

Review by Hazel K. Bell

Kathleen Coburn's *In pursuit of Coleridge* was published (by Bodley Head) in 1977. A late review, this – but my delight in reading the book was so intense that I cannot forbear to bring the good news to a new generation, of how Coburn discovered, researched, obtained for proper archives, edited, and published the manuscripts of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (STC), the English poet, philosopher and critic who died in 1834.

Kathleen Coburn, born in Canada in 1905, was the daughter of a Methodist minister. She spent all her academic life at Victoria College in the University of Toronto, becoming Professor in the English Department in 1953. She was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada (1957), Honorary Fellow of St Hugh's College, Oxford (1970), Officer of the Order of Canada (1974), and Hon.D.Litt. of Cambridge University (1975), in recognition of her intense and fruitful involvement with the works of STC. She was editor of his Notebooks (1957-90), providing footnotes and commentary; his *Philosophical Lectures* (1949); the *Letters of Sara Hutchinson* (1954), whom Coleridge loved; and delivered the Alexander Lectures published as *Experience with thought: perspectives in the Coleridge notebooks* (1979).

In pursuit of Coleridge describes how Coburn first felt intrigued by possible connections between STC and 18th-century German philosophers in 1928 during her Philosophy/English/History undergraduate course at the University of Toronto. She took this as the subject for her thesis; a Travelling Scholarship took her to England and to Oxford, where she obtained an introduction to the Coleridge family then living at Ottery St Mary, Devon - STC's birthplace. From then on, all the excitement of every aspect of literary research and publication is ardently conveyed.

There is **the social element**. Coburn's first meeting with Lord and Lady Coleridge occurred in 1930: Geoffrey, 3rd Baron, with 'a reputation for cussedness', and dislike of 'the tribe of pedants'; and diplomatic Jessie. Initially they supposed Coburn's interest to be in their home, Chanter's House. 'When I said it was chiefly in any manuscripts and annotated books of the poet in the library, I could see even her self-control quail. Not a word was said.' Geoffrey Coleridge bantered: 'Old Sam was only a poet, you know, never did anything practical that was any good to anybody, actually not thought much of in the family, a bit of a disgrace in fact ... why a young girl like you should spend your time on the old reprobate, I can't think! ... Now I at least know something about beef cattle ...'. They came to treat her with great affection, though, calling her Bookie 'for a bookworm is obviously what you are', and according her privileged access to the manuscripts, which they then allowed her to have photographed (some ten thousand pages, on special paper, cut according to the various sizes and shapes of the notebooks) and placed in the British Museum; and granting her permission to edit and publish the Notebooks. When, in 1936, Coburn reported Oxford Press having had an offer from another scholar to edit the notebooks, Lord Coleridge 'replied at once, "Find out the name of the rogue! He has no permission from me".'

The archival. Admitted to the Chanter's House library, 'The first moment of seeing the man's own books, notebooks, and handwriting, was like taking a breath of air from some other climate of existence. ... Confronted by fifty-five notebooks, two hundred books, many annotated, and the files of family letters, what could one do?'

The Reverend G. H. B. Coleridge at Leatherhead invited her to lunch, protesting, 'Why a young girl like you wants to spend a beautiful sunny afternoon like this among fusty old books mystifies me'. However, he unlocked his library cupboards for her, and at the back of the deepest lay twelve long-lost, hard-sought reports of STC's philosophical lecture course. 'It was necessary, in order to see things at the back, practically to swim breast-stroke into the cupboard. ... With the swoop of a sea-gull, or something less graceful plunging for a meal, I dived into Lecture 3, and came up with my fish - a specific reference to Tennemann. The Reverend Gerard Coleridge came home from his parish meeting to find a gibbering idiot in his study'.

The intellectual. Coburn 'caused [John Livingstone Lowes] to spill coffee over a beautiful Turkish rug by showing him a reference by Coleridge to the Wandering Jew - one he had looked for in vain when he was writing his book [*The road to Xanadu*]'. A textual problem is solved in the British Museum Department of Manuscripts shortly before her boat back to Canada sails, when she discovers a crucial mis-reading of STC's handwriting by his grandson Ernest Hartley: Studites in place of Chersites. 'Thus in a flash total defeat in research turns into triumph. A nonsensical mystery is clarified by a lucky conjunction of doors opening. ... I suppose a large part of the excitement of this sort of sleuthing is the hairsbreadth by which one might have missed it. ... At the moment of discovery I had about half an hour to get to the bank for cash for my homeward journey. It was before the days of rapid-copying, and I was too paralysed with ecstasy to transcribe accurately and had to ask Oliver to do it while I walked on air to the bank'.

