broadcast of 18th August 1948. (This broadcast was not apparently published in the 'Listener'.)
4. Morchard Bishop, 'The Farm House of Kubla Khan' (Unpublished tabletalk) TLS, 10th May 1957, p.293. The reference to 'Brimstone Farm' was shown to him by Kathleen Coburn. It occurs in some notes on C's table talk made by Henry Nelson Coleridge, dated in 1830. Bishop decided that it must be a misremembering for Broomstreet Farm, even though it is 1½ to 2 miles from Culbone.
5. First photographic reproduction of CreweMs, in article by T.C. Skeat, 'British Museum Quarterly', XXVI, 1962-3, pp. 77-83.
6. D.H. Karrfalt cited Ash Farm again in 'Another Note on Kubla Khan and Coleridge's retirement to Ash Farm', *N & Q*, 1966, CCXI, p.171-2.
7. Further photographic reproduction of CreweMs. in article by John Shelton, 'Review of English Literature', VII, 1966, pp. 34-42.

For all the above information, I am indebted to Prof. John Beer of Cambridge University.

References

1. Map of Day and Masters, 1782, Somerset County Records Office (SCRO), Taunton.
2. 'Ashley Combe, Bratton Court and Sparkhayes' - a journal of the Estate, anon., 1799-1840. SCRO Ref: DD/CCH (c/2367) Box 3.
3. 'Poems of the Supernatural', essay by John Beer in *S.T. Coleridge*, ed. R.L. Brett, *Writers and their Background* series, 1971, p.53.
4. Line from *Osorio* (1797) by STC:
'The hanging Woods, that touch'd by Autumn seem'd
As they were blossoming hues of fire and gold'.
5. Mrs Payne, Parsonage Farm. In conversation 1988.
6. Chadwyck Healey, *History of a Part of West Somerset*, 1901
7. *Ibid.*, p.29.
8. Morchard Bishop, 'The Farm House of Kubla Khan', TLS, 10 May 1957, p.293.
9. The Porlock Museum, The Doverhay Reading Room, Porlock, Somerset.
10. Joan Cooper, *Culbone: A Spiritual History*, 1977.
11. 'A Journal of Travels in West Somerset', authoress unknown, 1845, SCRO Ref: DD SWD 10/11.
12. Berta Lawrence, *Coleridge and Wordsworth in Somerset*, 1970, p.58. Cf. Shilcompton referred to as Kirkhampton.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
14. Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions*, 1989.
15. John Beer, 'The Languages of Kubla Khan', in *Coleridge's Imagination*, Ed. R. Gravil, L. Newlyn, N. Roe.
16. John Beer, 'Poems of the Supernatural', essay in *S.T. Coleridge*, ed. R.L. Brett, *Writers and their Background* series, 1971.
17. Rudolf Steiner, *Egyptian Myths and Mysteries*, New York, 1971 edition.
18. Owen Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought*, 1971.
19. Chris Rubinstein, lecture, First Coleridge Summer Conference, Nether Stowey, July 1988.

20. The briefest of extracts from a letter by STC to his brother (unspecified) from Nether Stowey, dated by Griggs to circa 10 March 1798 (letters 1, pps, 394-8).

COTTLE'S *ALFRED*: ANOTHER COLERIDGE-INSPIRED EPIC

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'My God! what a brain he must have', Lamb wrote to Coleridge in August 1800, referring to Joseph Cottle's epic poem *Alfred*,

His terrific scenes are indefatigable. Serpents, asps, spiders, ghosts, dead bodies, stair cases made of no thing with Adder's tongues for bannisters ... he puts as many plums in his pudding as my Grandmother used to do & then his emerging from Hell's horrors into *Light*, and treading on pure flats of this earth for 23 books together --!--¹

In one of Lamb's funniest letters, written a month later, he goes on to tell Coleridge how he alleviated Cottle's grief at the death of his brother, Amos Cottle, by praising *Alfred* to the skies: 'I felt my cue, and strong pity working at the root, I went to work, and beslabberd Alfred with most unqualify'd praise ... Was I a Candied Greyhound now for all this? or did I do right? I believe I did' (Marrs I, 239-40). True to form, the generous Lamb had praised, to its author, at a moment of distress, one of the least admired works of the Romantic period.

