

COLERIDGE, FAMILY, AND THE WEST COUNTRY

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It seems a truth universally acknowledged that in moving to Somerset and ultimately to the Quantocks in the 1790s Coleridge was in some sense "Coming Home". After all, he was a Devon man, and spoke with a West Country accent all his life, although he had left the region before he was nine. We might assume that living in a countryside not dissimilar to that of the Otter valley of his early childhood helped him towards the inner security which inspired his great West Somerset poems. But did Coleridge really have any special feelings about the West Country? He was always well aware that our Thoughts, Affections and Passions exist in a totally different dimension from Space. As he put it rather startlingly upon one occasion: "What should we think of one who said that his Love of his Wife was North West by West of his Passion for Roast Beef?"

So facile equations between points of the compass and Coleridge's Family or creative emotions seem dubious. Even suggestions based upon Early Association may prove suspect. Coleridge himself wrote to his brother George after a return visit to Ottery St Mary in 1793 with all the harsh clarity of a twenty-one year old: "I quitted Ottery, when I was so young, that most of those endearing circumstances, that are wont to render the scenes and companions of our childhood delightful in recollection, I have associated with the place of my education"(i.e. Christ's Hospital).

He went on to add, tactlessly: "...when at last I revisited Devon, the manners of the Inhabitants annihilated whatever tender ideas of pleasure my Fancy rather than my Memory had pictured to my Expectation. I found them (almost universally) to be gross without openness, and cunning without refinement."

And just how acute was Coleridge's awareness of the West Country as his native home? In 1799, while in Germany, STC wrote some *Lines in an Album at Elbingerode in the Hartz Forest* which certainly express a feeling of homesickness. And well they might, for only two months before he had heard of the unexpected and exceptionally distressing death of his second son Berkeley, his wife Sara was quietly waiting for his early return, and yet there he still was, in May, writing Lines in Albums! He addresses a discreetly generalised England and proclaims:

... How my longing eye

Turned westward, shaping in the steady clouds

Thy sands and high white cliffs."

No obviously Devonian or West Country images there, surely? So much, perhaps, for our late twentieth century awareness of West Country Heritage Trails and National Tourist Board Culture!

A vivid Notebook passage from the summer of 1811, improvised from his reading of the German Romantic poet Jean Paul, helps establish just what "Coming Home" meant to Coleridge throughout his adult life:

We are born in the mountains, in the Alps - and when we hire ourselves out to the princes of the Lower lands, sooner or later we feel an. incurable Homesickness...

That, surely is the authentic voice of STC? In him the Spiritual Homesickness really matters. So it is with a certain caution, and , I hope, an approximately Coleridgean sense of Place as Metaphor, that I want to approach his mid & late 1790s Somerset poems as celebrations of "Coming Home".

Notoriously, Coleridge's first Somerset poem (I presume we can ignore anachronist bureaucrat absurdities like "Avon") was written as a result of his walking tour with Southey in July 1794 and was addressed to the wrong village. As Berta Lawrence pointed out, the village named as "Kirkhampton near Bath" in the manuscript should really be Chilcompton on the old Fosse Way. Nevertheless, the place remains recognisably itself:

Lines to a beautiful spring in a village

Once more! sweet Stream! with slow foot wandering near,

I bless thy milky waters cold and clear.

Escap'd the flashing of the noontide hours,

With one fresh garland of Pierian flowers

(Ere from thy zephyr-haunted brink I turn)

My languid hand shall wreath thy mossy urn.

For not through pathless grove with murmur rude

Thou soothest the sad wood-nymph, Solitude;

Nor thine unseen in cavern depths to well,

The Hermit-fountain of some dripping cell!"

Coleridge's old schoolmaster, James "Call-a-spade-a-spade" Bowyer, might have grunted at "Pierian flowers" and "zephyr-haunted brink", but he might also have approved of Coleridge's general intent, for this spring in a Somerset village is no mere poetic cipher: like the cloister-pump at Christ's Hospital it has practical uses.

Pride of the Vale! thy useful streams supply
The scatter'd cots and peaceful hamlet nigh.
The elfin tribe around thy friendly banks
With infant uproar and soul-soothing pranks,
Releas'd from school, their little hearts at rest,
Launch paper navies on thy waveless breast.

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The rustic here at eve with pensive look
Whistling lorn ditties leans upon his crook,
Or, starting, pauses with hope-mingled dread
To list the much-lov'd maid's accustom'd tread:
She, vainly mindful of her dame's command,
Loiters, the long-fill'd pitcher in her hand."

Coleridge's stream is a social fact, a focus for village life presented quite charmingly as a bucolic eighteenth century idyll in this middle section of the poem. The poet stands quietly to one side and registers the scene. He has no part in this rural community, is merely a passing traveller. But the third and final stanza involves him and by doing so totally changes the picture.

