

THE UNKNOWN COLERIDGE

The Life and Times of Derwent Coleridge, 1800-1883,

Raymonde Hainton and Godfrey Hainton (Janus; ISBN 1-85756-288-7)

Reviewed by Alison Dodd

The Derwent Coleridge of this first biography deserves to be better known; vigorous, enthusiastic, strong-minded, tender-hearted, loving and beloved. But his unorthodox background and consequent lack of personal or political influence denied him preferment whenever he sought it, and the rapid changes of the nineteenth century destroyed his most successful enterprises, his school at Helston in Cornwall and the College of St Mark in Chelsea.

Much of the information in this book comes from careful research into original and unpublished manuscripts by and about Derwent Coleridge, housed in the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin, Texas, and from other archive material. Derwent Coleridge emerges as a lively and attractive figure who often speaks directly to the reader, giving an authentic flavour of the man.

The fruit of one of the brief periods of reconciliation in the Coleridges' increasingly difficult marriage, he was born at Greta Hall, Keswick, in September 1800. Through his three 'interpreters' of the natural world, Southey, Wordsworth and the first of all, his father, he absorbed the Romantic outlook which never left him. One of the Haintons' vivid quotations comes from a lecture he gave in 1862 on 'Poetry as a teacher': 'The men of whom I speak were Poets. Knowing them as I did, I grew up in the belief that this was a title of high and special privilege – almost divine...'

There was no money for the public school education which would have given him influence. When at last friends of his father offered the necessary additional funds, he was sent to Cambridge rather than Oxford. He could not make himself love mathematics, the only study leading to Honours in Cambridge at that date. Hartley described his brother as 'a beautiful classic', who 'might have got a Fellowship at Oxford' – but he gained only a pass degree, and sank into a deep depression during his final months as an undergraduate.

Mary Pridham, the lively, beautiful, intelligent and devout girl whom he met in 1824 at this low period, gave his life a completely new direction and meaning. The wholeheartedness which characterised his love for her, and all his enthusiasms, shines from a delightful postscript to one of his early letters to her: 'Write, write, write, write, write, please, pray, do, I ask, entreat, conjure, soon, immediately, now!' She helped to restore his lost religious faith so that he was able to commit himself to Holy Orders, and was to be his practical and emotional mainstay for the 56 years of their fulfilling marriage.

The period at Helston, 1827-40, fills several chapters. It covers his rescue of the run-down parish and near-defunct school, his early married life and the birth of his children, his forays into architecture, his one full-length book, *The Scriptural Character of the English Church*, 1839, and intermittent unsuccessful attempts to obtain a secure living or a more prestigious post, as he struggled – the only member of his

family to do so – to earn sufficient means to survive and maintain his family. Because of the diversity of his life and the variety of sources used, this section becomes almost too detailed.

The complex religious disputes of the nineteenth century have to be acknowledged: they were closely linked with the organization of education. In a book of this length, however, they cannot be fully explored. Perhaps it would have been better to relegate the broader historical background to an appendix, so that it could not distract from the living portrait of the man. Happily, he still sparkles out at intervals, for example when he writes wryly to Southey of the wonderful credulousness of the Evangelicals he had listened to: ‘I belong to the Bible Society – but to attend their meetings is indeed a severe penance.’

The swiftness of industrial development ruined a school which had come to be considered by some the equal of Eton and Winchester in the training it gave. The railway spread rapidly through the country, but it was not to reach Cornwall until 1859; the number of Derwent’s pupils dwindled alarmingly. Again he applied for more lucrative posts, again he failed, and in 1841 he went unwillingly to be Principal of St Mark’s College in Chelsea.

His twenty-three years at St Mark’s form the most substantial part of the book, and should be particularly interesting to Coleridgeans. Derwent’s background and experience combined to make him a firm believer in his father’s vision of a national clerisy, a body of truly educated men who would cultivate the humanity and intellectual potential of every citizen; Derwent made that vision the essence of his teaching at St Mark’s. Many of the lower and middle-class youths whom he taught transcended class barriers and rose to success as grammar school teachers or in the Church, with a sound foundation of knowledge and the confidence borne of independent thought. But in 1861 the Whig government’s Revised Code for education, a swingeing economy measure which was also designed to establish tight political control over what might be taught, abolished financial assistance to colleges and teachers, and made it possible to become a certificated teacher without attending college at all. Despite his vigorous resistance, the committed labour of half of Derwent’s life was destroyed, and he again found himself in a difficult parish, Hanwell in Middlesex, which called for indefatigable hard work.

The thoroughness of the Haintons’ approach does lead at times to an uneasy mix of personal and public history, but this is essentially an honest book about a very honest man, whose determined high principles as an educator made him a living tribute to the better side of his father’s influence. It is fitting that Derwent has the last word: ‘For my own part, I will never consent to educate down to any standard, to avoid an imaginary risk of inconvenient excellence... be it ever borne in mind that we are educating men, not forming machines.’ STC would have applauded.