Others were less charitable. At about the same time Southey judged that *Alfred* 'will be condemned to eternity'.² Even before this it had become a joke among the Wordsworth circle; in July 1799, Wordsworth wrote to Cottle from Germany:

Looking over some old monthly Magazines I saw a paragraph stating that your *Arthur* was ready for the press! I laughed heartily at this idle story.³

Explaining this unkind remark, James Butler points out that *Alfred* 'was not published until 1800, although Cottle had been working on it for some time'. But there is more to it than that. As he wrote to Cottle, Wordsworth was experiencing considerable anxiety at the failure to get on with his own epic poem, *The Recluse*; and the suggestion that Cottle's great work was nearing publication would have given him cold comfort. The sense of rivalry could only have been heightened by the awareness that both *The Recluse* and *Alfred* were projects developed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

The story of how he foisted onto Wordsworth the impossible task of *The Recluse* is now a commonplace of Wordsworthian scholarship,⁴ but no-one has yet found reason to blame him for *Alfred*. In fact the blame - if that is the word - is shared between him and Thomas Poole's brother, Richard, who wrote admiringly to Coleridge on 3 May 1796:

I would wish you very much to turn your attention to the Character of Alfred, he customarily has not been sufficiently attended to by Writers on

our Constitution. The research would be useful on two accounts, as I hope to see him the Hero of an Epic Poem by S T Coleridge.⁵

Coleridge never seriously considered writing this 'Epic Poem' himself, but he must shortly after have suggested the idea to Cottle. This would explain why, three years later, the time taken over its composition had become the subject of Wordsworth's amusement.

It is now possible to see how the burden of *The Recluse*, and its ultimate abandonment, shaped Wordsworth's career;⁶ though *Alfred* had the distinction of being both completed and published, its failure as poetry had equally cruel repercussions for its author. This is all the more poignant since Cottle himself was proud of his work. In August 1799, Thomasina Dennis reported to Davies Giddy that 'An Assembly of the Wits and Bels Esprits was convened a fortnight since in Bristol to hear the Production of Mr Cottle's *Muse* - Mr Wedgwood was invited, but not being one of the *initiated* he declined in assisting in the Mysteries'.⁷ Thomasina's irony was more appropriate than she knew.

As Robert Woof points out, nothing more is known of Cottle's reading of *Alfred* in Bristol in 1799, but Coleridge was presumably in attendance, for in November 1799 he makes a notebook reference to 'Cottle & his Alfred', pointing out that Cottle is one of those 'humble men in company, [who,] if they produce any thing, are in that thing of the most exquisite irritability & vanity'.⁸ Perhaps it was the failure of this project that prompted him to write to Wordsworth in September: 'I am anxiously eager to see you steadily employed on *The Recluse*'.⁹

Coleridge's initiation of *Alfred* must have made his disdain all the more wounding.¹⁰ By Coleridge's own account, Cottle 'suffered deeply from the very mean opinion, which I had frankly expressed to him of his Epic Poem' (Griggs I, 586); in later years he punned cruelly on its title, recalling that Cottle 'wrote a poem that bore a lie on its title page, for he called it *Alfred*, and it was never *halfread* by any human being'.¹¹ Apart from a handful of brilliant exceptions, much of Coleridge's own verse now seems quite bad, but it is a mark of Cottle's failure that even in its own day *Alfred* impressed no-one. Appropriately, the highest praise for one of the most despised works of the age came, in an inspired fit of compassion, from Charles Lamb. 'The effect was luscious to my Conscience', he told Coleridge (Marrs I, 240) - though as he wrote those words he could not have suspected that the poem he mocked, like Wordsworth's *Recluse* was 'half a child' of his correspondent's own brain.¹²

NOTES

1. *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marrs (3 vols., Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), hereafter Marrs; I, 236.
2. *New Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. Kenneth Curry (2 vols., New York and London, 1965); I, 228. A dangerous remark to have made, since posterity has been less than kind to Southey himself. *Alfred*, in fact, was reprinted in facsimile by Donald H. Reiman in the Series *Romantic Context: Poetry (Significant Minor Poetry 1789-1830)* (Garland Publishing, Inc., New York, 1979).

3. Wordsworth refers to *Arthur* but really means *Alfred*. The most reliable text of this letter is published by James A. Butler, 'Wordsworth, Cottle and the *Lyrical Ballads*: Five Letters, 1797-1800', *Journal of the English and Germanic Philology* LXXV (1976) 1,2, 139-53; the sentence quoted appears on p.149.
4. See for example Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), and Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and 'The Recluse'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).
5. I would like to thank the British Library for permission to quote from Add. MS. 35,343.
6. It led, apart from other things, to the composition of *The Prelude*, and the suppression of that poem during Wordsworth's lifetime - which in turn contributed to the critical undervaluing of his work. As late as 1838, Mary Wordsworth told George Ticknor to encourage her husband to get on with writing *The Recluse* (see Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Borders of Vision*, p. 340ff).
7. Thomasina Dennis (1771-1809), governess to the Wedgwood children, was acquainted with the Coleridge circle. Davies Giddy was, in the words of Robert S. Woof, 'her mentor and friend'. Her involvement with the 'Wits and Bels Esprits' of the day is movingly described by Woof in his article, 'Coleridge and Thomasina Dennis', *University of Toronto Quarterly* xxxii (Oct 1962 1, pp. 37-54, from which the report of the reading of *Alfred* is drawn (p. 48).
8. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks: volume 1 (1794-1804)*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957); p. 566.
9. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Letters*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (6 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956-71); hereafter Griggs, I 527.
10. Compare Wordsworth's dismay over Coleridge's disappointment at *The Excursion* (Griggs IV, 575). Coleridge's scorn for *Alfred* must have contributed to the increasing animosity between him and Cottle.
11. Henry Crabb Robinson, *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, ed. E.J. Morley (3 vols., London: Dent, 1938), II, 663. Since Robinson is recording a recollection of Dr Brabant, it is not surprising that he gets a crucial detail wrong, attributing *Alfred* to Amos, rather than Joseph Cottle.
12. Coleridge to Southey, 29 July 1802, on the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: 'Wordsworth's Preface is *half a child* of my own Brain' (Griggs II, 830, my italics).