Unboastful Stream! thy fount with pebbled falls
The faded form of past delight recalls,
What time the morning sun of Hope arose,
And all was joy; save when another's woes

A transient gloom upon my soul imprest,
Like passing clouds impictur'd on thy breast.
Life's current then ran sparkling to the noon,
Or silvery stole beneath the pensive Moon".

These first eight lines of the stanza seem to announce some sense of coming home. It is tempting to suggest that this Somerset stream has reminded Coleridge of his own "dear native brook" in Devon and that he has also been reminded of an ideal pastoral domesticity, that blessed mood in which "noon" and "Moon" must unquestioningly rhyme. But, if so, his final couplet wrecks all that!

Ah! now it works rude brakes and thorns among,
Or o'er the rough rock bursts and foams along!

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The language itself breaks and bursts into roughness, the imagery of a quiet North Somerset valley suddenly becomes that of rugged Mendip uplands. The whole dislocating change explodes into a metaphor for the disturbed poet's consciousness. If only there were some reference to predestined damnation here perhaps we might suppose we were reading Cowper? Yet there are essentially Coleridgean ingredients too: a disturbing conjunction between the strongly wished-for sense of a pastoral coming home and the strongly implied consciousness of being isolated, distanced, even an alien.

Coming to the *Brockley Coomb Effusion* of May, 1795 after the Chilcompton poem we can recognise obvious similarities. Here again is an apparently slight poem we might be tempted to dismiss as a mere period piece. Yet Coleridge modulates out of purely conventional eighteenth century poetic language into a more basic and tactile diction to energize his poem's changes of mood. And the Chilcompton formula of richly observed pastoral scene set against an isolated and emotionally-disadvantaged observer is repeated.

With many a pause and oft reverted eye
I climb the Coomb's ascent: sweet songsters near
Warble in shade their wild-wood melody:
Far off the unvarying Cuckoo soothes my ear.
Up scour the startling stragglers of the flock
That on green plots o'er precipices browse:
From the deep fissures of the naked rock
The Yew-tree bursts! Beneath its dark green boughs
(Mid which the May-thorn blends its blossoms white)
Where broad smooth stones jut out in mossy seats,
I rest:- and now have gain'd the topmost site.
Ah! what a luxury of landscape meets
My gaze! Proud towers, and Cots more dear to me,

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Elm-shadow'd Fields, and prospect-bounding Sea!
Deep sighs my lonely heart: I drop the tear:
Enchanting spot! O were my Sara here!"

Here, again, the fairly skilfully controlled imaginative movement of the poem leads us to a dislocating last couplet, where the Somerset landscape is suddenly replaced by the poet's disturbed emotional state. From one point of view at least this ending is rather better managed. The whole poem has brought us to a precipice edge of loneliness. If we have entered at all into its imaginative movement then we share

that moment of emptiness over which the poet stands poised and (I think I must add) posed. Perhaps it is appropriate for us, as indeed it might have been for Sara Fricker herself, to ask young Coleridge a few questions. Just what is the nature of this vacuum which he expects her to fill? Just why is he using this luxury of landscape to express his own loneliness? Why does having a view make him worry about not having a home? And because homes are places about which all human beings tend to mythologise, this may lead us to consider briefly what myths of "home" or "family" Coleridge himself seems to have nurtured.

The association between loneliness, vastness, and the sense of coming home was to recur in several memorable poems of his Stowey period, nowhere more suggestively than in the great Gloss to Part Four of *The Ancient Mariner*, composed to accompany the start of the redemptive movement which leads to the Mariner's blessing of the water snakes:

In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and every where the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival.

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John Livingston Lowes suggested this gloss was based on a memory of a passage in the Neoplatonist mystic Iamblichus, whom Coleridge had read since his schooldays. The psychological power of the passage, however, may have its source even further back in STC's consciousness – in that childhood moment he recalls in his autobiographical letter to Tom Poole, when his clergyman father had walked home with him at Ottery one night and:

he told me the names of the stars—and how Jupiter was a thousand times larger than our world—and that the other twinkling stars were Suns that had worlds rolling round them—& when I came home, he shewed me how they rolled round—/. I heard him with a profound delight & admiration; but without the least mixture

of wonder or incredulity. For from my early reading of Faery Tales, & Genii &c &c—my mind had been habituated *to the Vast*—.

