

From

The Coleridge Bulletin

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge
New Series 28 (NS) Winter 2006

© 2006 Contributor all rights reserved

<http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm>

Joseph Cottle and West-Country Romanticism

Richard Cronin

IN OCTOBER, 1799, Coleridge travelled from Bristol with his publisher, Joseph Cottle, to meet Wordsworth at Sockburn-on-Tees. The three men embarked on a tour of Wordsworth's beloved Lake Country, but on October 30, at Greta Bridge, Cottle left the party and travelled south. 'It was a tactful departure', notes Mary Moorman, 'Wordsworth and Coleridge wanted to be by themselves'.¹ That leave-taking has a symbolic value: it marks the birth of the Lake School of Romantic poetry, and yet Joseph Cottle, the man so brusquely dismissed by Moorman, staked a claim to have originated that school himself, and not in the Lake District but some 250 miles to the South, in Bristol:

Many might think it no small honour (without the slightest tincture of vanity) to have been the friend, in early life, of such men as *Southey*, *Coleridge*, *Wordsworth*, and *Lamb*: to have encouraged them in their first productions, and to have published, as it respects *each* of them, his *first* Volume of Poems.

Typically, this is not quite accurate,² but it was, as Cottle rightly insisted, 'a distinction that might never occur again to a Provincial bookseller'.³ It seemed to Cottle an 'extraordinary circumstance that Mr. Coleridge in his "Biographia Literaria" should have passed over in silence, all distinct reference to Bristol, the cradle of his literature, and for many years his favourite abode'.⁴ He was moved to publish his *Early Recollections* to correct Coleridge's omission, to celebrate a period in the life of his city when 'so many men of genius were there congregated, as to justify the designation, "The Augustan Age of Bristol,"⁵ and, with pardonable egotism, to remind the reading public of his own status as the provincial west-country Maecenas.

But Cottle goes further than that. He demands recognition not just as the publisher of Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth, but as their fellow poet. He begins and ends his book with a list of his own publications, and he carefully records the rather guarded compliments that they earned him—Wordsworth's praise of 'Malvern Hills' and the 'Monody on Henderson',⁶ the poem addressed to him by Coleridge in which he is complimented for writing verse on which the eye may 'gaze undazzled' (1, 282-4),⁷ even Coleridge's admission that the preface to the second edition of Cottle's epic poem *Alfred* was 'well written'.⁸ It may be that Cottle's friends were more sincere when they

¹ Mary Moorman: *Wordsworth: A Biography*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957-65), 1, p. 447

² Strictly, Cottle could claim that he was the first publisher only of Charles Lamb

³ Joseph Cottle: *Early Recollections; Chiefly Relating to the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge, During His Long Residence in Bristol*, 2 vols (London: Longman, Rees and Co, and Hamilton, Adama, and Co, 1837), 1 p. 309

⁴ Joseph Cottle, *Early Recollections*, Preface, p. viii

⁵ Joseph Cottle, *Early Recollections*, Preface, pp. ix-x

⁶ Joseph Cottle, *Early Recollections*, 1, pp. 273-4

⁷ Joseph Cottle, *Early Recollections*, 1, pp. 282-4

⁸ Joseph Cottle, *Early Recollections*, 2, p. 149

commented behind his back. When he published *Alfred*, an epic in twenty-four books, Southey wrote, 'I fear the Reviews will half induce him to hang himself,'⁹ which was particularly hard since Cottle had so clearly modelled his poem on Southey's own *Joan of Arc*, for which in 1796 Cottle had paid Southey 50 guineas and published in a handsome quarto.¹⁰ As Lamb pointed out, Cottle 'imitates Southey, as Rowe did Shakespeare'.¹¹ In the event, Southey's fears were unfounded. Cottle's enormous poem was largely ignored. The one extensive notice, in the *Monthly Review*,¹² was dismissive but its tone is more regretful than savage—*Alfred* is an unfortunate instance of epic 'pretensions' indulged by one of only 'moderate talents'. It is not really an epic so much as 'a plain *tale*; not highly elevated above prose, either by imagery or versification', an instance of 'the bad consequences resulting from some hasty opinions lately promulgated respecting simplicity of diction'. Cottle, it seems, is a victim of Wordsworth's preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Cottle had published the first edition himself, but the reviewer seems unaware of this: 'With Mr. Cottle we are totally unacquainted'. Nevertheless, the reviewer confidently enrols him as a humble follower of the poetic school of which Cottle, as the publisher of Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge, seems to have thought of himself as the founder. Coleridge, it might be felt, gave the conclusive riposte to any such claim in 1804 when he grouped Cottle with Campbell and Rogers as 'pseudo-poets' who contrive 'both by their writings and moral characters... to bring poetry into disgrace.' The name Cottle, Seamus Perry notes, 'has been written over, but is still discernible.'¹³

