

The Integrity of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*: the Making of a Book

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ALTHOUGH THE 1798 *LYRICAL BALLADS* is now widely considered as ‘the most important volume of verse in English since the Renaissance’, it was not always thus.¹ Sara Coleridge in her letter to her absent husband of 24 March 1799 informed him bluntly that ‘The Lyrical Ballads are not esteemed well here, but The Nightingale and The River Y [Wye]’ (CL I 489 n). She was even more frank when she wrote subsequently to Poole: ‘The Lyrical Ballads are laughed at and disliked by all with few excepted...’ (CL I 489 n), although her dismissive tone is perhaps mainly an expression of her deep hurt at Coleridge’s failure to respond adequately from Germany to the recent death of their younger son, Berkeley. However, to a few of its youngest and brightest readers, the 1798 volume was a revelation. The twenty-year old Hazlitt on first hearing these poems read aloud from manuscript in front of the house at Alfoxden in May 1798 felt ‘the sense of a new style and a new spirit in poetry’ come over him.² He memorably compared this feeling to that which arises from ‘the turning up of the fresh soil, or the first welcome breath of spring.’³ John Wilson, writing to Wordsworth in 1802 at the age of seventeen, claimed that *Lyrical Ballads* was ‘the book which I value next to my Bible’;⁴ and De Quincey, also aged seventeen, wrote saying that the volume was the one work he would save ‘from the wreck of all earthly things which belong to me.’⁵

Nevertheless, it remains in many ways a very strange little book to have played such a significant role. Readers still, as Wordsworth first warned in the *Advertisement*, ‘will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness’, and not just because of the diction.⁶ For a start, it is not a single book but a series of editions of a book, which doubled in size and was revised several times between 1798 and 1805 until it had metamorphosed into something quite different. Furthermore, there was always something disconcerting about its contents. Emile Legouis writing in 1939 called the 1798 edition ‘a somewhat random and incongruous assemblage of short poems’,⁷ and Coleridge himself recognised that his contributions to

¹ *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (Oxford, 1973), II, 125. Quoted in James A. Butler, ‘Poetry 1798-1807: ‘Lyrical Ballads’ and ‘Poems, in Two Volumes’’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Cambridge, 2003), 38.

² William Hazlitt, ‘My first Acquaintance with Poets’ in *William Hazlitt: Selected Writings* ed. Jon Cook (Oxford, 1991), 223.

³ Hazlitt, ‘My First Acquaintance’, 223.

⁴ Letter to Wordsworth, 6 August, 1802. Quoted in Mary Gordon, ‘Christopher North’: *A Memoir of John Wilson*, (2 vols; Edinburgh, 1862), I, 38-48. Also quoted in John Beer, ‘The Unity of *Lyrical Ballads*’, in *1800: The New Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Nicola Trott and Seamus Perry (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 9.

⁵ Letter to Wordsworth, 6 August, 1803. Quoted in John E. Jordan, *De Quincey to Wordsworth: A Biography of a Relationship* (California, 1962), 33-34. Also quoted in Beer, ‘The Unity of LB’, 9.

⁶ *Lyrical Ballads 1798* ed.W. J. B. Owen, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1969), 3.

⁷ E. Legouis, ‘Some Remarks on the Composition of the Lyrical Ballads of 1798’, in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Studies in Honor of George McLean Harper*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Princeton, 1939).

the later editions ‘appeared rather the interpolation of heterogeneous matter.’⁸ In addition to its contents and ‘assemblage’ there remain other puzzles: its joint authorship; its authors’ insistence on it being published anonymously; its catch-all title, which has been variously interpreted as oxymoron, tautology, or as heralding a new hybrid genre of verse. But *Lyrical Ballads* is not even its title. Its full title is, of course, *Lyrical Ballads with a Few Other Poems*, which seems disarmingly casual for such a historically significant volume and at variance with the pugnacious polemic of the *Advertisement*, which gives such a misleading picture of the volume as a carefully planned experiment.

There have been many attempts to try to make sense of the volume as a whole and to defend it from the charge of incongruity and randomness, starting with the authors themselves. In what has been called, ‘One of the most surprising things that has ever been said about the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*,’⁹ Coleridge claimed in the letter of late May 1798 to Joseph Cottle setting out his final conception of the proposed volume, that it was ‘one work, in kind tho’ not in degree, as an Ode is one work-and that our different poems are as stanzas’ (CL I 412). This characteristically Coleridgean claim for an underlying unity behind apparent diversity was followed by Wordsworth’s claims in the 1798 *Advertisement* and the later *Prefaces* for a unity which rested on the poems as ‘experiments’ in the rejection of eighteenth-century poetic diction. Much later still, the ageing memories of Coleridge and Wordsworth claimed a unity for the volume deriving from a neat division of labour and subject matter. Coleridge was to write on ‘persons and characters supernatural’, while Wordsworth would write about ‘subjects chosen from ordinary life’ (BL II 8), claims which have long since been recognised as fundamentally misleading.¹⁰ More recently, grounds for the 1798 volume’s unity have come to rest on its intellectual contexts, the shared excitement and the free exchange of ideas between the two writers, who both shared a disillusionment with purely political solutions to problems in the human condition and found in the combination of Coleridge’s Unitarian-inspired sense of the One Life and Wordsworth’s instinctive response to Nature an answer, albeit temporary, to their needs.¹¹ This is much surer ground, although it demands a familiarity with the contexts and the ability to read behind and beneath the sometimes deceptively simple surface of the texts themselves to discern the complex web of connections between them. However, it is fairly clear, for example, that the first and last poems of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, in spite of sharp discrepancies in genre, diction, tone and subject matter, indeed in virtually all specifically literary respects, nevertheless share a common vision: that, somehow, the world of appearances is not all there is and that behind the puzzling and disturbing world of the Mariner lies a sense of the possibility of the

⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton and Routledge, 1983), vol II, 8.

⁹ Beer, ‘The Unity of LB’, 6.

¹⁰ See, for example, Mark L. Reed, ‘Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the “Plan” of the Lyrical Ballads’, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, xxiv, 1964-5 238-53

¹¹ See Beer, ‘The Unity of LB’ and, earlier, Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity* (London, 1969), 184-232.

interconnectedness of all life revealed through occasional, albeit transitory, glimpses of 'happy living things.' And that, whereas in *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* one hears always 'the still, sad music of humanity', one also is made aware 'Of something far more deeply interfused'.