Which leads us to the interesting question about the myth of home and family which Coleridge created for himself. It is a significant fact that the larger part of our material for considering Coleridge's early home life at Ottery St. Mary (like the passage I have just quoted) is contained in a sequence of letters he himself began writing to Tom Poole on February 6th, 1797, soon after he had settled with his young wife and child at Nether Stowey. These letters were intended to form a series which STC was to deliver to Poole every Monday, presumably writing them in the Sabbath rest he hoped to earn by his gardening labours through the rest of the week and delivering them by hand through the connecting gate which Poole had built between their properties. Well, writing a series of letters to your next-door neighbour may in itself seem a little bizarre. But, as so often with Coleridge, if the desire was boundless, the act proved a slave to limit! Only five letters were delivered to Poole and the last of them was completed in February 1798, a full year after the plan's conception. Nevertheless they remain a remarkable early Romantic achievement in the as-yet unnamed art of

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autobiography: the first prose sketch-notes for a study on the "Growth of the Poet's Mind".

At the heart of the first letter lies Coleridge's picture of his father, whom he imagined setting out from a house of poverty at the age of sixteen to make his way in the world:

My father received the half of his last crown & his blessing; and walked off to seek his fortune. After he had proceeded a few miles, he sate him down on the side of the road, so overwhelmed with painful thoughts that he wept audibly. A Gentleman passed by, who knew him: & enquiring into his distresses took my father with him, and settled him in a neighb'ring town as a schoolmaster.

Exactly like a moment from a picaresque novel! That is how a literate late eighteenth century mind might receive and recreate stories of its own family past.

The image of the boy starting on the journey of life seems an essentially English form of bourgeois dream, as does that appealing vision of the passing Samaritan, who happens to be a Gentleman. And my instinctive use here of the word "Samaritan" is also significant, because the episode carries at least light echoes of the parables of the New Testament.

Years later, to beguile the winter evenings at Highgate, Coleridge would tell anecdotes about his father to another trustworthy friend, James Gillman:

and repeat them till the tears ran down his face... The relation of the story usually terminated with an affectionate sigh, and the observation, 'Yes, my friend, he was indeed an Israelite without guile, and might be compared to Parson Adams'.

It was the literary comparison Coleridge had made over twenty years before in his second letter to Poole. Now, of course, such comments were not uncommon in the period. The poet Crabbe was recalled by his son – "as like Parson Adams as twelve to the dozen". The image was both

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humorous and honourable. Fielding's Parson Adams, after all, had been the emblem of a good man in a fallen world. Richard Holmes has questioned whether the Coleridgean picture of his father as a dreamy and unworldly cleric quite fits the known facts about the career of this determinedly self-made man. It is probably relevant to remark that James Gillman went on to apply the Parson Adams appellation to STC himself and commented: "In many respects he differed in kind from his brothers and the rest of the family, but his resemblance to his father was ... strong."

How did Gillman know this? Coleridge's father had died in 1781 a year before Gillman was born. He knew because Sam told him so. Well, for our purposes it is the myth that matters. And in the great fourth letter to Poole of the 16th October 1797 Coleridge gives us another allusion which seems to fix his mythical relationship to his father quite explicitly. After his night out on the banks of the

Otter, when he has been given up for lost and is then, a little like his 16 year old father, rescued by a passing gentleman, Sir Stafford Northcote, young Sam is brought home to his father:

I remember, & never shall forget, my father's face as he looked down upon me while I lay in the servant's arms - so calm, and the tears stealing down his face: for I was the child of his old age.

Genesis 37, verse 3: "Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours." That 'coat of many colours' was the easy familiarity with the Vast which I mentioned earlier, the habit of abstract thought which became indissolubly linked for Coleridge with the experience of coming home. And Coleridge saw himself as a Joseph, a favourite among sons, one who must endure exile and

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persecution from his brethren, but whose dreams would be proved true. It is hardly surprising that this allusion occurs in a letter written to Tom Poole and not in one of the many written to his brother George back at Ottery....

Of course, in Genesis, Joseph returns from exile and is embraced by his brethren, whom he helps to advancement. Sam's case was quite painfully dissimilar. In the midst of his short sequence of letters to Tom Poole Coleridge sent a Verse Letter as Dedication for his 1797 *Poems* to his brother the Rev. George Coleridge, now once more back at Ottery St. Mary in their father's old post as master of the King's School. Kelvin Everest summed up this poem neatly as in many respects a conversation poem which fails because its writer is too nervous about his audience. It remains a poem of great interest— Coleridge's first substantial Nether Stowey poem and addressed from his Somerset home to its Devon prototype.

A blessed lot hath he, who having passed

His youth and early manhood in the stir

And turmoil of the world, retreats at length,
With cares that move, not agitate the heart,
To the same dwelling where his father dwelt....

It is of his brother George's fortunes that Sam writes here, not his own.

To me the Eternal Wisdom hath dispens'd
A different fortune and more different mind-
Me from the spot where first I sprang to light
Too soon transplanted, ere my soul had fixed
Its first domestic loves....