APPENDIX: EXTRACTS FROM *ALFRED*

Readers may wish to have some idea of *Alfred* at its best. In the First Book, Ivar, son of the Danish King, descends into an underworld, guided by an 'ocean Hag'. This is the episode Lamb has in mind when he refers to 'Serpents, asps, spiders, ghosts, dead bodies, stair cases made of no thing with Adder's tongues for bannisters':

On they moved
Through caverns intricate, and lofty vaults,
Where bats and screech-owls and the carrion-crow
Had their safe dwelling; ever flitting by,
Or sending sounds, reverberated far
O'er all the black domain, that made the light
Half conscious of obtrusion. To the mouth
Of a deep pit they came. Fearless the Hag
Leap'd downward half her length, standing secure
Upon a jutting stone that overhung
Th' abyss, yawning beneath: when, at her call
From every secret crevice, issued fast
Unnumber'd vipers! round the rocky sides,
As by mechanic impulse each appear'd
Rang'd in due order, piercing the hard crag
With fangs, monstrous, and keen, and down they hang,
Coiling, when thus the Hag: 'Young Prince, descend!
The steps are distant and impassable,
But by one only means: yon beings grasp,
And with their aid, dauntless proceed!

(II, 211-31)

One of the joys of *Alfred* is its footnotes, which underline its author's taste for gruesome trivia. One of them points out that, 'By the laws of the Anglo Saxons, certain prices were set upon all the members of the human body, and upon bruises, maims and wounds in every part of it, according to their length, breadth, and depth', and quotes as examples: 'If both nostrils be slit, let each be compensated with six shillings', and 'If the thumb be cut off, let the compensation be twenty shillings; the nail of the thumb, with three shillings; the forefinger, with eight shillings For each nail one shilling' (pp.252-3). Another footnote gives a detailed account of the Black Hole of Calcutta (pp. 300-1), and another describes the five Saxon 'ordeals' for the testing of criminal charges. The first of these is the 'ordeal of hot iron', performed with 'A ball of iron':

this ball was put into a fire, and made red hot, after which it was taken out. The accused having signed himself with the cross, and sprinkled his hand with holy water, took the ball of iron in his hand, and carried it to the distance of nine feet; after which his hand was put into a bag; and sealed up for three days; at the expiration of which it was examined If any marks of burning appeared on it, the accused was found guilty; if none, he was declared innocent. (p.202)

A CORNISH CURATE: FRIEND OF COLERIDGE

Berta Lawrence

In the eighteenth century Roskillys were fairly thick on the ground in Cornwall and it has not proved possible to identify the birthplace of Coleridge's friend. However, William Roskilly served as curate to the church of St. Mary in Nether Stowey, Somerset, where the vicar was frequently an absentee, during the decade 1790-1800, overlapping Coleridge's residence in Stowey by the last four years. Roskilly's first signature in the church registers appears in 1790. The following year he officiated at the marriage of a fellow Cornishman, Richard Lemon from Redruth, to a Stowey girl Susanna Chambers. Richard Lemon worked at the copper-mine in the Quantock Hills owned by the Duke of Buckingham and remembered by Coleridge in a letter from Germany in which he says he refused to visit the mines at Clausthal because he had already visited the Stowey mine and would find nothing new. Most of the miners at the Stowey mine were Methodists.

In December 1792 the register records the burial of William Roskilly's wife Frances. A year or two later he married, in Stowey church, a widow Mrs Dyer. The baptism of their daughter Mary Elizabeth is recorded in 1796, the year when Coleridge's son Hartley was born and when the Coleridges took the cottage in Lime Street. The two young wives became friendly and frequently 'drank tea' together, sometimes in their husbands' company. Tea-drinking was one of the social activities of the little town (now a lively village). More than twenty years later Mrs Coleridge recalls, in a letter to Tom Poole, the prosperous Stowey tanner who was the Coleridges' constant benefactor, that on one occasion the Roskillys brought to tea at the Lime Street cottage a physician called Dr May who was visiting them and that Dr May kindly gave Sarah advice on weaning Hartley. At his Stowey house, not identified, William Roskilly kept a small, genteel boarding school. Tom Poole, warmly recommending it in a letter to a friend seeking a school for his son, wrote 'Mr Roskilly the Clergyman takes 20 boarders at £20 per annum'. Washing and Latin were included for this fee and there was 'an optional Dancing Master'.

