

Shirley Watters

(1933—2016)

The address given by Justin Shepherd, Chair of the Friends of Coleridge, on Friday 28th October 2016, at the Service of Remembrance and Thanksgiving.

EVERYONE, FAMILY, FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES HERE WILL, of course, have their own picture of Shirley. But I am sure that she would have been pleased that I, as Chair of the Friends of Coleridge, have been kindly invited to speak today, because it is an organisation which, I know, meant a lot to her. It certainly absorbed much of her and her husband Reggie's energy after they returned from Japan in 1991. Indeed, the Friends as it is today, with its diverse international membership and its many activities, is in large measure their creation. Until 2012, Shirley was Honorary Secretary, a key role which she carried out with meticulous care. But it was her deftness with people, her sense of fun and her magical ability to get people to do things, which made her such a potent, if quiet, force. Quite simply, people would find themselves saying 'yes' just to please her. Later, I would like to try to account for this somewhat mysterious power of Shirley's.



Shirley on The Women's Walk, 2015

Reggie's and Shirley's interest in Coleridge went back all the way to their own days together in Cambridge. Coincidentally, the first time I heard the name 'Watters' linked with that of 'Coleridge' was also in Cambridge. I went up to read English in 1970 and soon found myself in a circle which included no fewer than five former pupils of Reggie's at Christ's Hospital, all reading English, all in the same year. ('Is this a record?' as they used to ask in Private Eye at that time.) I was puzzled by the way in which they all used the apparently familiar, 'Reggie', to refer to someone who was obviously a somewhat formidable figure. He did not seem to have a surname. Soon after, I found a member of this circle, now a professor at Lancaster University, reading with close attention a little paperbound book, clearly hot off the press. It was called simply 'Coleridge' by Reginald Watters. 'Reggie's book', he explained simply, as if it was something I knew all about already. I was enormously impressed, since teachers, I then thought, could not possibly also write books. Years later, I remember Shirley telling me that the book was written during one long summer holidays by the sea. Every day she would take the children off to the beach while Reggie would stay behind and work on his Coleridge book. That, I learned, was how teachers wrote books.

In 1991 Reggie and Shirley came to live in Nether Stowey and to run Coleridge Books. This, Shirley later confided to me, was not really a business project; more an excuse for Reggie to handle books about Coleridge and for them both to meet like-minded people. They found that the Friends of Coleridge, started only a few years earlier, was about to expire. They seized control and swiftly revived it.

As a couple they were brilliantly effective. Reggie provided the enthusiasm, the drive and was front man, while Shirley not only supported him but leavened the bookishness with her own warmth and ability to draw out the shy, the diffident and the newcomer at any Coleridgean occasion. They started an annual autumn study weekend at Kilve, which was in some ways the most characteristic expression of their talents. Aimed mainly at amateurs and enthusiasts but with distinguished academic speakers, it combines high thinking with conviviality- a sort of Coleridgean weekend house party. Many people have written to me about this since Shirley's death. Here is John Powell-Ward, poet and former Professor at Swansea:

I remember year after year arriving at Kilve's front door and meeting her and Reggie and afterwards Peter, and the welcome they gave us. I recall too it gradually dawning on me that her quiet, kindly smile hid—or revealed—a deep intellect, and her literary understanding became unmissable. She stepped into Reggie's shoes...with just no fuss at all.

As we know, Shirley lost Reggie in 2000. However, her resilience emerged in the following years and her belief that more should be done with Coleridge Cottage was unshaken. Tom Mayberry, who took over from Reggie as Chair, says that it was Shirley who finally broke the stalemate with the National Trust

with a deftly worded letter to the *Guardian*. The refurbishment of the Cottage, reopened to great acclaim in 2011, is testament to Shirley's long commitment to the cause.

We all came to think of Shirley as a mother figure to the Friends. Committee meetings on Saturday mornings at 11, Castle Street were such cosy occasions. However, we all realised her intelligence and reading. Did she shelve her own literary ambitions in favour of her family? Possibly. But my own guess is that she saw literature and learning in the wider context of human relationships. I am reminded of that remark of Logan Pearsall Smith, a scholar from an earlier, tweedier age: 'People say that life is the thing', he said, 'but I prefer reading.' Well, if Life and Reading are seen as mutually exclusive then Shirley, unlike Pearsall Smith, would certainly have chosen Life, but she did not think in these binary terms.

Nevertheless, Shirley was a perceptive reader and able scholar, as is demonstrated in the only two papers by her known to me. Both are about Sara Coleridge, the remarkable daughter of the poet, and both can be readily found in the Coleridge Bulletin online. I can warmly recommend them. They cast a penetrating and sympathetic light on Sara's relationship with her father, her husband and on her role as a writer and woman and, by implication, perhaps on Shirley's own inner life.

I come back to my earlier promise. What, I wonder, was the secret of Shirley's special charm? Alas, after long reflection, I do not think I can provide a definitive answer. It included, I suppose, a mixture of gentleness, strength, intelligence and what can only be called a sweetness of character.

I will end by recalling a passage from a letter of Coleridge, and which Reggie himself used as a kind of motto on all Friends of Coleridge pamphlets. If you remember, Coleridge had recently withdrawn from a hectic life in Bristol to the quiet of Stowey and is justifying his decision to a friend:

I am not fit for public life, yet the Light shall stream to a far distance
from the taper in my Cottage window.

We too can say with confidence that Shirley's light shall continue to stream for many years to come in the organisation that she and Reggie did so much to shape and in the minds of all those of us who were lucky enough to have known her.

A Family Tribute

Helen and Joanna, two of Shirley's daughters, speaking alternately, paid this tribute to their mother at the Service of Remembrance and Thanksgiving.