Very much what he had been writing to George in his letter three years earlier, and there is a certain self-knowledge here, in the recognition of the instability which Coleridge's early losses have given to his "more different mind". What

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form of recognition might there have been at Ottery, I wonder, for the following words?

A brief while
Some have preserv'd me from life's pelting ills.

A fraternal snort , perhaps?- An imagined interjection which may remind us that the instability and loss Sam was regretting in his poem was even greater than that

central trauma of 1781 which we all remember, of his father's sudden death and Sam's removal to Christ's Hospital. James Engell, in his important recent Clarendon Press edition of the early Coleridge family letters, has pointed out that, between the year 1781 and 1792 Sam lost not merely his father but the three brothers and the sister who were closest to him. By 1797 he is writing his poem to George because George is the only surviving male of the Coleridge family who might possibly understood him....

To skate momentarily on thin psychological ice, might it be that, as the youngest of the family, who had always set himself slightly apart, Sam felt an ill-defined guilt about this destruction of his siblings, a guilt which reappeared from his unconscious in that harrowing image of:

The body of my brother's son

Stood by me, knee to knee:

The body and I pulled at one rope,

But he said nought to me?

Now that James Engell's edition has appeared we can add to the STC version of family given in his letters and the Ottery St Mary version given in Bernard Lord Coleridge's *Story of a Devonshire House* (1905). An interesting picture of an interesting family emerges. The brothers divided naturally, in a manner characteristic of their late eighteenth century upwardly mobile class, into those who were military and those who were professional. Brother George, eight years his

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senior, quiet, scholarly, was the clergyman schoolmaster to whom Sam sometimes wrote in Latin, an avuncular presence with whom STC could partly identify, at least until their formal estrangement over what he saw as the Ottery family's rejection of his wife and children in 1807(a rejection made all the more difficult for Sam to bear since it undoubtedly stemmed from his own announced intention

of separating from them!) Luke, seven years his senior, had for a time been a role-model with whom he walked the wards of the London Hospital. But Luke was dead before STC left school. It was the military brothers who devoted themselves to founding the family fortune. In this they were led by the eldest brother, John, born in 1754 and therefore eighteen years older than Sam. He had set out for India at the age of sixteen, risen to become a lieutenant in the Indian Army by twenty one, and was sending money home from the time of his father's death, even contriving to find £1,000 to buy a captaincy for his brother James (born in 1759) and confiding in 1785: "I have been thinking for these some days past of getting Sam, a couple of years hence, sent out to me as a Cadet at the India House."

John himself died two years later, before this could happen, and the death of another potential patron deprived Sam for ever of this possible Oriental dimension to his life. But before his death John had already managed to engineer the transfer of Frank (born 1770 and closest to Sam in age) from the navy into the Indian Army, where he became an Ensign at the age of thirteen and was himself sending home sums of £100 by the time he was fifteen. Both John and Frank died suddenly and mysteriously, possibly both by their own hand. Of the military brothers only James survived. He, in 1788, married a Devonshire heiress, Frances Duke Taylor, left the Army and became active in the Volunteer movement, becoming eventually Colonel of the East Devon Militia. He was the virtual founder of that highly successful Coleridge dynasty, which produced an eminent Judge and a

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Bishop and then the Lord Chief Justice of England and a Baronetcy in successive generations. By the time young Sam moved to Stowey at the end of 1796, Colonel James had already bought the old Chanter's House at Ottery and was husbanding his resources prudently enough to be able to send three sons to Eton. As his descendant, Bernard Lord Coleridge put it: "no man was more worldly wise, or a better steward of his own or other's property".

These military brothers seem to have lived with a strong sense of practical family Duty. John had written to James in 1783 of their mother: "At least 'tis our Duty to prevent anything happening to her that may give her the least uneasiness." In the following year he wrote to George: "Make my duty to my mother, and my love to my Brothers, Uncles, Aunts, etc." No more than a formal ending, perhaps? Well,

almost ten years later STC was to write a similar ending to brother George from Cambridge: "Give my Duty to my Mother... and my Love to my Sister." The difference, sadly, was that John, James, Frank, and George, all showed their Duty as well as their Love in practical, financial terms, and Sam did not. His own lifelong struggle with family Duty, and most other kinds of duty, must, surely, be related to that shining example his military brothers set him from his early boyhood?

Of these military brothers, Frank - or Francis Syndercombe Coleridge, to give him his full name - was the closest to STC, whom he remembered in his letters home as "dear little Sam". "Dear little Sam" had, of course, at least once threatened Frank's life with a knife - the occasion which led to that traumatic night beside the banks of the Otter - and I sometimes wonder whether his fit of infant madness helped STC later to sympathise when he wrote his great letter to Charles Lamb about Mary's killing of their mother with a carving knife.