Tom Poole had a friend John Chubb, a prosperous merchant and talented amateur artist, a democrat in politics and a friend and political supporter of Charles James Fox. His hospitable house stood on the quayside by the tidal river Parret in Bridgwater and here he entertained Coleridge and his wife in 1807 when de Quincey met Coleridge at the supper-table and found his personality dazzling. John Chubb's son - Morley aged seven - went to Mr Roskilly's school in Stowey, and his grave, childish letters to his father illustrate the constant fear of French invasion which in Stowey engendered the 'spy-scare' and consequent suspicions about Wordsworth and Coleridge. When there was an alarm the pupils were kept indoors. 'Mr Wood - the music master, teaches us our excercises and we have little wooden guns'. In the time of inflated corn prices riots flared up in the village when 'Sir Phillip Hales came to carry away the corn' so that Mr Roskilly's boys were not permitted to leave the premises. Sir Phillip Hales was 'the titled Dogberry' who led the campaign against Wordsworth.

Mr Roskilly's school ran into debt and failed.

There is no evidence that Mr Roskilly and Coleridge were close friends. No doubt they found each other's company congenial since men of good education were not numerous in Stowey. Over the years, particularly when he was in Germany, Coleridge's letters are

scattered with requests to Poole and other correspondents to pass on a brief, amiable message to Roskilly. In later years while living in the Lake District he casually sends 'my love to the Roskillys' including them in a list of old friends like Ward and Chester while never finding time to write them a letter. He did write Roskilly one letter, lively, semi-facetious, while loitering in Germany in January 1799. It is a letter of warm congratulation written after learning that Roskilly has been given a living in Kempford in Gloucestershire. He declares that he will drink a big 'bumper' to the health of the Bishop of Gloucester - 'God bless him'. Scribbled on the back of a letter written to Sarah the letter ends 'Sincerely your friend

S.T. Coleridge'

Sarah kept in touch with the Roskillys who proved kind and helpful. In 1800, after Coleridge's return to England, she found herself stranded without a domicile, with little money, pregnant and with the child Hartley to care for. The Roskillys earned her gratitude by inviting her to Kempford rectory. 'I and the child left him (Coleridge) in London and proceeded to Kempford in Gloucestershire. Papa was to have joined us there but did not' she wrote after making a six-week stay. For many years Sarah remembered the Roskillys, frequently mentioning them in letters to Tom Poole, chiefly a certain Miss Roskilly still living in Nether Stowey - Roskilly's daughter, perhaps, judging by her age. "Is Miss Roskilly married yet?" Sarah candidly enquires. At times she merely asks 'how is Miss Roskilly?' In 1830, after a Stowey visit, she writes 'I am sorry to have missed a sight of Miss Roskilly' and, in 1829, after the wedding of a Southey daughter at Southey's home Greta Hall Mrs Coleridge writes to Poole, 'I have indulged in scribbling an account of the wedding for the amusement of your young cousins and Miss Roskilly'.

Two intimate friends of the Coleridge's during their Stowey sojourn were young Mr and Mrs John Cruikshank who had married the same day as the Coleridges and occupied an adjacent house communicating by a garden path. Cruikshank's father was agent to the Earl of Egmont (brother of Perceval the Prime Minister) who lived in Enmore Castle, a few miles from Stowey, and gave Coleridge hospitality some years later. It was John Cruikshank who described to Coleridge his dream about a skeleton ship manned by a crew of ghosts which Coleridge incorporated in his *Ancient Mariner*. On 3 February 1797 William Roskilly baptised the Cruikshanks' baby girl Anna Elizabeth who was about Hartley's age. We do not know whether Coleridge, who at that time disapproved of infant baptism, attended the religious ceremony but we know that he wrote a poem to honour it, 'On the Christening of a Friend's Child'. These verses are a tribute to the baby's mother Anna Cruikshank, particularly for the sweetness and 'meekness' of her character - much admired by Coleridge (according to a letter).

In October 1807 William Roskilly and his wife paid a visit to Nether Stowey. The recently published interesting diary of William Holland, Vicar of Over Stowey (it is called *Paupers and Pig Killers*) describes the visit in Mr Holland's usual carping manner. He met the Roskillys at the house of a relative of Tom Poole whom he disliked intensely. He remarked that Mr Roskilly did well for himself by marrying the Bishop of Gloucester's niece! He had failed at everything else - his school had failed, he was a poor scholar, a poor parson and a poor preacher, and *a very mean-looking plain man*. Yet marriage to the Bishop's niece had 'set him right again'.

William Roskilly died in 1810.

BOOK REVIEWS

Jonathan Wordsworth, Robert Metzger, Paul Betz. **BRITISH ROMANTIC ART.** Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University in Association with The Wordsworth Trust, 1990. Pp.54.