Helen

Over the last few weeks we have been reflecting on how lucky we have been, each of Shirley's four children, to have had such a wonderful mother who was able to maintain a strong relationship with each one of us throughout our lives. What is striking is how individual all our relationships with her were: how incredibly sensitive she was to all our differences, not only understanding them but relishing them, sharing with each of us different aspects of herself.

Shirley was a very sensitive and intuitive person. Putting all our thoughts and memories together - and adding to those all the wonderful tributes that so many people have been kind enough to send – the overriding impression we have of Shirley is of someone whose happiness genuinely did come from making other people happy.

Joanna

As a mother she shared her values by example rather than by instruction, because modesty was one of her core values, along with honesty, integrity, moderation, kindness and respect. Mum was born in 1933 in Walton-on-Thames as Shirley Margaret Young. She changed schools many times, as her family moved around during the war, until she settled at Croydon High School, from where she secured an exhibition to Girton College, Cambridge, to read English. She met Reggie at Cambridge, while he was an undergraduate at King's. This was the start of their long and happy relationship, at the centre of which was their love of literature. As young graduates they both moved to London, where she worked at Foyles, before they got married in 1957 and moved to Reggie's first teaching job in Rugby. They soon moved again, to Bristol where Reggie taught at Clifton College and Shirley became a mother, and created a very happy home with her 4 young children. They made lifetime friends there, one of whom recently wrote: "Wherever Shirley was, there was always a sense of peace & purposefulness; she seemed always to be smiling, and never rushed." Reggie took on a teaching exchange to Denmark, and Shirley with typical determination took this on with 3 young children though she didn't speak the language and the winter was long. I remember her reading *The Hobbit* to us during the long winter evenings.

Helen

In 1968 we all moved to Christ's Hospital and became part of a very supportive community of staff families. Shirley gradually returned to teaching English and Latin part-time as we grew up, and in time, without in any way making a big fuss took on full time teaching with all its time-consuming extras: marking, lesson preparation, prep supervision.

To us it seemed completely natural and effortless. Now we all have our own children we just marvel at how she never lost her composure and kept everything ticking along so smoothly. The only indulgence we can really remember was her allowing herself the occasional early night; and the creative chaos that descended on the very rare occasions that she was not well and we all had to band together to cook supper with Reggie at the helm.

Joanna

Shirley's parents retired to Cornwall in the '60s. So we spent all our holidays in Cornwall – seemingly endless happy days often spent with Shirley's sister Mary's or brother John's families too. In the 70s, Reggie and Shirley bought a tin miners cottage near Helston, which they enjoyed renovating, and later, a house romantically perched on the serpentine cliffs at Bass Point on the Lizard peninsula.

Shirley loved returning to Cornwall, and we have kept up the tradition of family holidays on the Lizard, so that in the last decade Shirley spent many glorious holidays with all her children and grandchildren, most recently this August, in simple familiar holiday routines revolving around getting in the sea, cliff walks, jigsaws and games, and eating clotted cream, pasties and fish and chips. In the early 80s, as we all began to leave home, she and Reggie put their CH lives in storage and relocated to Japan, a place Reggie had been drawn to all his adult life. Both of them immersed themselves in Japanese culture: sleeping on futons; eating rice, tofu and seaweed; and socializing with Japanese colleagues. It was an enriching time for both of them, but even from the other side of the world, a world without internet, with a steady stream of airmail letters to us all, Shirley managed to give us children (with new-born grandchildren) a sense that we were always in her thoughts.

Helen

As one perceptive friend wrote in her letter: "There was her other, intellectual, side, never vaunted but always strongly there." Keeping her intellectual side alive and flourishing was very important to her—for herself but also for her relationship with Reggie. They shared everything intellectually—and it was their joint love of Coleridge of course that brought them to Nether Stowey for the last and very happy chapter of their lives together. They bought 11 Castle Street mainly because it had a room big enough to be a bookshop, which became "Coleridge Books", and they spent many happy years running this venture together. Shirley enjoyed adapting the house to make a wonderfully practical home, with solar panels heating the hot water, which gave her great pleasure and a fruitful garden full of raspberries, marigolds, cowslips and roses. She loved being part of this village.

Joanna

Shirley took great pleasure in collaborating with a Japanese colleague, Kiyone, adapting *The Pilgrim's Progress* to an edition for Japanese school students which was published in 1992. In the Introduction, Shirley explains how this book written by a C17th Calvinist living in England, can be of relevance to

students of English today—this is typical of her perspective that good literature speaks to universal human truths, across time and space, and that we all deserve access to that. The words from the last hymn we are going to sing today *He who would valiant be* are originally from *The Pilgrim's Progress*. And, when Reggie died 16 years ago, Shirley simply and quietly, adjusted to life as a single person enjoying all that had to offer. She continued as secretary to the Friends of Coleridge and was passionate about getting Coleridge Cottage restored. She supported the Library and enjoyed her book club. She loved walking up Watery Lane, and she developed a habit of hiding a few hazel sticks in the bushes at either end of the walk, so she could take one out and use it as a walking stick just through the woods as she passed.

Helen

Shirley continued – in her extraordinary quiet and unassuming way - to be a wonderful mother to the four of us—and a supportive and interested grandmother to her eight grandchildren—a loyal sister to Mary and a good friend to those around her.

So many of her friends from every chapter of her life have taken the trouble to tell us how they appreciated her gentle strength and intelligence, and were lifted by her warm smile. On the back of the order of service we have printed one of our favourite recent photos of Shirley, as she was setting out on one of the Quantock walks that she loved so much, which we think is a very fitting way for us all to remember her today.