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In the story STC told Thomas Poole, you will recall, it is his agonised reaction to the rivalry with Frank which drives "dear little Sam" out of the home, and into a self-induced displacement which, in a real sense, lasted for the rest of his life.

When he heard of Frank's death Sam wrote to George from Cambridge that his brother had been "the hero of all the little tales that make the remembrance of my earliest days interesting". Remembering the tale of the minced cheese, such wording strikes me as a shade equivocal. He told Poole of his early rivalry with Frank over the affections of their mother and their nurse Molly Newberry, and there is a less well-known and bleak entry in the Malta Notebooks which suggests at least one lasting psychological effect of his early treatment by Frank. It is dated by Kathleen Coburn as written on the day of the Valetta Horse-racing - "Bells jangling, & stupefying music playing all Day -":

It is a subject not unworthy of meditation to myself, what the reason is that these sounds & bustles of Holidays, Fairs, Easter-mondays, & Tuesdays, & Christmas Days, even when I was a Child & when I was at Christ-Hospital, always made me

so heart-sinking, so melancholy? Is it, that from my Habits, or my want of money all the first two or three and 20 years of my Life I have been *alone* at such times?—That by poor Frank's dislike of me when a little Child I was even from Infancy forced to be by myself— ... ? (NB 2647)

We have already had one very plausible suggestion this weekend for a new reading of familiar lines from *Frost at Midnight*. Here is another less plausible. Maybe that memory of the Ottery Church bells ringing "all the hot Fair-day" and that hint it gave of "wild pleasure" was inextricably linked with deep feelings of melancholy and isolation? Can we even claim that notions of "home" were usually associated by Coleridge with similar undertones?

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One last suggestion about the ambivalent inheritance our exiled Joseph received from his brethren. Six months or so after hearing of Frank's death, as we all know, Sam suddenly enlisted in the King's Light Dragoons. It was of course madness. Yet was there, also, a little method in the madness? Was Sam really acknowledging, in the modern cliché, "If you can't beat them, join them"? It was, after all, the way to preferment which his more practical brothers had chosen. It fulfilled at once several of the claims to Duty which they would have wished upon him. If there was no prospect of success as a clergyman like his father or brother George, where better to turn than to the Army like John, James and Frank? Thinking back to my own National Service days, I would simply suggest that you never realise quite how unsuited you are for the Army until you are actually in it.

From such wild and whirling words on the outer ramparts of speculation, it is pleasant to return to the Somerset poems. In the *Dedicatory Poem* to George of 1797, STC claimed that he had found a new security at Stowey in the personality of a substitute brother, the very man to whom he was writing his sequence of autobiographical letters, Tom Poole:

beside one Friend,

Beneath the impervious covert of one oak,

I've rais'd a lowly shed, and know the names

Of Husband and of Father....

Writing to Southey about the poem, STC felt his metaphor of the diverse sorts of friendship had been excessively "hunted down", and certainly the rather clumsy earlier image of the false and fair-foliaged Manchineel, a West Indian tree reputed to drop poisonous gum on those who sat beneath it, might have been applied by brother George to such hot-head radical friends of Sam's as young Southey himself. (In contrast, the patriotic oak, with its finely latinate epithet "impervious", seems reassuringly right for Poole.) Some thirty lines later the metaphor has been absorbed into the texture of the poem to reappear as a delicate picture of

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Stowey domesticity where conventional 18th C. images mingle with realistic detail in a way which anticipates *This Lime-Tree Bower*.

Oh! 'tis to me an ever new delight,

To talk of thee and thine: or when the blast

Of the shrill winter, rattling our rude sash,

Endears the cleanly hearth and social bowl;

Or when, as now, on some delicious eve,

We in our sweet sequester'd orchard-plot

Sit on the tree crook'd earthward; whose old boughs,

That hang above us in an arborous roof,

Stirr'd by the faint gale of departing may,

Send their loose blossoms slanting o'er our heads!"

These lines lift the poem to George momentarily to the level of the great Conversation Poems and it was quite natural that they should. Both the poems themselves and the letters to Poole help define a myth which might enable STC to recreate at Stowey at least a substitute for the lost West Country home of his childhood.

However, Stowey patently wasn't Ottery. Sam wrote a note against the Poem of Dedication to George in one copy of the 1797 Poems which reads:

N.B. If this volume should ever be delivered according to its direction, i.e. to Posterity, let it be known that the Reverend George Coleridge was displeased and thought his character endangered by this Dedication.