This argument has the great advantage of not making the kind of grandiose claims for unity into which Coleridge was drawn in the letter to Cottle (CL I 412), and it can also acknowledge the fault-lines between the two writers, which were ultimately to lead to the breaking up of the volume in the subsequent editions of 1800 and after.¹² However, there is a further, very different approach to making sense of the volume's 'strangeness and awkwardness', not by looking behind and beyond the texts, but by considering the materiality of the 1798 volume. By examining its complex production history; the order, composition and arrangement of the individual poems; its design, typography and production values we find that, in spite of the improvisational nature of its final coming together, it possesses, if not a unity, then an overall integrity. In other words the intellectual, poetic and, what might be termed the cultural integrity of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* is expressed in the material form of the volume itself.

In order to begin to make sense of the volume, it may help to think of the 1798 edition as a kind of palimpsest, overwriting earlier cherished literary projects, bright ideas which came to nothing, cancelled poems and late substitutions. Vestigial remains of some of these earlier projects and proposals for publications by Cottle during the year 1797-98 can still be glimpsed, for example in the two fragments from Coleridge's tragedy and in the segment from *Salisbury Plain* called *The Female Vagrant*, both of which Cottle remained keen to publish until the last moment. Indeed, if we confine ourselves to a careful examination of the contemporary evidence, mainly in the form of letters, and try as far as possible to ignore the later recollections of those involved, it becomes clear how very late it was that the numerous ideas and proposals for a publication or publications by one or both writers suddenly crystallised into a definite form, a process occurring only in late May 1798 immediately following Cottle's visit to the Quantocks at the invitation of Wordsworth.

But before we look in detail at this final stage, it is important to remind ourselves of some key contexts surrounding it. The first and most important is of course the passionate friendship of Wordsworth, Dorothy and Coleridge, stemming from his Racedown visit in spring 1797. It is the complex dynamics of this relationship and the shared intellectual excitement which derived from it, which underpin the joint publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, a relationship which was based initially on what Coleridge acknowledged as his characteristic 'vice...a precipitance in praise' (CL I 221), but from which Wordsworth took not just moral support but the intellectual framework for his work at the time.

The second context is provide by the numerous literary projects and works

¹² See Beer, 'The Unity of *LB*'.

in progress which jostled for attention and were considered at various stages of the Alfoxden year as candidates for publication from which, as we shall see, the *Lyrical Ballads* somewhat surprisingly emerged as victor. Indeed, it was regarded by Coleridge and Wordsworth as something of a stop-gap volume. It was only one among many possible outcomes of what is sometimes called, misleadingly, 'the year of the *Lyrical Ballads*'. All sorts of other projects were considered both for single and for joint publication by Cottle and some of these other literary projects were of far more importance to both writers at the time than any of the poems which eventually made up *Lyrical Ballads* with the single exception of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which was consistently seen, by Coleridge at least, as central to any planned publication.

In addition to their friendship and their various literary projects, material factors need also to be kept in mind. The first is money, or the lack of it: 'those two giants yclept bread and cheese' (CL I 227). The fact is, that for most of the year both Wordsworth and Coleridge were chronically short of funds. At one time they both hoped that their tragedies would be commercial propositions and the desire to raise funds was, we know, a major factor in the original joint planning of *The Rime*. The Wedgwood annuity eventually relieved Coleridge of immediate financial anxiety, but Wordsworth remained very short of money, and *Lyrical Ballads* was put together and published above all to finance Wordsworth's German trip. As he later bitterly complained, writing to Cottle in 1799 in response to Southey's harsh review, 'He knew that I published these poems for money and money alone. He knew that money was of importance to me.'¹³ Behind the wounded tone of this remark lies not financial greed but financial need; money was important to him for a very specific project: the German tour with Coleridge.

A further related factor is the non-renewal of the Alfoxden lease. The annual lease was almost certainly never going to be renewed after the scandal surrounding Thelwall's visit to Somerset just after the Wordsworths took up residency. Although they did not receive confirmation of this until the spring, it was the deadline of having to quit Alfoxden Park by July 1798 along with the consequent plan for the German tour, that provided the immediate impetus for the publication of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that Joseph Cottle is intrinsic to any discussion of the publication of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*. Traditionally, scholars have tended to treat him somewhat patronisingly and as something of a joke. If Coleridge thought he had 'a smack of Hamlet' in him, then Cottle was his Prufrock:

Deferential, glad to be of use,
 Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
 Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
 At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—.¹⁴

¹³ *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787-1805*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd edition, rev. Chester Shaver (Oxford, 1967), 267-8.

¹⁴ T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London, 1969), 16.

In this, they have followed in the tradition of the mockery of Cottle and his verse epics in which Southey, Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth all indulged at various times behind his back. However, this view of Cottle is very limited. *Lyrical Ballads* was, as he implied in *Early Recollections*, a characteristic product of his bookshop at 5, Wine Street, Bristol. It was in fact the culmination and final flowering of the West Country radicalism of all three young men, each of whom subsequently set off in a new direction.

It is worth remembering that when Coleridge first met Cottle on his arrival in Bristol in Aug 1794, Cottle immediately offered to publish his work and offered his support. At that time he had been active in Bristol as a bookseller for three years. His shop had prospered and he had soon been able to give tangible expression to his non-conformist and radical sympathies in the form of generous charitable donations and projects. He put Coleridge in touch with Baptist and radical circles in Bristol and gave active and practical support to Coleridge's speeches and pamphlets on the key radical issues of the day. Cottle, deeply rooted in Bristol, was a young man of energy and integrity with radical political and dissenting religious convictions of his own which coincided with Coleridge's and, to a lesser extent, with Wordsworth's.