The funding. Anxious that a collection of STC papers up for sale should not be dispersed into separate private hands: 'I wrote a letter to an old friend, Arthur Meighen, twice our Canadian Prime Minister. He loved English literature ... He was the one person I knew well enough to approach who had enough money and sufficient power of quick decision to lend me the sum at once, on my total non-security. ... My plan was to buy the collection and then find a donor to give it to the Victoria College Library'.

The bureaucratic. With crates of manuscripts purchased for the College packed, the necessary forms apparently all completed, her ship sailing from Southampton the next day: 'I found an urgent message from the signing officer in the Board of Trade. The forms must be typed in triplicate, each case of manuscripts to be listed separately, and I might still have to do some talking to get permission to export. ... My desk in the British Museum was still littered with unsolved problems, but instinct told me that if I had a difficult diplomatic mission ahead of me with the Board of Trade, I should take the time to buy a new hat.'

The travelling. As well as observing the necessity 'to see every Coleridge manuscript wherever it was' - Cornell, Harvard, Yale, Chicago, Vermont, England - Coburn traced STC's footsteps through Malta, Sicily, Italy, Germany, to check the actual sites against his recorded impressions; and to Durham Cathedral Library 'to examine the borrowers' book to see what Coleridge had read there in 1801'.

Through it all, Coburn continued to teach full-time at Victoria College. She purchased an island in Georgian Bay where a cottage was built for her (in a month) by Canadian Indians, to which she retreated for periods of work on STC.

At last began the preparation for publication of the edited notebooks. By 1952 Coburn had funding for a typist, indexer and research assistant; through 1953 she was working on the text and notes of the first volume, to be printed in New York. 'By now a rough notion of the probable division into volumes of these million words or more was possible. Volume One would extend from 1794 to Coleridge's departure from the Lakes in 1804 for Malta.' Volumes 2-5 would divide into 1804-1808, 1808-19, 1819-27, 1827-end.

The indexing. The index was begun in advance of page-proofs, by notebook and entry numbers. This work was done by Gertrude Boyle, retired cataloguer of the Toronto Public Reference Library, with 'a splendid intolerance of inaccuracy - Coleridge's, mine, and everyone else's. ... The process she put me through in coming to the principles and practices we arrived at was more than worth the agony. She saved me, as good indexers do, from many slips, oversights, and downright errors. Illness overtook her towards the end of her work on Volume Two, since when the indexing has been less provocative.'

Proof correction brought highest drama.

My typescript of Volume I had gone in [to the Bollingen Foundation], Text and Notes, by the fall of 1953. Problems of printer, design, discussions about style, and the copy-editing in New York consumed 1954. The whole of 1955 was lived in a recurrent state of alarm over proofs. Aeons seemed to pass before the first galleys arrived, and then, so difficult and eccentric was the text, and so unequivocal Bollingen's desire to convey as fully and meticulously as print could, what Coleridge's intentions were, so

many strange situations cropped up in every ten lines of type, that it was necessary to have revised galleys, page-proofs and revised page-proofs. The really alarming consequence of such generosity in multiple proofs is that the more revises, the more chances of errors creeping in. With a stab of fright one sees in the final page-proof, 'Cristabel' for 'Christabel', which has been correct up to then, or still more horrific, in a list of works projected by Coleridge, by the printer's transposition of a letter, "An Essay on Bowles" has become "An Essay on Bowels". Most hair-raising of all the proof-corrections was one that occurred during a September gale on Georgian Bay. I discovered that a whole stanza of a two-verse poem had been dropped out of the revised page-proofs of Volume I. It had been in the last galleys, but in the cutting up of galleys into pages it had got lost. Pages cannot be stretched to accommodate extra stanzas of verse. I already knew that Bollingen expected the whole volume to be "put to bed" the next week, so the absolute deadline was upon us. Suddenly I saw how the error could be patched up ... But it had to reach New York in time!

I had no motor boat, and almost all the neighbouring cottages within five miles or so were closed for the season. One family about four miles away was pulling out the next day for Cleveland, Ohio.

Leaving a note for Johnson to follow me if he happened to turn up (because the wind was rising and I was not sure how it would be on my return trip), and putting three or four sizable rocks in the canoe, I tied up the corrected page of proof and a letter in a water-proof bag and had an exhilarating paddle over a stretch of open water in a gusting south-wester. The Clevelanders were just about to leave, and kindly took my packet and a telephone message to Bollingen.'