The vision of blissful fraternal conversation in the Dedication was as illusory as that other vision, couched in surprisingly similar terms, which John Thelwall offered to Coleridge himself in his *Lines Written at Bridgewater, July, 1797*, of fraternal conversation with Coleridge and the Wordsworths. Ironically, and typical of the way in which we pass on to others the hurt we have received ourselves, STC shattered Thelwall's vision, as George had shattered his own, and for

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the same reason: what in Coleridgean phrase might be called -" fear of the Goody"!

"Fear of the Goody" – a characteristically male projection onto the females of the species.... Which may remind us that, so far, in this discussion of STC's myths of Homes and Families very little has been said about Women! And it is certainly notable that, whereas Sara Fricker appears clearly near the centre of the earlier Somerset conversation pieces of 1795, the *Shurton Bars Lines*, *The Eolian Harp*, and *Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement*, in the great Conversation Poems of 1797-8, *This Lime-tree Bower* and *Frost at Midnight*, she is surprisingly absent from the domestic scene. She leaves her husband crying over spilt. milk or

simply minding the baby, but is herself no more than an inmate of the cottage. Instead, the great poems focus upon a male world of the mind, where male friendships or male bonding between father and son are seen, sub specie aeternitatis, as harmonising with the workings of a male God in Nature. Perhaps a vision of the sweetness of the seasons was more easily achieved as an all-male vision? An ambivalence in Coleridge's imagination towards the movements of the journeying Moon in *The Mariner* might perhaps be related to his male unease with the secret life of the female. In justice to Coleridge we should acknowledge that he himself recognised the problem. In March 1796, having first encountered, through Sara's supposed miscarriage, those difficulties with which the women of his day and most other days lived and died, he wrote: " I think the subject of Pregnancy the most obscure of all God's dispensations...."

One of the least well-defined areas in the myth of his Ottery childhood which Coleridge created is the exact nature of his mother and his mothering. In the Poole letters Coleridge's mother is sketched much more faintly and more

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coldly than his father. " My mother was an admirable Economist and managed exclusively"– or - "My Father ...had so little of parental ambition in him, that he had destined his children to be Blacksmiths &c, and had accomplished his intention but for my Mother's pride & spirit of aggrandizing her family". So the mother's ambition is held responsible for the good stewardship of Brother James and the rest, and she is defined, broadly, by simply being different from his father– and, therefore, Sam.

Looking elsewhere in Coleridge's reminiscences we find little more. To Gillman he confided that Ann Bowden :

had naturally a strong mind. She was an uneducated woman, industriously attentive to her household duties, and devoted to the care of her husband and family. Possessing none, even of the most common female accomplishments of her day, she had neither love nor sympathy for the display of them in others. She disliked,

as she would say, 'your harpsichord ladies', and strongly tried to impress on her sons their little value, in their choice of wives.

One moment in the *Table Talk* helps to flesh out this side of his mother's nature. In an entry which Henry Nelson Coleridge decided not to publish, his uncle Sam recalled how once in later years at Ottery his brother George had preached morning and evening on Scandal and Smuggling.

In the afternoon people congratulated my mother. She looked rather blank upon the occasion, and said - 'George was, no doubt, very clever and fine – but for her part, she must say - she did not like any new doctrines.' And to be sure, she did love gossip, and as to smuggling - decent brandy could not be obtained without it.

Judging by such anecdotes, and by the evidence of the Engell edition of the Family Letters, Ann Bowden Coleridge seems to have been just the kind of down-to-earth West Country

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inhabitant that Sam found he didn't particularly like when he returned to Ottery as a young adult. And, rightly or wrongly, her sending of him away to Christ's Hospital at the age of eight was something he never really forgave or forgot. So, in his private myth of the family, the role of his *sister* Ann became crucial. Born in 1777 Ann Coleridge was five years older than Sam, the only girl of the family and the darling of her brothers. She was dead by 1791 and Sam writing his poem *To a Friend* (Charles Lamb) in 1794 claimed that in his early years she had been his closest confidante:

I too a Sister *had*, an only Sister -

She lov'd me dearly, and I doted on her!

To her I pour'd forth all my puny sorrows

(As a sick Patient in a Nurse's arms)...."

The conflation of Sister and Nurse seems particularly revealing of Coleridge's psychology. Throughout his life he appealed to women for just such support – to the Evans family, to the Fricker family, to the Wordsworths and Hutchinsons, to the Morgans, to Mrs Gillman.

Alone in Malta in 1805 he composed in a notebook a variation on a passage from the Song of Songs:

O that thou wert as my Sister that sucked the Breasts of my Mother! Should I find thee without, I would kiss thee, yea, I should not be despised. I would lead thee into my House!

At the corners of the notebook's pages, again and again, he has inscribed the names and initials "ASRA"(in Greek)/ "Coleridge"/"WW"/"DW"/"MW"/ in various combinations....