Furthermore, he had literary ambitions, not just for himself, but for his native Bristol, which he saw as a cultural and commercial centre in opposition to London, the home of Pitt's government. The very titles of his own works indicate this idea of the West Country as a kind of separate, alternative kingdom to London.¹⁵ These include: *Malvern Hills*, *The Fall of Cambria*, *Dartmoor* and *Alfred*, the epic in twenty-four books which caused such mirth among his protégés. His bookshop and his own writing and publishing ventures were all part of a distinctively Bristolian and West Country dissenting and radical culture and Southey, Coleridge, Lamb and Wordsworth were all enrolled by him in the same cause. Thus it should be remembered in any discussion of the publication of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* that each of the three young men involved had their own ambitions and agendas while sharing basic interests and values. It was not the case that Cottle was delighted merely to have the privilege of associating with such geniuses as Coleridge and Wordsworth, both of whom had had the benefit of an education superior to his own, nor was he driven by narrow mercenary interests. It was more complicated than that; he saw himself partly as their patron and partly as their friend, but with a better head for business than either of them. This mixture of roles was characteristic of eighteenth-century booksellers, as can be seen, for example, in Joseph Johnson's care for Mary Wollstonecraft for whom he provided practical and financial assistance in addition to literary commissions. However, in the case of Coleridge and Cottle, such a relationship could be uneasy. As Coleridge wrote in 1796, 'I feel what I owe you-& independently of this I love you as a friend-Indeed so much that I regret, seriously regret, that

¹⁵ See, especially, Richard Cronin, 'Joseph Cottle and West Country Romanticism' and chapters by Paul Cheshire, Timothy Whelan, Peter Kitson and Anthony John Harding in *English Romantic Writers and the West Country*, ed. Nicholas Roe (London, 2010).

you have been my Copy-holder...' (CL I 186). Indeed this tension arising from role-confusion is evident in their entire relationship and is very marked in Cottle's account of Coleridge in *Early Recollections*. It can certainly be detected below the surface in their correspondence over what became *Lyrical Ballads*.

Having sketched in some important contexts, it is time to try to give a clear account of the sometimes tangled production history of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* in which one can see how the competing interests of the three young men jostle for ascendancy.¹⁶ Financial pressures, the Alfoxden lease and the impending German tour all exert their influence from outside. Set against these are Wordsworth's and Coleridge's shared intellectual excitement and the creative renewal springing from their friendship, reading and conversations together during the year. In addition both writers were concerned to retain control of their public literary reputation in the teeth of Cottle's own ambitions as a bookseller and, above all, his passionate desire to add Wordsworth to his stable of new young writers, a desire which was founded on his early admiration of *Salisbury Plain* and subsequent admiration of *The Ruined Cottage*, both of which he went on hoping to publish right up until May 1798. An examination of the production history makes clear how very late in the day *Lyrical Ballads* emerged, fortuitously almost, after myriad other proposals and stalled projects had fallen by the wayside.

At Racedown, it was the two tragedies and the poem which became known as *The Ruined Cottage* which were the focus of attention. The idea of writing something substantial together first surfaced in relation to *The Wanderings of Cain* in the first of the two walking tours in the autumn of 1797. This plan quickly stalled. They soon tried again on that famous walking tour, their second in a month, which began rather late in the winter afternoon of Monday 13 November 1797, so vividly recalled by Dorothy and often referred to as the genesis of *Lyrical Ballads*:

'...we set out last Monday evening at about half past four. The evening was dark and cloudy: we went eight miles, William and Coleridge employing themselves in laying the plan of a ballad, to be published with some pieces of William's.'¹⁷

This ballad is almost certainly *The Rime* but these 'other pieces of William's' are not likely to refer to any of the poems which later figured in *Lyrical Ballads*, most of which had not yet been written or thought of, but to *The Ruined Cottage* and *Salisbury Plain*, substantial narrative poems with which Cottle was familiar and which he wanted to publish.¹⁸

By 13 December both tragedies had finally been rejected for production in

¹⁶ For summaries of the lead-up to publication, see the Introductions to *Lyrical Ballads 1798*, ed. WJ.B.Owen (Oxford, 1969), vii-xxxv, and *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Cornell, 1992), 3-33.

¹⁷ EY, 194.

¹⁸ Cottle had long wanted to publish *Salisbury Plain*. See Robert Woof, 'Wordsworth and Coleridge: Some Early Matters', in Jonathan Wordsworth (ed.) *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies* (Cornell, 1970), 76-91.

London, bringing to an end the young writers' dreams of a successful run in the commercial theatre, which would have relieved them from financial anxiety. Money now became an urgent issue, so urgent that Coleridge in desperation on Jan 6 proposed selling off *The Rime* for £5.00 to the *Monthly Magazine*, which would of course have made the later *Lyrical Ballads* impossible. Even after he had accepted the Wedgwood annuity, which, according to Hazlitt, Coleridge seemed to make up his mind about 'in the act of tying on one of his shoes', Coleridge was not out of the financial woods.¹⁹ He still owed money and it took weeks for the annuity to be set up and administered. Hence the note of high anxiety in the rather confused letter of 18 February. (CL I 386-7). In this letter there is no mention of Wordsworth and several of the works which later were to appear in *Lyrical Ballads* are put forward for publication immediately under his own name alone. He offers Cottle two proposals: the first was to publish a new third edition of his Poems in one volume, dropping some works from the 1797 edition and inserting 1,500 lines of unpublished new material including *The Destiny of Nations*, the 340 line version of *The Rime* and the same two fragments of *Osorio* which were later to appear in *Lyrical Ballads*. An alternative idea was to add a further volume to the second edition of his poems by printing the whole of *Osorio*, *The Destiny of Nations* and the 340 line version of *The Rime*.

Meanwhile, Wordsworth had become deeply engrossed in *The Recluse*, the enormously ambitious epic project which was to be a philosophic poem on 'Nature, Man and Society', which came to dominate the whole of his poetic life. Between Jan and the beginning of March he had already completed 1,300 lines. However, at this time he received formal notice that the Alfoxden lease would not be renewed. With the July deadline for quitting fast approaching, he was open to suggestions about what to do next. It was at this moment that Coleridge's long-held ambition to study in Germany seemed suddenly less fantastical. What if they went together? They could do it provided that they could lay their hands on a modest amount of money. *The Recluse* was of no use in raising funds; it was a long-term project which would now have to be set aside in favour of something more immediately commercial.

A proposed third edition of Coleridge's poems is still in the air in the letter to Cottle of 13 March (CL I 399), although by this time Coleridge had realised that the business was beginning to run into financial difficulties: 'I think it would answer you in a pecuniary way to print the third edition humbly and cheaply' (CL I 391). However, now for the first time Coleridge begins to act as an intermediary between Wordsworth and Cottle, playing the role of literary agent. And the reason for this is that Wordsworth is suddenly thinking of ways to raise cash for Germany. 'I am requested by Wordsworth to put the following questions', writes Coleridge (CL I 399). In a business-like, somewhat perfunctory letter, entirely devoted to detailed proposals concerning numbers of lines, sums of money and deadlines, we see Coleridge in the role of the

¹⁹ 'My first Acquaintance', 217.

hard-headed professional writer; money is the dominant motive, yet he is also sensitive to Cottle's now precarious business situation, 'What could you *conveniently* and *prudently*, and what *would* you, give...' (CL I 399). Two offers are on the table: either a single joint volume consisting of their two tragedies with notes, or a volume under Wordsworth's name alone which would consist of *The Ruined Cottage* and *Salisbury Plain* with a few other unspecified shorter poems.