Blake, Cotman, Crome, Girtin, the Varleys, De Wint, Cox, Hearne, Farington, Constable, Turner, Gilpin, Rowlandson, Palmer, Fuseli, Gainsborough, and Haydon, are all represented in this catalogue for the exhibition of British Romantic Art held at Bucknell University's Center Gallery last Easter, many illustrated in monochrome, with informative annotations by Jonathan Wordsworth and the Gallery's Curator, Robert Metzger.

Alongside a number of old favourites, there are many surprises. The illustrated Faringtons, both of Lake District scenes, give an idea of the artist's careful, razor-sharp manner during the mid-1770s. The more confident sweep of his mature style has yet to develop, and he instead offers precision and care. With this, it is interesting to compare the seething vitality of Rowlandson's *Tree Group*, full of the characteristic suppleness of his line in the feathery offhand signs of foliage. Beneath it readers will find a memorable reworking of Leda and the Swan, reminding us that Rowlandson produced many pornographic drawings to stimulate the jaded palate of the Prince Regent. Thomas Sunderland offers a calmer depiction of Peele Castle than the more famous one by Beaumont. The ruins are integrated into a picturesque landscape replete with sheep and swains in true Gilpinian style, while their scale (less evident in Beaumont) is emphasized by the smallness of the schooner passing beneath it.

The hidden treasure of the catalogue lies in its second half, which provides an itemized breakdown of Manuscripts, Books, and Related Pictures of the Paul Betz Collection. On the evidence of this selection, Professor Betz has one of the most interesting collections of Romantic material in private hands. This part of the catalogue is not, alas, annotated, and only a small number of the exhibits are illustrated, but the entries provide a good idea of the material. It includes a legal document signed by John Wordsworth Sr. in 1771 (item 3); one of Wordsworth's schoolboy textbooks, Pitt's *Aeneid*, 1736 (6); a legal document admitting Southey and his friend Bedford to study law at Gray's Inn, 1797 (13); an unpublished draft of Richard Perceval Graves' conversations with Wordsworth (10); manuscripts by Wordsworth (64), Coleridge (57), Crabbe (34), De Quincey (58), Helen Maria Williams (26) and Sir John Stoddart (25); rare first editions of Wordsworth's *An Evening Walk* (1793), Coleridge's *The Fall of Robespierre* (1794), and *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Elians will be interested to know that six books from Lamb's library, all with the 'Relics of Charles Lamb' bookplate, are listed (133), as well as Lamb's copy of Chatterton's *Poems* (1794) containing Coleridge's 'Monody on the Death of Chatterton' (50). Until the publication of the annotated, illustrated catalogue of the Collection, forthcoming from the Bucknell University Press, this list will be an invaluable reference work for Romanticists.

This catalogue, with its essays by Jonathan Wordsworth and Robert Metzger, is a fine introduction to British Romantic Art, and provides an essential account of the Betz Collection. It is full of hitherto little-known material, including item 119 in the Betz Collection, a sketch of Wordsworth in rainwear from 1823 - scarf, greatcoat, and balaclava helmet.

DUNCAN WU

BRITISH ROMANTIC ART is available from Center Gallery, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA 17837, USA. Please send an international money order for £8 (or US cheque for \$12.50).

Jonathan Bate, *SHAKESPEAREAN CONSTITUTIONS: POLITICS, THEATRE, CRITICISM 1730-1830*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, 234pp.

Let it be stated from the start: this is a first-rate book. It is written with exemplary clarity and a sustained drive that carries the reader along from beginning to end. It is both descriptive and closely analytical, lively yet always scholarly; although the author clearly has a relish for the specific and individual, the work as a whole is informed by a large view of literature and criticism.

The title is apt, but does not quite alert the reader to the contents of the book. The opening date could well be 1709 or 1714, although the effort is concentrated mainly on the reigns of George III and George IV when politics were enlivened by the challenge of a native Radicalism and the French Revolution. Apart from the Theatre, where Garrick, Kemble and Kean inevitably dominate the scene, the main centres of discussion consist of Caricature, Parody and the Literary Criticism of Hazlitt. What binds these diverse and disparate ingredients together and makes the work a book rather than a collection of articles is Shakespeare - the Georgian Theatre and Shakespeare, Caricature and Shakespeare, Parody and Shakespeare, and finally Hazlitt as Shakespearean critic.

The cumulative effect of these various discussions is to demonstrate comprehensively the canonization of Shakespeare as the national Bard, so that he could be regarded by the end of the eighteenth century as 'part of an Englishman's constitution'. In charting the course of this development we are rightly reminded that the ground for the Shakespearean revival was already well prepared before it was taken over by Garrick. Rowe's edition of the *Works* in 1709, especially as reprinted by Tonson in 1714, first secured Shakespeare a wide reading public: whereas in the first decade of the century something like one in ten of plays performed in London were Shakespeare's, by 1741, when Garrick entered the London stage, the proportion had risen to one in four; and in the '30s pressures like that of the mysterious Shakespeare Ladies Club began to secure the revival of a wider range of the plays. All the same Professor Bate has to agree that whatever the criticisms that can be made of Garrick's Jubilee it was this event that did more than anything to promote and establish Shakespeare's preeminence.

