

STC's grandson compares Derwent Coleridge with Hartley and Sara.

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(The Coleridge Bulletin New Series No 2 (Autumn 1993), pp 15-19)

There is a fascination in "found" documents, as readers of AS Byatt's *Possession* know. A copy of Eleanor Towle's 1912 book, *A Poet's Children: Hartley and Sara Coleridge* which I bought in a secondhand bookshop, contained a handwritten letter by Ernest Hartley Coleridge (son of Derwent), which makes an interesting comparison of Derwent with his brother and sister.

RICKFORD'S HILL

AYLESBURY

April 11 1912

Dear Mr Bailey Kempling

It was kind of you to send me the review - still kinder to write it. I am indeed grateful to you, for this book of Mrs Towle's, which is well done and aptly written in a sympathetic and kindly tone, has called forth some very ignorant and very unpleasant reviews - e.g. *The Times* and the *Daily News*.

I answered - and the *Times* today prints [my letter] - a wholly uncalled for. and most entirely false slur on my father - and there were other unverifiable statements which I am obliged to leave unanswered. I am most grateful to you for what you say about my father - the *Daily News* says that he [was] 'ordinary and successful' -

Now neither I nor anyone connected with him would claim him as a great original writer in verse or prose, or as the literary equal of his brother or sister, but he was to the full as intellectual, and as to his being ordinary, he was, though a man of dutiful and orderly behaviour, quite in his way as unconventional as Hartley, and

he was not very successful so far as this world's rewards are concerned - I rather should say that though he did not [decline?] he was content to go without any preferment of a lucrative kind.

Once more thank you and I am sure that my sister Christabel will also be pleased.

I am/very truly yours/ Ernest Hartley Coleridge

You see I have left Croydon

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Some literary detective work was needed to discover the background to this letter. *The Times* has a complete index, so those items were easy to find. *The Times Literary Supplement* of March 28th, 1912 carried a long and approving review of the Towle book. Its tone was generally sympathetic to Hartley Coleridge's "weaknesses", but opened with a rather waspish generalization about the Coleridges, saying they could be divided into two groups:

" the Coleridges of talent whose virtues adorned public and private stations in strict accordance with the rules prescribed by pious and respectable people; the Coleridges of genius who, in spite of their genius, somehow or other, turned out unsatisfactorily. The great examples - perhaps the only ones - of the latter class are, of course, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his son Hartley." Of Hartley, the reviewer wrote " his case...evokes compassion, and even affection, because he had no vices, only weaknesses".

The particular passage which offended Ernest Hartley was:

"The common account of Hartley is that he took to drink and consequently went to the bad. His respectable brother the prebendary said so". Justly pointing out that this passage misrepresented what. Derwent had said in his Memoir about Hartley, Ernest Hartley's reply, in the *TLS* on April 11th, 1912, added " My father outlived his brother by 30 years, and I can bear witness to the fact, that though he often spoke of him with love and admiration, no word...of condemnation or depreciation ever passed his lips. The 'Prebendary' was made of quite other stuff."

The *Daily News* review, by S K Ratcliffe, appeared on April 9th, 1912, and contained the sentence: “The third [of STC’s children], Derwent, was ordinary and successful, and became a prebendary of St Paul’s.” It was this description which Ernest Hartley was disputing in the later part of the “found” letter.

I was left with some further questions - who was Mr Bailey Kempling, and what did he say in his review, which Ernest Hartley liked? *Who was Who* revealed that William Bailey Kempling, who died in 1941, was assistant literary editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, and wrote for various periodicals. (He also published small anthologies of the verse of Hartley Coleridge and John Wilson.) I drew a blank with the periodicals, but eventually found the review, signed WB Kempling, in the *Daily Chronicle* of April 6th, 1912. It contained this paragraph:

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“On the other hand, Derwent, except to a certain few, is half-forgotten. A less dramatic figure than Hartley, partaking in nowise of the picturesque ruin, Derwent, though a poet, became the practical man of the family; an entire success, whether as churchman, preceptor or linguist (“The most accomplished linguist in England”, according to Dean Stanley, with a dozen languages at his command). Yet he was, more than by flesh and blood, one of the poet’s children, much nearer to father, brother and sister in spiritual affinity, in mind communion, . than as a rule is allowed. Would not, therefore, the present have been a happy occasion to attempt something by way of justice to Derwent’s memory, to place him, not by incidental allusion, but according to his true order of precedence and birthright as one of the poet’s children?”