In early April Coleridge mollified his tone somewhat in a carefully worded letter which skilfully balances business with friendship. In this letter he tells Cottle that they no longer wished to publish their tragedies, but only the Wordsworth volume for 30 guineas to be paid in the last two weeks of July, the date of Wordsworth's notice to quit. 'We both regard the publication of our Tragedies as an evil...It is not impossible but that in happier times, they may be brought forward on the stage...' (CL I 402). They do not want to 'throw away this chance for a mere trifle...' (CL I 402). The tone of this letter suggests that Coleridge was treading very softly and was careful to draw a clear distinction between Cottle's role 'merely as a bookseller' and as a friend. He urges him to be careful not to commit himself to paying any more for the projected Wordsworth volume than he can afford, 'So I entreat you, again and again...consider yourself only.'

But now on 12th April there is a significant new development when Wordsworth himself approaches Cottle directly, referring for the first time to the new, shorter poems he had begun to write very rapidly from the beginning of March and which he would go on producing at an astonishing rate until the end of May.²⁰ These poems were not for *The Recluse* but were fresh, new lyrics and narratives which were eventually to make up much of *Lyrical Ballads*. This sudden outpouring cannot easily be accounted for. It seems to be associated with the fact that *The Recluse* project had temporarily stalled or been put aside and that he felt a sudden sense of liberation as a result. The move from blank verse to short rhymed stanzas perhaps contributed to this sense of freedom. Dorothy had written on 5 March that 'His faculties seem to expand every day, he composes with much more facility than he did, as to the *mechanism* of poetry, and his ideas flow faster than he can express them.'²¹ Whatever the reason, Wordsworth writes soon to Cottle 'You will be pleased to hear that I have gone on very rapidly adding to my stock of poetry. Do come and let me read it to you, under the old trees in the park.'²²

Wordsworth is now beginning to make the running himself. In his letter of 9 May he starts by dealing with *Salisbury Plain* in which Cottle had been interested for so long. 'I am determined to finish it, and equally so that You shall publish.' However, he then broaches something else: 'I have lately been busy about another plan which I do not wish to mention till I see you; let this

²⁰ EY, 215.

²¹ EY, 200.

²² EY, 215.

be *very, very* soon.²³ The conspiratorial tone of this allusion to ‘another plan’ is, almost certainly, the first definite reference to a completely new publishing project in which the new shorter poems would feature rather than the familiar items such as *Salisbury Plain*, *The Ruined Cottage* and *The Borderers*. *Lyrical Ballads* is beginning to take definite shape and it is striking that it is Wordsworth who is now driving the project rather than Coleridge.

Events now move rapidly. Hazlitt arrives in Stowey on 20 May and walks with Coleridge to Alfoxden, where Coleridge reads to him from the manuscript versions of the most important narrative poems of *Lyrical Ballads* such as *The Idiot Boy* and *The Thorn*. Then Wordsworth, in his striped pantaloons, accompanied by Cottle arrives a couple of days later from Bristol, and Wordsworth reads *Peter Bell* aloud under the trees in front of Alfoxden House and Hazlitt and he, sometime later, have the metaphysical argument which gives rise to *Expostulation and Reply* and *The Tables Turned*.²⁴ However, as far as the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* is concerned, the key event may be the excursion made by Cottle, Wordsworth and Coleridge to The Valley of Stones, during which detailed discussions about the new book or books took place. Naturally we have no record of their conversation. However, we can infer the key issues which emerged and the disagreements still to be resolved by examining the single most reliable document of all about the ideas and competing interests surrounding the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. This is the letter Coleridge wrote to Cottle in late May, or very early June, immediately after the latter had left for Bristol, taking with him for printing the manuscripts of *The Rime* and, probably, all the other poems in *Lyrical Ballads* apart from *Tintern Abbey* and, possibly, *Expostulation and Reply* and *The Tables Turned*. It gives the clearest picture we have of the state of play at the time *Lyrical Ballads* suddenly crystallises into a definite proposal.

It is a sprightly and assertive performance. It is as if Coleridge is swiftly tying up the loose ends and, in resuming his role as professional author, is reasserting a firm control over the book in its final stages as if he feels it had begun to slip away from him. The letter, however, although signed by Coleridge, was definitely written with Wordsworth metaphorically and literally looking over his shoulder. We know this because half-way through Wordsworth actually seizes the pen from Coleridge and scribbles a line to Cottle about the typography. ‘Wordsworth and I have *maturely weigh’d* your proposal’, Coleridge begins somewhat pompously, ‘& this is our answer-’ (CL I 411). First, he rejects a proposal which had been in the air for some time. This was to publish a first edition of Wordsworth’s poems in two volumes. This cherished project of Cottle’s is dismissed in no uncertain fashion:

W. would not object to the publishing of *Peter Bell* or the *Salisbury Plain*, singly; but to the publishing of *his poems* in two volumes he is

²³ EY, 218.

²⁴ For a discussion as to the nature of this argument, see Duncan Wu, ‘The Road to Nether Stowey’, *The Coleridge Bulletin*, NS 23, Spring 2004, 22–41.

decisively repugnant and oppugnant-' (CL I 411).