A more original contribution to the study of that preeminence and its potency is provided by the examination of Caricature that occupies Part I. The years of George III and George IV are treated as the golden age of this medium of public entertainment, comment and criticism, which during this period surpassed the pamphlet as the popular instrument of political satire. Prints reached a wide and varied public by a number of means, not only purchase: an interesting example, at the higher social level, is still to be seen in the Print or Caricature room at Calke Abbey, where a room was given over entirely to satirical prints, the walls completely covered with them and the display evidently kept up to date, as in places prints have been found pasted up to three deep. Particularly from the time of the controversy over Lord Bute the plays of Shakespeare were widely adopted by satirists as a source of both illustration and apt quotation. How this demonstrates Shakespeare's

place as the national bard is well argued here. The prints assumed not just a theatre-going but a large reading public, well-versed in the plays and ready to respond to all the nuances of picture and text. In a print space was limited so that its full effect required more than a literal, untutored reading; it required a reader equipped to respond to the associations and resonances of words and image and to move from the text quoted to the wider context of character and situation. Hence the peculiar potency of Shakespearean quotation. However - and this is one of the themes of the book - such usage could be double-edged owing to the ambivalence of Shakespeare and the variety of interpretations to which the text is susceptible. Thus a print such as Gilray's on 'Citizen' Stanhope (*The Noble Sans-Culotte*) while apparently supportive of the Establishment could also be read with a subversive meaning.

One is bound to comment that in this first part the subject of Caricature almost takes over from the subject of Shakespeare. Not quite, for Shakespeare is always in view; but it is a tribute to Jonathan Bate's ability to engage the reader's attention that his examination of the caricaturists and of Gilray in particular acquires a momentum and significance of its own, apart from the main theme of the work. This, fortified by excellent illustrations, is the most engaging part. It is also scholarly and shows how a discerning and exacting eye can illuminate the reading of even a well-known print. This is seen best when Professor Bate takes his fresh look at *Shakespeare-Sacrificed*, Gilray's satire on Boydell's Gallery and argues convincingly for a new interpretation. What he brings out well in general is the intelligence and subtlety behind Gilray's art and the ambivalence of his stance.

If the chapter on Parody hardly carries the same weight the fault must lie with the parodists. Although this is the golden age of English parody, reaching its high point in the *Anti-Jacobin* and *Rejected Addresses* the commitment to Shakespeare requires that the chapter be virtually dominated by an inferior master. This is 'Master Shallow', the pen-name of the Revd. Thomas Ford, for many years vicar of Melton Mowbray. That the *Gentleman's Magazine* considered it appropriate and profitable to publish, between 1792 and 1805, some hundred and fifty of his Shakespearean parodies clearly justifies his resurrection here as evidence of Shakespeare's readership; but one has to agree that apart from one piece which Jonathan Bate rightly selects as exceptional, the general level is one of complacent mediocrity. More interesting is the appropriation of Shakespeare to serve Radical culture, illustrated here by way of Richard Carlile's attack on Castlereagh in *A Parody of the Tent Scene in Richard the Third* - and one is reminded how, some thirty years later the Chartist leader, Thomas Cooper, organised his Shakespearean Association of Leicester Chartists.

Although Part II is entitled *The Example of Hazlitt* it is difficult to write about Shakespearean criticism in this period without some reference to Charles Lamb; and in fact Lamb occupies the first pages of this part, in development of a reference made to him earlier. His well-known views on the staging - or the impossibility of staging - the plays are considered with some sympathy but in the end criticized as exemplifying 'The Romantic Ideology' and arising out of Lamb's retreat from his radical political past 'into a world of the self' from which he emerged to address 'a socially elite audience'. This leaves a problem since the avowed object of this part is to present Hazlitt as 'the exemplary Shakespearean critic'. It is a problem because Hazlitt shared some of the attitudes and views of Lamb: he had much of the Romantic in him, he was the first to recognize the talent of Kean, the supreme Romantic actor, and, as has to be admitted here, Hazlitt shared Lamb's views about the impossibility of representing *Lear* on the stage. It is met in various

ways. Hazlitt possessed a balance that Lamb lacked. He was both a Romantic and critic of Romantics. In politics he could admire both Burke and Paine. Among actors he could appreciate Kemble as well as Kean. Although at times he despaired of the possibility of actors doing justice to the more poetic texts, he was realistic – and perhaps modern – enough not to expect ideal, valid-for-all-time performances but to regard them as ‘commentaries’ on the text. And his distinction between ‘articulation’ and ‘conception’ allowed him to admire the skill of the performance while questioning the interpretation of the text. These qualities redeemed Hazlitt from the weaknesses of the Romantic position. It is also argued that it is a mistake to see him as a traditional ‘character critic’: true, Hazlitt wrote much about Shakespearean characters but that was because the inter-relationship of the characters is part of the structure of the play. It was also, it seems, part of Hazlitt’s strength that he did not follow Lamb’s retreat into his private world, but remained a Radical with a firm sense of the public interest and an understanding of the public role of the theatre and the actor. This is interesting, but perhaps more convincing are the passages that bring out the originality and modernity of Hazlitt’s reading of many of the plays and characters in them such as Henry V, Shylock and Caliban. There remain difficulties about Hazlitt, but it is difficult to lay down this book without agreeing that he is, at the least, the finest Shakespearean critic of his time.