Excitement over the indexing continues.

The patience of my doughty little indexer was often stretched but never exhausted, and she gave that kind of stern support that only a conscientious indexer can give, correcting my errors or laziness, insisting on decisions when I thought I was too busy to make them, and generally sparing neither herself nor me in the interest of her "Mr Coleridge".

Volume I of the *Notebooks* was published in 1957, to such a scholarly welcome that the Bollingen Foundation agreed to sponsor a full collected edition of STC's works. This was announced in the Times Literary Supplement in 1960, to consist of 'about twenty volumes, including an index volume', with Coburn as General Editor, and with fourteen other editors round the world. By 1977 when *In pursuit of Coleridge* appeared, six volumes had been published.

In 1958 Coburn visited Dublin because 'Coleridge had been reading some strange Irish books ... which I could not track down in England'. She learned from the National Librarian that he was having a complete file of the oldest daily paper in the English language indexed by six

forgers, embezzlers, and other bright boys' from the penitentiary. The cost was one cigarette a day for the indexers, whose work was checked at the library, wherefrom books were supplied 'to help them to understand the subjects they are dealing with - architecture, government, history - everything'. Coburn adds, 'I tried to interest some prison officials in the idea when I got home, but unsuccessfully'.

In her final chapter Coburn reviews 'the whole experience of editing Coleridge':

The first and most important part of the process of editing the notebooks was to find out, "... by nature's quietness / And solitary musings ..." what the questions really were. Later in the British Museum, weeks and months were needed to dig and delve for answers, and to squirrel away hundreds of reference acorns. The third stage, the writing of notes or polishing them to as concentrated a form as possible, seems always to require the Georgian Bay peace. In the beginning the process was a straightforward one of physical ordering, reading, accumulating some sense of STC's interests and chief concerns.'

Now this splendid book has begotten a literary successor. A.S. Byatt has recorded how, in the British Library, she watched 'that great Coleridge scholar, Kathleen Coburn, circumambulating the catalogue', and thought, 'She has given her life to his thoughts, and she has mediated his thoughts to me. Does he possess her, or does she possess him? There could be a novel called *Possession* about the relationships between living and dead minds'. And indeed, now that we can all read the wonderful *Possession*, a fictional account of twentieth-century research into nineteenth-century writings, indeed therein the initial visit of the modern scholars, Maud and Roland, to the ancestral home of the Victorian poet, now lived in and guarded by her unappreciative collateral descendants, much resembles that first embarrassed meeting of Coburn and the latter-day Coleridges.

Kathleen Coburn died in 1991, the year after *Possession* was published. Did she know that her own research into literature had itself transmuted into literature?

Acknowledgement

I would like to express thanks to Dr Michael Crane of the University of Otago for drawing my attention to *In pursuit of Coleridge*, and suggesting its connection with the novel, *Possession: a romance*.

– This review article by Hazel K. Bell appeared in *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* Vol. 29 No. 1 October 1997, pages 56-61

In pursuit of Coleridge. Item Preview. remove-circle. Share or Embed This Item. EMBED. In pursuit of Coleridge. by. Coburn, Kathleen. Publication date. 1977. Topics. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 1772-1834, Literature. Includes index. Access-restricted-item. true. 202 pages. This edition doesn't have a description yet. Can you add one? In pursuit of Coleridge. This edition was published in 1977 by Bodley Head in London. Edition Notes. Includes index. Classifications. Dewey Decimal Class. 821/.7. Library of Congress. PR4485 .C6 1977. Nearly 1,400 entries, throwing light on a little-known period: Coleridge's voyage from England to the Mediterranean, his government service in Malta, and his travels in Sicily and Italy. Together with his metrical experiments, studies of Italian poetry and language, and attempts at writing cipher, there are revealing glimpses into such intimate matters as his addiction to opium and his love for Sara Hutchinson. No customer reviews. 5 star5 star (0%). 0%. 4 star4 star (0%). Kathleen Coburn. Bodley Head, 1977 - Biography as a literary form - 202 pages. 0 Reviews. From inside the book. What people are saying - Write a review. Index. 195. Copyright. Bibliographic information. Title. In Pursuit of Coleridge. Author. Kathleen Coburn. Contributors. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wordsworth Collection. Edition. illustrated. Publisher. Bodley Head, 1977. Original from. the University of Michigan. Digitized. 5 Mar 2008. ISBN. 0370300025, 9780370300023. Length. 202 pages. Export Citation. BiBTex EndNote RefMan.