The reason offered is that 'He (Wordsworth) deems that they would want variety &c &c' (CL I 411). Coleridge goes on to say that a volume under his own name alone would suffer even more from the same fault. Both by this time are evidently united in their desire to publish a joint volume against Cottle's lingering ambition to be the first to publish Wordsworth's poems under his name alone. Coleridge then offers his elaborate, surprising and, ultimately unconvincing case for joint authorship in language so abstract that it is impossible not to feel that he is attempting to forestall criticism by a kind of philosophical smokescreen. A joint volume would, he said, have a profound unity of its own. 'We deem that the volumes offered to you are to a certain degree *one work*, in *kind tho' not in degree*, as an Ode is one work-& that our different poems are as stanzas, good relatively rather than absolutely...' (CL I 411). Coleridge is here drawing upon two separate discourses: that of Aristotelian philosophy with its distinction between the qualitative as opposed to the quantitative differences of a substance, and that of the classical taxonomy of poetic genres, which includes the Ode. He repeats the scholastic distinction for emphasis, as if forestalling objections as to the wildly differing lengths of the poems to be included in the volume, 'Mark you, I say *in kind tho' not in degree*' (CL I 411). Cottle's proposal for a dedication to the Wedgwoods is also dismissed as 'indelicate and unmeaning.' 'Indelicate', because of the implied reference to the annuity, and 'unmeaning' because the volume under consideration is not considered by Coleridge to be nearly substantial enough to repay the moral obligation incurred by acceptance of the annuity. The question of anonymous publication, which clearly Cottle still opposed, is forcefully defended on two grounds; firstly, plenty of other 'most popular works' were published anonymously; and secondly the odium he had recently attracted from *The Anti-Jacobin* was a positive deterrent: 'Wordsworth's name is nothing-to a large number of persons mine *stinks*.' Coleridge sums up by re-emphasising the primacy of the *The Rime* as the foundation stone of the whole project: 'However, I waive all *reasoning*, and simply state it as an unaltered opinion, that you should proceed as before, with the ancient Mariner.' (CL I 411).

It is noticeable that Coleridge makes no reference to the subsequently famous title of the volume(s), a title which Cottle later asserts had been agreed on during his visit in late May. Much ink has been spilt over its significance, but two simple points can be made. The first is that the title of a volume of verse published at the time was part of what we would now call the marketing strategy and was not infrequently arrived at by negotiation between bookseller and poet.²⁵ Thus, although we shall never know which of them came up with the term, *Lyrical Ballads*, it could have been Cottle's idea rather than Wordsworth's or Coleridge's. The second point is that, although it may not be

²⁵ See the correspondence between John Clare and his publisher, John Taylor, over the title of *The Village Minstrel*, quoted in Zachary Leader, 'Lyrical Ballads, the Title Revisited', in Trott and Perry, *1800: The New LB*, 23.

possible to determine the precise significance of the term, it clearly meant something or else the subtitle would surely have been unnecessary. The full title is of course, *Lyrical Ballads with A Few Other Poems* and in this long title there is a clear distinction explicitly drawn between those poems which are 'lyrical ballads' and those 'few other poems' which are not, presumably because they do not meet the required criteria.

Thus, we can fairly assume that the title meant something, but what? There is broad agreement as to what a ballad was understood to be at the time and also what the term 'lyrical' suggested. However, it is the hybrid term 'lyrical ballads' which has had critics scratching their heads. Although, as Robert Mayo pointed out, by this time virtually anything could be considered a ballad,²⁶ the term definitely had the following associations: it was a story or 'tale' often of a sensational nature; it was traditionally sung to a musical accompaniment; it was written in a certain metre, which Coleridge referred to as 'common ballad metre'; it was impersonal and objective rather than personal and subjective, and in the words of the 1797 edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, it was 'adapted to the capacity of the lower classes'. The term 'lyrical' on the other hand is traditionally associated with something sophisticated, song-like and expressive of the singer's feelings. Ruskin later defined it unequivocally in these terms: 'lyric poetry is the expression by the poet of his own feelings.'²⁷ The hybrid, portmanteau term 'lyrical ballads' thus manages simultaneously to be both tautology, because both are sung, and oxymoron, because one is objective and popular while the other is subjective and sophisticated. The title worried some critics at the time: 'The title of the poems is in some degree objectionable', snorted John Stoddart, writing of the 1800 edition, 'for what Ballads are not lyrical?'²⁸ However, it is useful to keep in mind that *The Rime*, unequivocally a ballad, was the one constant in the circuitous route to the final version of *Lyrical Ballads*. It was the real cornerstone of the volume, in spite of Wordsworth's later reservations about the poem, and most of the other poems in the 1798 volume either tell stories in a variety of verse forms or else are lyrics and dialogue poems in simple four-line stanzas reminiscent of simple ballad metre. In all there are, perhaps, twelve narrative poems, three lyrics often using the word 'Lines' in the title and four dialogue poems totalling nineteen. This leaves four unaccounted for, the 'Few Other Poems' of the casual sounding subtitle. These are: *The Nightingale*, a late insertion in place of *Lentil*; *Lines Written Near Richmond*, a hodge-podge of two poems long used as album pieces; *Old Man travelling*, subtitled *a sketch*, and *Tintern Abbey*, which is clearly an Ode.

As we have seen, the decision to make the book was a late one, and there remains a sort of provisional or ad hoc quality about it, which helps give it its characteristic freshness, before the integrity of the 1798 edition is disrupted by its subsequent mutations in 1800, 1802 and 1805. Emile Legouis, however,

²⁶ Robert Mayo, 'The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*,' *PMLA* 69 (1954), 486-522.

²⁷ John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera* (1873).

²⁸ Unsigned review, *British Critic*, February 1801, vii, 131n.

was surely wrong when he termed the 1798 edition 'a somewhat random and incongruous assemblage of short poems'.²⁹ The fact is that both poets at all times were extremely conscious of all aspects of publishing and printing and habitually took an active interest at all stages, influencing the contents, the title, and the typography and production values of their published works. In spite of Coleridge's subsequent disenchantment with what he later rather disparagingly called 'the trade', at this early stage of his career he had already been particularly active in supervising two volumes of his own through the press, as is attested by his detailed instructions to Cottle in the correspondence concerning both his 1796 and 1797 volumes. The matter of order and arrangement especially concerned him. As James Averill has shown,³⁰ Coleridge arranged his poems carefully so as to structure the reader's experience. Thus in 1796 he starts with *Monody on the Death of Thomas Chatterton*, which was not only his first poem published in book form but also announces himself as the youthful heir to Chatterton the poet, 'the marvellous boy'. The volume's most ambitious poem, *Religious Musings* appears at the end. This concern for beginnings and endings returns in *Lyrical Ballads*.

Wordsworth of course had published nothing at all for five years prior to *Lyrical Ballads*. However, there is clear evidence that he was closely concerned with the printing and publishing of this book. As Dorothy writes, 'We leave Alfoxden in three weeks, ... we are going to take lodgings for a short time in the neighbourhood of Bristol. William has some poems in the Bristol press, and he wishes to superintend the printing of them' (EL 219). During this time he wrote *Tintern Abbey* and also the *Advertisement*, according to bibliographical evidence,³¹ and it is reasonable to conjecture that it was he rather than Coleridge who managed the order and arrangement of the poems. In fact, throughout his career he showed a particular care in the arrangement and disposition of his poems within volumes. This is demonstrated very clearly in the way in which he later broke up *Lyrical Ballads* for later editions and made a wholesale rearrangement of his poems under his own idiosyncratic headings in the 1815 edition of his poems, a pattern which he maintained in all subsequent editions of his work.