R H Evans
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SOCIETY NEWS AND NOTES FROM MEMBERS

SUBSCRIPTIONS PLEASE...AND THEN WE EAT

January bring the time for the renewal of subscriptions (rates – still unchanged – at the end of this *Bulletin*). Cheques to the Hon. Treasurer, Nick Powell, please. His address is on the back cover.

And then we eat! As last *Bulletin's* enclosure told us, the annual Charles Lamb Birthday Luncheon for 1991 will take place at the Royal College of General Practitioners' headquarters, 14 Princes Gate, Kensington, SW7, at 12.15 (for 1.00 pm) on Saturday 9th February. As usual, Madeline Huxstep (address also on the back cover) is issuing tickets, price £12 each. Please don't forget to enclose the S.A.E!

The Guests of Honour at the 1991 Luncheon will be Professors James and Carolyn Misenheimer. The venue, which is of great historic interest, is the subject of the piece which follows, kindly and authoritatively provided by our Chairman.

PRINCES GATE & THE AMERICAN CONNECTION

Our luncheon venue this year is peculiarly appropriate, and a note about its history and significance might be of interest. Completed in 1849 by the builders of the Albert Memorial, the terrace was hard to sell, since its 'amenities' were soon adversely affected by the huge Crystal Palace only a few yards away in the Park. The neighbourhood has many points of contact with the Romantic world; in Lamb's time both Lady Blessington and William Wilberforce lived close by, as well as the widow of Samuel Whitbread. During the Great Exhibition, Lady Blessington's house became an up-market restaurant, its chef no less than Alexis Soyer.

In the previous century, the district was distinctly aristocratic, with the Countess of Yarmouth and the Duke of Portland at the apex, together with the 'notorious' Duchess of Kingston. 100 acres of the area comprised the Brompton Park Nursery, whose owners, London and later Wise, co-operated with Charles Bridgman in the various landscaping works in Hyde Park which culminated in the Serpentine.

14 Princes Gate was bought only five years after its completion by the banker J S Morgan when he came to London to partner George Peabody (of the 'buildings'); J S died in 1890, leaving this house, Dover House at Roehampton and \$2.6m to his son, J Pierpont Morgan. He spent several months each year in England, and built up a fine collection of art (comparable with what later became the Wallace Collection). All but the library 'for tax reasons' was kept at 14 Princes Gate, but soon the collection grew too big for the house, and much was lent to the V & A; at his death in 1913, it was valued at \$60m. Five years after J Pierpont's death the house was offered to the American Government as a home for their Ambassador, and this gift was accepted in 1921. The Ambassadors lived at Princes Gate until they moved to a new mansion in Regent's Park in 1955 (itself presented to the American Government by Barbara Hutton, the Woolworth heiress). The Pierpont Morgans also owned a large house in Aldenham, Hertfordshire, where I often went to childrens' parties in the 1920s.

With apologies to our speakers on February 9th, I shall skip the first three new 'owners' of the house, and move on to Joseph Kennedy who lived at 14 Princes Gate from 1937 to 1940. He has been perhaps misjudged in his attitudes to Britain and to his own family, but was well known after the last War for his pessimism about Britain's chances in the war against the Axis, and for his ambition 'to preserve a small place in history for the Kennedy name'. Four further ambassadors lived in Princes Gate after the Kennedys, until the Independent Television Authority bought the house in 1955. They then sold it in 1962 to the Royal College of General Practitioners - for £162,000! Since then the Royal College has expanded into No. 15 next door, itself adjacent to the now-burnt-out Iranian Embassy.

There is much, much more to tell, so do come to the luncheon and find out for yourself; for myself, I should like to end on a very personal note. Where was I when John Kennedy was killed? I was dining in the first floor Long Room at a Council Dinner of our College when the dreadful news came through; we were stunned and appalled as was everyone - but the feeling that we were sitting in the very room where he had so often shared family life and perhaps some fringes of diplomatic life, was uncanny and almost unbearable. I never return to 14 Princes Gate without the memory of that night, and without a sense that history is never far away - never quite without some impact even on our own 'ordinary' lives.

For the details above, horribly compressed in this short account, I am greatly indebted to two of my GP colleagues, John Horder and Stephen Pasmore, the authors of "14 Princes Gate" (Exeter 1987). It is a mine of fascinating material - I shall bring my copy to our annual luncheon, but shall keep a sharp eye on it all afternoon!