Hartley [\[1\]](#) and Sara [\[2\]](#) have each had two further biographies since that of Eleanor Towle, but Kempling’s plea for a life of Derwent remains so far unanswered. There is a notice in the *DNB*, and a eulogy written just after his death by a former pupil, AM Swift [\[3\]](#). Otherwise Derwent just has a frequent, but not always sympathetically written, walking-on part in biographies of his brother and sister. He was one of a distinguished circle at Cambridge, which included Henry Nelson Coleridge, and Macaulay, the future historian. They amused themselves by writing *Knight’s Quarterly Magazine*, Derwent’s contributions being mainly poetical. The family accused him at this time of being extravagant and dandyish, which STC excused as his “caterpillarage”. However, he settled down to the life which the *Daily News* called “ordinary and successful”, being for 16 years headmaster of Helston Grammar School, and then for 23 years principal of St

Mark's teacher training college in Chelsea. At the age of 64 he accepted what might have been a retirement post as rector of Hanwell in Middlesex, but he remained active and deeply involved until he was 80, among other achievements building a new church. Those of us who admire Hartley Coleridge's writing have particular reason to be grateful to Derwent for editing the seven posthumous volumes of his brother's works (no small task in the case of the previously unpublished poems, and of the *Essays and Marginalia*, though probably much helped by Sara). His 200 page memoir of Hartley, prefixed to the poems, was loving, honest and informative, and has been the basis for all subsequent studies of Hartley.

Nevertheless, Derwent remains a somewhat shadowy figure, about whom we would like to know more - not least, exactly how he was "quite in his way as unconventional as Hartley". This is one of many reasons to look forward eagerly to Molly Lefebure's forthcoming study of all three Coleridge children.

Ernest Hartley Coleridge (1846-1920), the writer of the letter, was Derwent's youngest child. His knowledge of his uncle and aunt must have been largely through family recollections, for he cannot have met Hartley, and Sara died when he was five. He edited STC's works and letters, and also the works of Byron. In 1898 he published a small volume of his own poems [\[4\]](#), some of which show the same love and concern for the memory of his father (and also his grandfather) as does the letter. One addressed *To the River Brent* contains the verse:

And thou wouldst mingle in the dream

Of one who paced thy shore,

Mindful of that far Cumbrian stream

Whose name he loved and bore.

The idea is that the Brent, which runs past Hanwell Rectory, would recall to Derwent in his old age the River Derwent, after which he was named, and by which he played as a child at Keswick. However, this simple verse contains further skilful layers of allusion to romantic river poetry. "Mingle in the dream" reminds us that the river Derwent was also Wordsworth's "fairest of all rivers", which

loved

To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song

And ... sent a voice

That flowed along my dreams."

1850 *Prelude* 1:270

So Derwent's Lake District childhood is referred back another generation to that of Wordsworth - and perhaps, too, to that of Coleridge and the River Otter. (The corresponding passage in the 1805 *Prelude* actually quotes "my sweet birthplace" from *Frost at Midnight*, but this version would not have been known to Ernest Hartley.)

There are rewards in forgotten poetry as well as in "found" letters.

[1] E L Griggs *Hartley Coleridge: his life and work*. University of London Press, 1929. H. Hartman *Hartley Coleridge: poet's son and poet*. Oxford University Press, 1931. C E Griggs and E L Griggs *Letters of Hartley Coleridge*. Oxford University Press, 1937.

[2] E L Griggs *Coleridge fille a biography of Sara Coleridge*. Oxford University Press, 1940. B.K. Mudge *Sara Coleridge : a Victorian daughter*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989.

[3] A M Swift *Derwent Coleridge: Scholar, pastor, educator*. New York: Roper, 1883.

[4] E H Coleridge *Poems*. London and New York: John Lane, The Bodley Head.