Such entries date from a time when some kind of idealised Platonic communion of Brothers and Sisters was all he could hope for from human relations. Yet even at Stowey in February 1798, when he must still have believed in the possibility of a good marriage, the only female who is allowed towards the central focus of his greatest domestic

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poem *Frost at Midnight* is his:

sister more beloved,

My playmate when we both were clothed alike!"

The fact remains that for a short time, between 1795 and 1798, at least, Coleridge sought happiness and psychological security in a West Country marriage. In August, 1795, he wrote, with an almost doctrinaire enthusiasm to Southey that: "Domestic Happiness is the greatest of things sublunary - and of things celestial it is perhaps impossible for unassisted Man to believe any thing greater—."

Lines written at Shurton Bars was composed in that faith. The most vivid section creates a haunting image of shipwreck in the Bristol Channel off Flat Holm, but sets against it the counter image of Sara the Beloved Woman who will stabilize Coleridge against such dangerously destructive inner energies. The poem closes with a dynamic metaphor of married love as harnessed electricity – and I sometimes suppose, standing at Shurton Bars, that STC would not have entirely disapproved of Hinckley Point Power Station....

Such optimism also produced the poems of the brief Clevedon idyll, but by March 1796, he was back in Bristol, writing with more world-weary wisdom, of:

Marriage having taught me the wonderful uses of that vulgar article, yclept
BREAD –.

My wife, my wife's Mother, & little Brother, & George Burnet - five mouths
opening & shutting as I pull the string!"

What interests me here is that he has freely adopted, perhaps from the example of his own childhood, the pattern of an extended family. There is no modern sense of a nuclear separation here. Even on their Clevedon honeymoon, Sam and Sara took their fellow failed Pantisocrat George Burnett along with them. And the "little Brother" (George Fricker) is worth noticing, too. Coleridge continued to do what he

could for him, standing security for £500 to get him taken into Savory's Bank in 1799 and allowing five guineas a year out of his own meagre resources, and later doing what he could to get him a London clerkship through the good offices of John Rickman, even writing from Malta for that purpose. Towards George Fricker, at least, Sam showed a commendable sense of Family Duty of which Colonel James himself would have approved.

The marriage to Sara Fricker had begun as part of the extended family of Pantisocracy, where a chosen number of Sisters would be permitted to unite themselves with a choosing number of Brothers. The marriage, as we all know, had to endure a variety of other chosen extensions for the remainder of its days. Yet Coleridge was also strongly drawn to something closer to our modern concept of a nuclear family, and he expressed his ideal vividly in his early verse several times, most movingly, perhaps, when, in a scene derived from the scene in Brutus's orchard, he inserts, into the midst of the rather hectic male rhetoric of *The Fall of Robespierre*, a female song which he later published under the title *Domestic Peace*:

Tell me, on what holy ground
May domestic peace be found?...
In a cottag'd vale she dwells
List'ning to the Sabbath bells!
Still around her steps are seen,
Spotless honor's meeker mien,
Love, the sire of pleasing fears,
Sorrow, smiling through her tears,
And conscious of the past employ,
Memory, bosom-spring of joy."

By the time he was proof-reading that song at Nether Stowey in 1797 Coleridge must have hoped that, at least

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temporarily, he had found his domestic ideal in a West Country cottag'd vale. One tangible product of "Memory, bosom—spring of joy" was to be *Frost at Midnight*. In that Stowey scene Sara had a difficult role to play—Mother/Sister/Nurse/Wife—and she did so on ground of her husband's choosing.

Stephen Potter wrote amusingly in *Minnow among Tritons* of "the Fricker instinct to make a kind of matriarchy out of Pantisocracy". By the end of 1796, when he left Bristol for Stowey, Coleridge must have been well aware of this instinct and he had decided to outrun it. He moved forty miles away, a convenient distance for him to walk back and visit his publisher and his friends and to collect books from the library. Far enough away for his wife to be separated from her family and society. No prospect for her of walking forty miles to renew old acquaintances! Instead, she had to depend on the circle of friends her husband and Tom Poole could provide. In effect, she became a member of Coleridge's chosen "extended family" rather than her own. Sara was a loyal wife and there is little indication that she initially protested at this. But the point is, of course, that we only have Coleridge's reactions to the new situation, not Sara's.

His early reports were optimistic:

We are all, Maid, Wife, Bratling, & self, remarkably well - Mrs Coleridge likes Stowey, & loves Thomas Poole, & his Mother, who love her – a communication has been made from our Orchard into T. Poole's Garden, & from thence to Cruikshanks's, a friend of mine & a young married Man, whose Wife is very amiable; & she & Sara are already on the most cordial terms - from all this you will conclude, that we are happy.

