

TOM MAYBERRY; Coleridge & Wordsworth in the West Country. (Alan Sutton
1992. 182pp £14.99)

Reviewed by Merle Gardner

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Over twenty years ago Berta Lawrence, a distinguished West Country author, entered the lists of Coleridge bibliography with *Coleridge and Wordsworth in Somerset* which presented the activities of both poets in our landscape with particular reference to the places and personalities they knew and which influenced them.

Tom Mayberry has admirably advanced the work she began, bringing the discipline of the professional county archivist to bear on the subject. None should think, however, that the dry hand of bureaucracy is apparent in his style; on the contrary, his prose is lively and often acutely expressive, and his text moves easily and swiftly through its seven chapters.

There is no doubting that Mayberry knows his Coleridge; within his chosen limits an impressive amount of information is contained in 155 highly readable pages. To some extent he has produced a condensed synthesis of the relevant material in previous biographies and other research which he has read, but there is a sense of freshness in his narrative. And narrative it is; Mayberry's sensible and accessible approach is to tell the story of Coleridge's life as it fits his West Country visits, sojourns and residence, but the main periods when he was elsewhere in England or abroad are also briefly recounted so that there is a feeling of completion in this telling of a complex tale.

All the important human influences are touched upon, with appropriate emphasis placed on the major figures of the Wordsworths, Pooles, Frickers, Wedgwoods and the small band of Pantisocrats, yet seventeen members of the Coleridge family

receive attention in varying degree and dozens of other personages are mentioned. The most important verse is sensitively, though briefly, discussed, concentrating on local references with appropriate quotations.

With a volume of this type, the importance and the number of the illustrations will persuade many prospective buyers that they can spend £14.99 (very moderate, these days) in the pursuit of edification. I count about 120 photographs, drawings, maps, documents and so on. In contrast with all other comparable Coleridge books in my experience, which have illustrations lumped together in one or more groups, the Mayberry illustrations appear at precisely the right spot in his text. This makes for very easy and satisfying progression and avoids tedious page-flipping in an effort to consider the written description of a face or location alongside the appropriate picture. So many illustrations mean that a useful number of the well-known Coleridge and Wordsworth-related paintings, engravings and drawings are available in one handy and convenient title. In addition the author includes many of his own monochrome photographs of the important locations and buildings remaining from the time of Coleridge as they appear today.

Indeed, it is mainly through his illustrations that Tom Mayberry makes some original contributions to the sum of Coleridge research. He has discovered that the Globe Inn at Nether Stowey was, in the late eighteenth century, located in the commodious building now known as the Clock House in the centre of the town. It was moved to Castle Street in 1850, so the house just above Poole House in present day Castle Street is not where the Government agent James Walsh stayed during the weeks when he was keeping an account of the doings of they imagined Jacobins and farcically mishearing S.T.C. on the subject of the philosopher Spinoza. Mayberry arranged a special survey of Coleridge Cottage, and the resulting diagram of the ground floor plan shows the remaining original structure and, in outline, the likely shape of the cottage in 1797, revealing a somewhat larger and more complex dwelling than has long been thought. Almost as importantly, he reproduces a drawing in old age of Tom Poole, Nether Stowey tanner, worthy, and Coleridge's most enduring West Country friend. Hitherto, the engraving of Poole in middle age from .Mrs Henry Sandford's 1888 biography, was long thought to be the only surviving likeness. The source of this "new" portrait is a descendant of the St. Albyn family, who leased Alfoxden to William and Dorothy Wordsworth, so its provenance is excellent, and inscriptions on the drawing make the case virtually watertight. Mr Mayberry has located and photographed the house of John Cruikshank whose dream of a spectre ship with the sun shining through its skeleton timbers was the first inspiration for *The Ancient Mariner*. Likewise, new biographical information has been

achieved, including the place and almost the exact date of Coleridge's impetuous proposal to Sarah Fricker. Finally, the long-demolished Withycombe Farm is advanced as the most likely place for the composition of *Kubla Khan*.

Appendices add a sense of comprehensiveness to works of research, and the present volume offers two: a gazetteer of the cities, towns, villages and other locations in the body of the book where the poets lived, worked and had their being, which adds further information; the second appendix gives Dorothy's diary for 1798. There are also supporting end notes and a useful index. Lord Coleridge has provided a briefly urbane foreword.

So, with story and pictures *Coleridge & Wordsworth in the West Country* is suitable for the keen poetry reader, local colourist, public library, coffee table, or for the Coleridge scholar - who will refer to it more frequently than he or she might imagine. Reliable in its authority, memorable for its style, and rather lavish in its illustration, the book is eminently suitable for the beginner and sufficiently documented for the expert.