This was ungenerous to a man who had so often lent him money. Cottle's moral character is, I grant, easier to defend than his writings,¹⁴ and yet Cottle's poetry does, I think, serve to indicate that when he published Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth it was not only because he recognised their talent, or, in his own words, 'predicted for them that distinction which the Public at first rather tardily admitted:' he was enrolling them in a project of his own, a single grand project that seems to underlie his activities as both publisher and poet, and I want to begin by sketching what I take that project to have been.

First, and most obviously, there is Cottle's local patriotism. *Alfred* is designed explicitly and proudly as an epic of the West Country.¹⁵ When a timid counsellor suggests that Alfred delay battle until his army is reinforced by

⁹ *New Letters of Robert Southey*, ed Kenneth Curry, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 1, p 228

¹⁰ See *The Poetical Works of Robert Southey* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1876), p

¹¹ *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed E V Lucas (London: Methuen, 1905), Vol VI, *Letters 1796-1820*, p 185

¹² *Monthly Review*, 35 (May, 1801), 1-9

¹³ *Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection*, ed Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp 89 and 229

¹⁴ The fullest and most sympathetic account of Cottle of which I am aware is Basil Cottle, *Joseph Cottle of Bristol* (Bristol: Bristol Branch of the Historical Association Local Pamphlets, 1987)

¹⁵ For alternative accounts of *Alfred* that do not stress its west-country character, see Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp 168-9; Lynda Pratt, 'Patriot Poetics and the Romantic National Epic: Placing and Displacing Southey's *Joan of Arc*' in *Placing and Displacing Romanticism*, ed Peter Kitson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp 88-105; and Lynda Pratt, 'Anglo-Saxon Attitudes? Alfred the Great and Romantic National Epic' in *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp 138-56

Mercians, the King responds witheringly. Mercia is not to be relied on. 'Now be our trust / Dependent on ourselves!' (9, 272-3):

Let others shrink,
 Inglorious from the conflict, to herself
 If Wessex be but true, altho' her ranks
 May not with Danes compare, yet shall her zeal
 Furnish new armies, troops invincible,
 And compensate for each deficiency,
 By her own courage. (9, 236-42)

The poem is an expression of Cottle's 'local fondness' (10, 80), but, then, so was the whole of his career. His poems, from *Malvern Hills* (1797) to *The Fall of Cambria* (1808) and *Dartmoor, and other poems* (1823), celebrate a West Country that includes Devon, Cornwall and Wales, a nation within a nation of which the capital is Cottle's own city of Bristol. In this Cottle was no more than a typical citizen of Bristol of his time. It was a city in which civic pride ran deep. In his *New History* of the city, for example, the Rev. George Heath does not simply insist that Bristol is England's second city, he makes it London's rival: St Paul's and Westminster Abbey are matched by Bristol Cathedral and 'the Church of St Mary at Redcliff';¹⁶ it is not outdone by London in its cultural facilities, its theatre, schools and its five newspapers; it is London's equal, too, in the variety of goods on sale in its shops, and outdoes London in their cheapness and the civility of the shopkeepers; and its Exchange represents a concentration of wealth that, relative to its population, exceeds that of London itself. Heath divides England into two nations, a nation of the East, in which 'the two finest cities' are London and Oxford, matched by a nation of the West of which Bristol is 'the capital Key and great Mart' and the place of Oxford is taken by Bath, 'the most elegant City in the Kingdom without exception' (p. 32). He draws the boundaries of the Western nation widely. Its capital, Bristol, 'stands so near the confluence of the River Avon with the Severn, that it enjoys the Navigation and Trade of that great river and adjacent Country: and of a vast extent of Sea Coasts down the British Channel: of Somerset, Devon, Cornwall and Wales.' This describes very precisely the nation within a nation of which Cottle appointed himself laureate. His brief career as a publisher should also be understood in this context. In publishing the four young poets he advanced a claim that his native Bristol might, just as well as London, be a centre from which an ambitious young writer could launch a literary career. He seems to have communicated his local patriotism to his young friends, not just Southey, who as a native Bristolian like Cottle himself might be expected to share it, but Coleridge too. 'I love Bristol & I do not love London,' he wrote to Thomas Poole in July, 1796.¹⁷