D G Wilson, Cambridge, September 1990

GRAVE SPOTTERS' CORNER

Those who carry their love of the past to the length of hunting for the burial-places of the obscurely-famous are compensated by the occasional lucky strike for the inevitable hours spent trudging about in accordance with faulty directions.

Donald Greenwood's *Who's Buried Where in England* (Constable, 1982) is an excellent supplement to the *Oxford Literary Guide to the British Isles* in almost every case; but where Greenwood stumbles is with Walcot Cemetary, Bath, situated on the right-hand side of Walcot Street, heading away from the town centre. We are assured that T R Malthus and Fanny Burney are buried here, but on exploring my companion and I found that the sites of their graves are no longer identifiable. After an exhaustive (and exhausting) trudge about we gave Malthus up entirely; but across the road from the cemetary we spotted the burial place of Fanny and General D'Arblay. At least we thought that the tomb marked with their names in a small enclosure *was* theirs, but the *Literary Guide* firmly assures us that they are buried in the church! All very confusing! Does any reader know whether this *is* the site of Fanny Burney's grave, or has the tomb been moved to its present position?

In the same enclosure as the D'Arblay tomb we found the tombstone of George Austen. But the real purpose of this short note is to point out that the right-hand side of the main graveyard gives shelter to the remains of John Thelwall, the radical friend of Coleridge and Wordsworth. Since this is not mentioned in the *Guide*, the fact may be of interest to readers of the *Bulletin* who live near Bath, or who may be visiting it in the future. Thelwall's marker is on the right of the church, close by the wall.

It was with a sense of something like elation that I discovered Thelwall's tomb, after a frustrating search for Malthus, who, of course, lies in the Abbey...
Or does he?

Mark Garnett

EDWARD MOXON

D E Wickham

In September 1990 I was offered - and have so far refused - ten issues of *The Spectator*. Nos. 172-179 and No. 181, September 1711, bound up together in early nineteenth-century marbled wrappers, all in dreadful condition but inscribed on the separate binder's flyleaf 'O Moxon the gift of his respected friend Chs Lamb Oct 16/24'.

I examined the item and thought about it long and hard. Without an authentic autograph signature before me I can only say that the inscription looked remarkably neat for Charles Lamb. The 'O' might possibly be intended for the Greek letter [theta] which was formerly used, and has recently been used by me, to address someone whom one particularly wished to address as Esq. but whose initial is unknown. Alternatively it might be used in exostulatory form - 'O Moxon!!!'

Would Charles Lamb refer to himself as Moxon's 'respected friend'. Here one is on the outer fringes of Elian scholarship but I think he might use the phrase, especially if he was in a whimsical mood or if they had met and there had been some reference, mistaken or misunderstood, to respect or respectability.

The date is all-important. Edward Moxon was born in 1801. He came to London from Wakefield in 1817 and entered Longman's the publishers in 1821. Charles Lamb knew him by September 1826, when he introduced the young man to Wordsworth, and no authority seems to date the start of the acquaintance much earlier than that.

The usual lists of Lamb's books are hopeless, of course, because this one would have left his shelves early. It is in a suitably dreadful state, however, and there is an Elian reference to something in *The Spectator*, No. 173. Can anyone offer useful comments, please?

ALLIANCE OF LITERARY SOCIETIES

The Alliance of Literary Societies' AGM and Seminar at the Birmingham and Midland Institute will take place on Saturday 20th April 1991.

WHY DON'T THEY...? - NO. 147

D E Wickham

Why don't They obtain more publicity for the Charles Lamb Society? I had also wondered this and, with Council's approval, I tried a sustained attack on the *Daily Telegraph*. Others suggested similar attacks on the *Times* and the *Independent* but I decided to husband my resources.

Without all the correspondence before me, I can say only that it was almost certainly the October 1989 meeting about which I sent the first notice to the *Daily Telegraph*. They printed it gratis along with the lectures in London museums, etc. The notice attracted one unexpected visitor to the meeting though I am not sure that she actually joined the Society.

That success must have got under the wire because I sent off notices about the November, December, January and March meetings, each in reasonable time. Not one was printed or acknowledged, nor did I receive any warning about wasting the newspaper's time.

I had been ready to send off a résumé of the February 1990 Birthday Luncheon when it struck me that, if it was to be printed on the Monday like the annual notices of the B.r.n. Society's events for example, it must be posted on the Friday at the latest, i.e. well *before* the Luncheon had occurred. This seemed a bit of a risk and such a notice would necessarily have omitted the surprise highlight of that occasion, the President's farewell song. So I didn't - and I haven't since - but I (and They) did try.

WHY DON'T THEY...? - NO. 148

Anon

Why don't They ask me to do something for the Charles Lamb Society? Are They waiting for me to volunteer? I really must write to the Secretary and offer. They must not succeed in trying to frustrate my desire to help.

CROSSWORD CLUE

D E Wickham

What Mary called Charles

Answer: Lambkin

[N.B. This is apparently geniune]

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