The Rime is, then, the cornerstone of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*. It is also a highly appropriate opening poem. Firstly, in its advancement and questioning of the Unitarian vision of the One Life at the heart of the poem, most clearly in the Water snakes episode, it provides a philosophical context for the whole volume. Secondly, it is a poem about poetry in the sense that it is a poem about a man telling a story rather than a simple story itself. The framing device of the wedding guest 'who can not chuse but hear' and who turns away at the

²⁹ E. Legouis, 'Some Remarks on the Composition of the LB 1798', in *Studies in Honor of George McLean Harper*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Princeton, 1939).

³⁰ James H. Averill, 'The Shape of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798)', *Philological Quarterly*, 60:3 (1981: Summer), 387-407.

³¹ The 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* has attracted much scholarly attention from a bibliographical point of view. Classic studies include: D.F. Foxon, 'The Printing of *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798', *The Library*, vol. 9, 4 (1954), and Mark L. Reed, 'The First Title-page of *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798', *Studies in Bibliography*, Vol. 51, (1998), pp. 230-240. Particularly helpful for the preparation of this article has been Alan D. Boehm, 'The 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* and the Poetics of Late Eighteenth-Century Book Production', *ELH*, Vol. 63, No 2 (Summer, 1996), 453-487.

end ruminating on what he has heard, is in a similar position to the reader of *Lyrical Ballads*. James Averill wittily refers to this sorting out into sheep and goats at the opening of *The Rime*, as ‘the mathematics of readership’.³² Just as only one of three was chosen by the Mariner to hear his tale so perhaps only one of three potential readers is fitted to read *Lyrical Ballads*. Certainly, Wordsworth’s *Advertisement* reinforces this sense that *Lyrical Ballads* is not for everyone in spite of its inclusive subject matter. Wordsworth’s performance here is pure sophistry and an example of an eighteenth-century century Catch-22. It turns out that if you dislike the volume it is your fault. ‘Readers of superior judgement’, he writes, by which he means those who merely think they are of superior judgement, may disapprove of the style and diction. However, really educated readers, he continues, that is, those who are ‘more conversant with our elder writers’ and are familiar with the best writers ‘in modern times’ and who have thus taken the time and trouble to acquire what he calls ‘an accurate taste in poetry’ will make ‘fewer complaints’. Thus readers who complain at its subject matter and diction reveal only their own ignorance and lack of taste. Wordsworth’s muse may be a levelling one as Hazlitt later claimed,³³ but his imagined audience on the evidence of the *Advertisement* was the discerning few, such as the young John Wilson and de Quincey, rather than the fashionable reader of merely conventional tastes.

As far as the arrangement of poems within the volume is concerned, the equitable distribution of the two authors’ works might have been the first priority. The decision to start the volume with a nearly unbroken sequence of poems by Coleridge is obviously not a matter of chance; 849 out of the opening 909 lines are his. This is then followed by a run of nine Wordsworth poems totalling 891 lines. Coleridge’s *The Dungeon*, his fourth and final contribution, is then used as a spacer before the long sequence of Wordsworth poems totalling 970 lines, which closes the volume. Perhaps he felt Coleridge required the courtesy of appearing first in view of his leading role in relations with Cottle. Perhaps the primacy of *The Rime* was a determining factor or perhaps they both wished to retain their separate identities behind the mask of anonymity. The careful placing of the longest poems was perhaps the second consideration. The four longest poems are roughly equally spaced throughout the volume of nearly 3,000 lines with *The Rime* and *The Idiot Boy* kept well apart. Some poems form obvious pairs such as the dialogue poems. Thus *Expostulation and Reply* is followed by *The Tables Turned*, and *Anecdote for Fathers* is followed by *We are Seven*. But the significance of the arrangement of the rest is more elusive. Some are connected by theme. Hence *The Female Vagrant* is paired with *Goody Blake*, another poem about a woman on the margins of society and *The Mad Mother* is paired with *The Idiot Boy*, both poems about maternal love. Other poems gain by juxtaposition and here we go back to Coleridge’s letter in which he uses the Ode as an analogue for the kind of unity found in the volume as a whole, which depends on an underlying commonality

³² James H. Averill, ‘The Shape of *LB*’, 392.

³³ In ‘Mr Wordsworth’ from ‘The Spirit of the Age’ (1825), *Hazlitt: Selected Writings*, 348.

of feeling and intention behind the individual poems or stanzas rather than a strict formal logic. A significant feature of the Ode is its abrupt transitions. Perhaps the transition from *Lines written at a small distance* to *Simon Lee* and from *Lines written in early spring* to *The Thorn* would be examples. In both, a 'credal' statement, perhaps too pat, at the end of the first is then followed by a disturbing real-life example which subverts the moral aphorism. To sum up, whereas it can not be claimed that the placing of each poem is determined by some commanding theory, there is clear evidence of a thoughtful and deliberate arrangement of the poems throughout volume so as to structure the reader's experience of it.

As we have seen, the immediate motivation for choosing *Lyrical Ballads* over other potential publishing projects was money. However, as has already been demonstrated, this did not mean that they did not care about the book or that it was a haphazard and perfunctory publication. The final stages from manuscript to publication, including typography and design, were carefully calculated to make a product which would appeal to certain kinds of readers and to convey certain aesthetic and political ideas. Cottle was, as we have seen, a bookseller with ambitions to contribute something valuable to the literary culture of his native Bristol, and being a man of dissenting principles in religion and liberal or radical sympathies in politics, his lists of authors and books published by him reflect this.³⁴ His own literary works were also expressions of these values. He, like Joseph Johnson, the leading radical bookseller in London, was concerned that his books would be not cheap, but affordable and therefore, with the exception of the 1796 edition of *Joan Of Arc*, a fine quarto volume, which Southey later claimed was 'the handsomest book that Bristol had ever yet sent forth'³⁵, he eschewed the contemporary fashion for ornate and elaborate printing, luxury paper and large formats. When *Lyrical Ballads* finally appeared in September 1798 it was in a print run of 500 copies in a foolscap octavo edition measuring six-and-three-quarter inches by three-and-three-quarter inches of 210 pages, simply and clearly printed in a Roman typeface on good wire-wove paper bound in plain boards. It sold for five shillings, which was about average for books sold by Cottle and well within the reach of the majority of readers.