When the Wordsworths moved to Alfoxden in July 1797 all the necessary ingredients for Coleridge's great year of poetic creation were in place. Among

these, both domestic happiness and a sense of its vulnerability seem to have been crucial.

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When he left for Germany in late summer 1798 Coleridge, significantly, asked Sara to send a copy of his newly-published London volume *Fears in Solitude*, post-paid, to his brother George at Ottery. Almost certainly he thought the volume more important than his other publication of that summer *Lyrical Ballads*. One interesting shift in modern critical reception of Coleridge's Somerset poems has been to see the *Fears in Solitude* quarto as an important and carefully-crafted poetic statement of Coleridge's personal and political position. Its full title was *Fears in Solitude, Written in 1798, during the Alarm of Invasion. To which are added, France, an Ode; and Frost at Midnight*, and it appeared with the imprint of the leading radical publisher of the day. At the heart of the first poem, which if you like states the problem which the later two poems seek to resolve, lies imagery of a horror which still threatens our own domestic screens:

O let not English women drag their flight
Fainting beneath the burden of their babes,
Of the sweet infants, that but yesterday
Laugh'd at the breast!

(Coleridge being Coleridge he also anticipated in the same poem the dangerously dehumanising tendencies of our receiving a flood of such images through the media!)

Today it no longer seems exaggerated to insist that we place the domestic calm of *Frost at Midnight* in its first context. Set as the final poem of the *Fears in Solitude* Quarto it becomes a fully realised version of the song of *Domestic Peace*, a moment of visionary calm in a troubled era. For Coleridge the briefly-won domestic happiness was always threatened both by political insecurity and by psychological insecurity. Unlike Joseph, his political dream of the 1790s was never

proved true to his brothers, and he remained an exile from his family home. Unlike Joseph, also, when his inner dream became true it destroyed his personal

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security. I believe, he never forgot that childhood moment at Ottery when he heard a night shriek and awoke to the knowledge that his beloved father was dead.

But I want to end this paper on a possibly happier note. What would it have been like to walk into the life of that cottage in Lime Street as it was being lived in, say, August, 1797, at a time when the Wordsworths had moved into Alfoxden and enriched Coleridge's life, but before serious tensions had arisen between the two domestic nuclei? What impressions would we have carried away? Well, the young Coleridges were. not the last inhabitants of the West Country to hope they could make ends meet by keeping a small-holding and taking in paying guests. One of the prospective guests arrived in August 1797 and left a short account of what he found, in a letter to his sister. His name was Richard Reynell, and his account is not particularly well-known. (Neither Molly Lefebure nor Richard Holmes quoted it in their excellent descriptions of the Coleridges' domestic life at Stowey.) I will end with some of Reynell's words, partly because, although our own hindsight makes some of his impressions poignant, they celebrate freshly a happy time in Coleridge's life, however much we see it now, in Philip Larkin's phrase, as a moment of "frail, travelling coincidence". And I quote Reynell for a simpler reason also: I have always found it particularly easy to identify with those spots of time when an ordinary mind encounters genius:

...On my arrival at Stowey and at Mr Coleridge's house I found he was from home, having set out for Bristol to see Mrs.Barbauld a few days before.... He returned on Saturday evening after a walk of 40 miles in one day, apparently not much fatigued. The evening on which I arrived was employed for the most part in walking with a young man named Burnett, who arrived just before I did on a visit to Coleridge. He is agreeable and well informed, and of a very benevolent

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turn of mind....

I arose in the morning tolerably recruited, however, and found Mrs. Coleridge as I have continued to find her, sensible, affable, and good-natured, thrifty and industrious, and always neat and prettily dressed. I here see domestic life in all its beauty and simplicity, affection founded on a stronger basis than wealth - on esteem. Love seems more pure than it in general is to be found, because of the preference that has been given, in the choice of a life-friend, to mental and moral rather than personal and material charms, not that you are to infer that Coleridge and his wife have no personal recommendation. Mrs. Coleridge is indeed a pretty woman....

Coleridge has a fine little boy, about nine or ten months old, whom he has named David Hartley, for Hartley and Bishop Berkeley are his idols, and he thinks them two of the greatest men that ever lived. This child is a noble, healthy-looking fellow, has strong eyebrows, and beautiful eyes. It is a treat, a luxury, to see Coleridge hanging over his infant and talking to it and fancying what he will be in future days."

Note:

Coleridge - The Early Family Letters, edited by James Engell, Oxford: The Clarendon Press [ISBN 0-19-818244-9] was published in November, 1994. Based upon a transcript of Coleridge family letters in the British Library, previously available but largely neglected, these forty letters give a rich sense of a remarkable family and will be essential reading for STC's biographers in the future.