

REVIEW: THE FALL OF ROBESPIERRE

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(*The Coleridge Bulletin* New Series No 4 (Autumn 1994), pp 60-64)

The splendid octagonal hall of Cannington College made a convincing and enhancing theatre for the World Première of "The Fall of Robespierre", performed there on July 25th, 1994, 3 days before the 200th anniversary of Robespierre's death on July 28th, 1794. Duncan Noel-Paton, Director of Drama at Christ's Hospital, and his young actors and actresses made excellent use of the small stage with its elegant flight of steps and curved balustrades, the gallery at the back of the hall, and floor of the hall itself, to draw the audience into the action and mood of the play. A tree festooned with a banner inscribed with the one word, LIBERTÉ, stood centre back stage: this and the vigour of the introductory scene left no doubt about the play's main theme and the vehemence with which it was to be conveyed.

The opening scene was lively and original, as one would expect from Duncan Noel-Paton, a director known for his skill in handling large numbers of actors and for creating strong dramatic effects. The arrival of a jostling group of actors dressed in their present-day (yet timeless) uniform of long dark—blue coat, white shirt and bands, stockings and breeches, did much to bridge the gap between then and now and gave a contemporaneous impact to the events of 1794. The discarding of the long coat to reveal garments symbolic of the French revolution pointed to the easy transition from senior schoolboy to youthful idealist fired with excitement over social upheaval. Boys at Christ's Hospital in 1794 must have taken an avid interest in the chaotic events in France: only 3 years previously Coleridge had been one of them himself, wearing the same Grecians' uniform. He was only

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21 when he and Southey wrote the play.

Lively and arresting as this opening scene was with its clever use of tableaux and mime to illustrate some of the more gruesome incidents of the Revolution, a cardinal difficulty was soon apparent. "The Fall of Robespierre" is not a play. It is easy but unfair to accuse it of failing to be something which its authors never claimed it to be. Coleridge called it a Dramatic Poem in which it was his "sole aim to imitate the impassioned and highly figurative language of the French orators and to develop the characters of the chief actors on a vast stage of horrors." It was written with prodigious speed - within 48 hours! - as a money-raising venture in aid of Pantisocracy - the unfulfilled dream which Coleridge and Southey shared of an idyllic society to be established in America. Something of the spirit which inspired the two poets to devise their ideal, egalitarian community, no doubt inspired them to distil their keen interest in the upheaval in France in this passionate Dramatic Poem. Written within a month of Robespierre's death, it shows the extent and accuracy of the poets' knowledge of the tumultuous events just across the channel. Coleridge had - he certainly claimed to have had - the greater part in its composition: had he returned to the subject later in his career he might have developed further "the characters of the chief actors on a vast stage of horrors", especially the character of Robespierre himself whose "great bad actions" made him a hypnotic leader of this bloodthirsty revolution.

This then is the problem: how to act a Dramatic Poem. Duncan Noel-Paton and his actors went for the drama rather than the poetry, but it had to be a drama of the debating chamber rather than the battle-field. Each main speaker took centre stage in turn for his share in the debate and there was plenty of movement among the rest of the cast to give the impression of an eager, bustling crowd. Occasional use of

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tableaux and mimes at crucial moments, as in the opening scene, relieved the "impassioned and highly figurative language". The protagonists were impressive in their variety, whether tall and arrogant in the long dark-blue coat like St Just, or slight and neatly dressed like Robespierre. These were good dramatic ingredients. The trouble was with the voices. Coleridge and Southey had struck a vein of rhetoric which encouraged the actors to give full volume to their voice from the very beginning. When voices are strained to produce crescendo after crescendo, the words tend to be lost in the effort. Critics have called the quality of the verse in "The Fall of Robespierre" poor - or even bad - but there are some moments of colourful description which could be made to sound quite poetic with the use of varied pace and volume. Coleridge at this stage loved highly figurative language -

"Similes forever! Hurra!" he wrote in a letter to Southey - and there is plenty of it in this poem, but it does need to be heard clearly.

One poetic moment did come across very well and provided a welcome relief from the relentless oratory. It was the scene between Tallien and Adelaide in which she sang the nostalgic song:

Tell me on what holy ground

May domestic peace be found?

This is in a different vein from the rest of the poetry and it was sung in a steady, clear voice by a striking Adelaide to a tune and accompaniment composed by Tim Benjamin – a Grecian at Christ's Hospital whose original music gave skilful emphasis to many dramatic moments during the evening. Tallien responded sensitively to the song: he and Adelaide provided a glimpse of gentler, personal feelings amid the rumbustiousness of public emotions. Tallien was one of those who did manage to vary the range of his voice to good effect and cut a fine figure as Robespierre's chief opponent. There

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were many vigorous performances. Robespierre himself was convincingly ambitious, ascetic and self-righteous, the focal point of the hatred and frustrations of his opponents. "There is in him that which makes me tremble", says Barrère early in the text: Robespierre's performance made this statement credible, but it was a pity that the volume of his voice often obscured the words. His brother, Robespierre Junior, was a good foil - a quieter, more stolid man; St Just was appropriately aristocratic and haughty; and Couthon looked and sounded horribly villainous.

The drama was full of hatred - what St Just calls "The thick black sediment of all the factions". All the actors produced hatred, passion and fierce determination and many of them assumed a ferocity of facial expression which remained throughout the performance. Barrère, Legendre, Bourdon L'Oise and Collot d'Herbois struck defiant poses and declaimed their lines with grim sincerity. Other named revolutionaries - Billaud Varennes, Merlin of Douay, Lecointre, Dubois Crance - were played with great zest by girls and provided an interesting contrast to the rest of the cast: their higher voices and clearer diction made for a welcome variation in the quality of the sound.

Throughout the performance, the quality of sound was much enriched by Tim Benjamin's original music which he, resplendent in Grecian's uniform, played on a keyboard at the side of the hall. It was cleverly composed in keys appropriate to the moods of the incidents being emphasised and was never intrusive or extraneous. From time to time he played subtle and restrained variations on the theme of the Marseillaise, refusing to burst into the full-bodied tune but using the melody in a threatening minor key. This music of not-quite-the-Marseillaise, combined with a final tableau of all the cast on the steps of the octagon, brought this speech-packed hour to an end. Robespierre, St Just, Couthon and Robespierre

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Junior were dead and Tallien had the last word, proclaiming that "France shall blast the despot's pride and liberate the world!" What high hopes Coleridge and Southey must have shared with many others during the republican months of Thermidor and Fructidor 1794.

Every Coleridge enthusiast should thank Duncan Noel-Paton and his actors, who spent the first weeks of their summer holiday rehearsing this production and grappling with fairly intractable material. There is no recorded previous performance of this Dramatic Poem and those who saw it at Cannington College were a privileged few. Much research had gone into this unique event and some of it was presented in an excellent programme for the evening which gave essential information about personalities and dates of developments in the French Revolution between 1789 and 1794.

We may assume that Coleridge would have been gratified to see his Christ's Hospital descendants taking his Dramatic Poem so seriously: as a keen speaker, he might well have wanted to join in.