However, it is worth looking a little more closely at the appearance of this famous book because its design and typography were deliberately shaped to express its contents. Remember that Coleridge and Wordsworth both had clear views on these matters, Coleridge suggesting in his letter to Cottle following his May visit that he could write him an 'Essay on the Metaphysics of Typography' if he had more time but that, failing that, he will simply have to follow his instructions without what he terms the 'abstruse reasons' lying behind them. (CL I 411). These instructions include the following: eighteen

³⁴ Of the fourteen works listed in the stock list at the end of the London edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, ten are literary works by Southey, Coleridge, Lamb, Lloyd and Joseph or Amos Cottle; three are religious works by John Prior Estlin and one is a medical work by Thomas Beddoes.

³⁵ See the Preface to *Joan of Arc* in *The Poetical Works of Robert Southey* (London: Longman, Green and Co, 1876), 2.

closely printed lines to a page, certainly more closely than the recently printed second edition of *Joan of Arc* which was lying on the desk in front of them as they wrote; 'equal', that is, good quality ink, and 'large margins'. Interestingly, Wordsworth can not contain himself over this matter of spacing, but grabs the pen from Coleridge and butts in, scribbling '(Oh, by all means closer! W.)' (CL I 411). They are already very aware of the style and appearance they both want, which is simplicity, legibility and modest plainness rather than the elegance and fine printing suitable for a volume destined for a gentleman's library. In fact the printing of *Lyrical Ballads* is notably plain, even in comparison with other books from Cottle's list.

A brief comparison of the title pages, typography and overall style of Coleridge's first two editions of his poems with that of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* shows clearly how deliberately plain, even austere, is its design. The 1796 *Poems on Various Subjects* has a fairly busy title page with a Latin epigraph from Statius. There are sixteen lines to a page and a mixture of fonts used, including a bold Gothic for the titles of separate sections, although there are no printers' flowers or decorations. The titles of individual poems are long and elaborately set out on the page in a variety of font sizes. It contains not only a *Preface* but eleven pages of *Notes* at the back of the volume. The 1797 *Poems* (Fig. 1.) has a decidedly grander feel with a much more elaborate title page, including the names of Lamb and Lloyd and featuring a mock-scholarly epigraph or motto in Latin specially composed by Coleridge. It also features a long dedicatory poem to his brother and a new *Preface* but no *Notes*. The font is larger than that used for the first edition and there are eighteen lines to a page. Once again there is the use of multiple fonts, but there is also extensive use of printers' flowers and decorations, which reinforces the sense of greater luxury as compared with the 1796 *Poems*. The contrast with the style and design of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* is very marked. Both the Bristol and London (Fig.2) versions of the title pages are strikingly simple and uncluttered, containing approximately a quarter of the number of characters as compared with the volume's immediate predecessor. A smaller font size is used and there is little variety of font style and no use of Gothic. Plenty of space is allowed around the short stanzas and there is no decoration and no large initial letters, but only simple double lines under the titles. There is an *Advertisement* but no notes. This homely appearance is not mainly the result of financial constraints, even if Cottle's business by this time was in trouble, but was a deliberate choice, its calculated simplicity designed expressly to appeal to the discerning reader who would read the whole work aright, not as a collection of popular ballads for the unlearned, nor as social propaganda such as was found in magazine verse, but as a sophisticated exploration of the potential of popular and seemingly simple poetic forms for complex purposes.

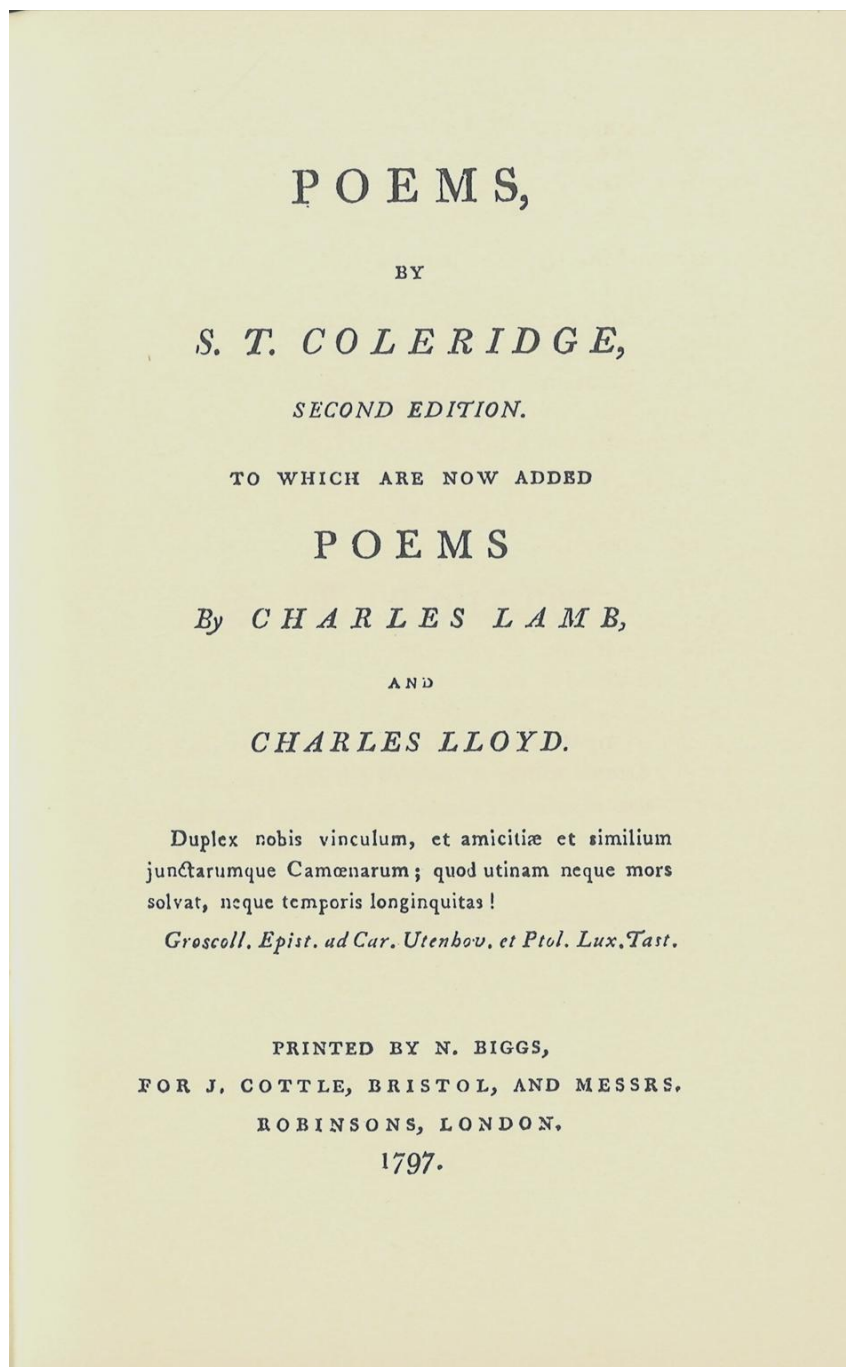


Fig. 1 The title-page of *Poems*, 1797. A translation of the motto by 'Groscollius', invented by Coleridge 'with references purposely obscure', reads as follows: 'Double is the bond which binds us—friendship, and a kindred taste in poetry. May neither death nor lapse of time dissolve it!' (See PW 1 2 1227 for further details).

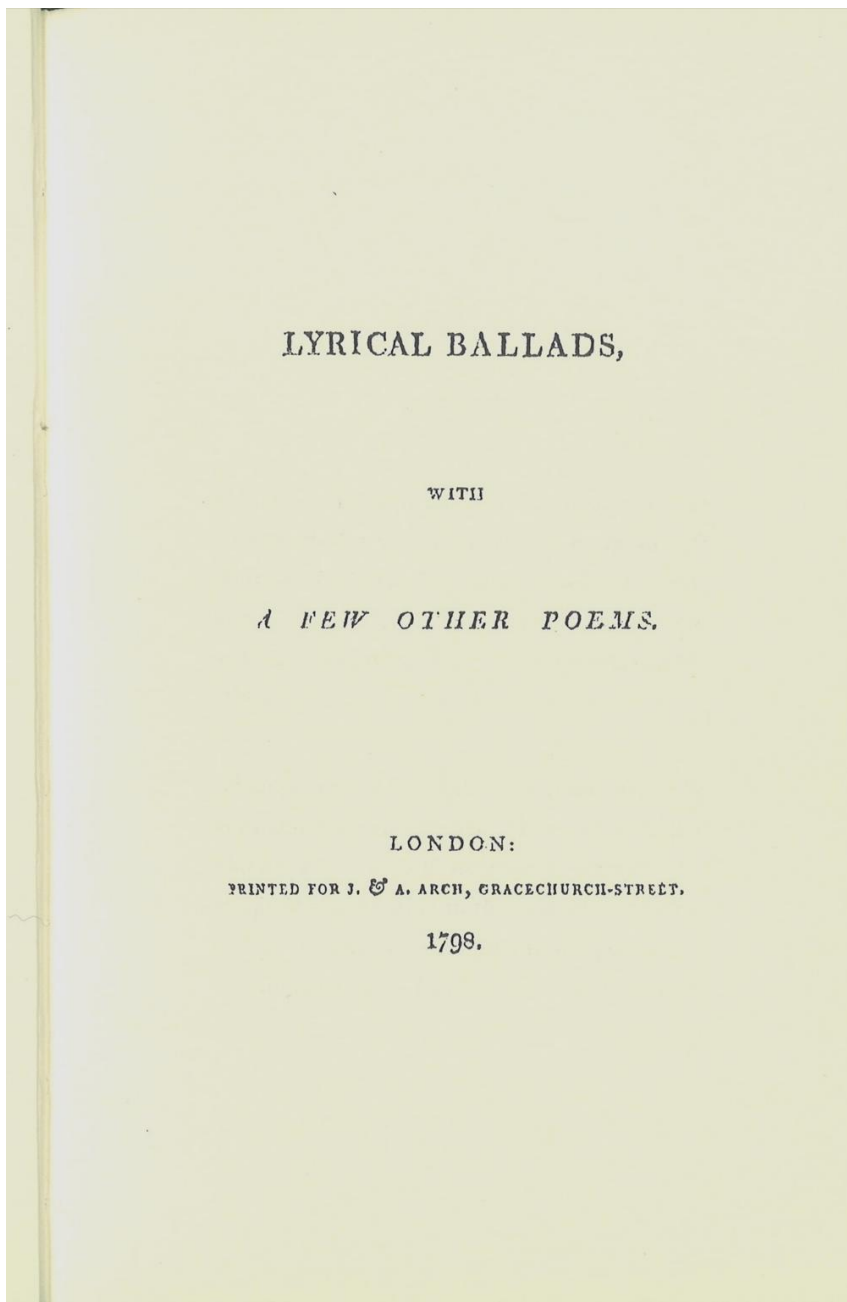


Fig. 2. The title-page of the London issue of *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798. Except for the title-page, the London issue does not differ from the Bristol issue.

In conclusion, we have examined what might be termed the material drivers of the work and we have seen how very late it emerged among a host of other possible candidates for publication. But we have also seen that behind the

seeming casualness of the long title, the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* is not, as it once seemed to Emile Legouis, 'a random and incongruous assemblage of short poems'. Not only were the poems thoughtfully selected and arranged but the volume's physical appearance was carefully designed to convey a particular aesthetic and to attract a certain readership. There is in fact an integrity about this first edition lacking in the later editions, because the nature and distribution of the contents, the book's design and production are all the manifestations of a shared culture of religious and political dissent in Bristol and the West Country in the 1790's and of Coleridge's Unitarian vision of the One Life deriving from this. The 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, therefore, holds in precarious balance a particular moment, a particular culture which soon gave way. It was in fact the last flowering of three young men's youthful literary radicalism, an end of an era. Cottle may have misremembered the timing of the book's publication, which was just before 4 October, but he was surely emotionally accurate in lending a powerful sense of closure to that event when he wrote as follows at the end of the first volume of *Early Recollections*: 'The volume of 'Lyrical Ballads' was published about Midsummer, 1798. In September of the same year, Mr Coleridge and Mr Wordsworth, left England for Germany, and I for ever quitted the business of a bookseller'.³⁶

³⁶ Joseph Cottle, *Early Recollections; Chiefly Relating to the late Samuel Taylor Coleridge during his long residence in Bristol* (London, 1837), 324.