¹⁶ The Rev. George Heath, *The New History Survey and Description of the City and Suburbs of Bristol* (Bristol: W. Matthews, 1794), p. 54

¹⁷ *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71), 1, p. 227

But it was not just local pride that in the years in which he met Southey and Coleridge induced Cottle to proclaim himself a citizen of West England. He identified East England, the nation governed from London, with Pitt's war machine. His Bristol acquaintance, he remembers in *Early Recollections*, were united in their 'detestation of the French war,'¹⁸ and it was the main purpose of one of the very first volumes that he published, his own *Poems* of 1795, to express that detestation. Cottle's Preface identifies 'War; a fragment' as the volume's most important poem. He offers it to the public 'from a belief, that it is the duty of every man to raise his feeble voice in support of sinking humanity, and not to be content with thanking God, that he feels indignant at the enormities of war, without labouring to inspire the same abhorrence in the breast of others.'¹⁹ He insists on the disconnection between the interests of those who instigate wars and those who fight them: 'the peasantry of a country are unacquainted with what is termed the political interests of different states, and from their occupations, necessarily imbibe sentiments of benevolence; and yet, these are the instruments in the hands of tyranny for propagating war, and all its horrid consequences.' (Preface, p.viii) The poem itself enforces the point through the sentimental tale of Orlando who is seduced from his happy village life by a company of soldiers who 'Laugh'd at [his] garments, dwelt on [his] distress' ('War, A Fragment, 136), and dies in battle gazing forlornly on the picture of Catherine, the village girl that he loves. This figure, the peasant ripped from his village home and domestic attachments by war, recurs in a very large number of the poems written by Cottle's school of poets, from *Joan of Arc* to *The Ruined Cottage*. The only war that Cottle is prepared to countenance is a defensive war fought to repel an invading army or to overthrow a tyrannical ruler:

Yet; if invaded rights the task demand,
 If men behold oppress'd their native land,
 By foreign despots, wand'ring far for prey,
 Who locust-like, with ruin mark their way;
 Or, see their Prince direct the Nation's helm,
 In ruin's surge, his people to o'erwhelm:
 Reward for foulest deeds a venal tribe,
 Nor shun to blacken whom he cannot bribe

'Twill then be right to grasp the blazing spear.
 ('War, a fragment', 323-34)

This does more than justify the defensive war being fought by revolutionary France against the invading Allied armies, it comes close to proclaiming the

¹⁸ Joseph Cottle, *Early Recollections*, p. 28

¹⁹ Joseph Cottle, *Poems, containing John the Baptist. Sir Malcolm Alla, a tale, shewing to all the world what women's love can do. War, a fragment. With a monody to John Henderson and a sketch of his character.* (Bristol: Joseph Cottle, 1795), Preface, p. ii The first edition was published anonymously, but Cottle acknowledged his authorship of the expanded second edition, which appeared in the following year

justice of a civil war designed to overthrow the British state.

Cottle claims citizenship of a West England, then, as a signal of his opposition to the war, but he has other reasons too, and reasons that proved longer-lasting. By 1801, when he published *Alfred*, he had clearly, like Coleridge, Southey and Wordsworth, come to the view that Napoleonic France represented a greater threat to peace than Britain under Pitt. Alfred defends our 'clift-bound isle in this tremendous hour' (9, 321) against the assault of the Danes in a manner clearly designed to inspire Cottle's countrymen in their defence of Britain against Napoleon's invasion force. But his Alfred is emphatically King of Wessex rather than of England, as a happy consequence of which Cottle succeeds in writing a national epic that contrives to avoid even a single reference to London, the nation's capital city. Cottle's insistence on identifying himself as a west-country poet is an expression of his hostility to the centralised state, and this too was a matter in which his young protégés agreed with him. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's pained bewilderment as he paces London's streets joins with the presentiment that he claims to have felt in Robespierre's Paris where

Liberty, and Life, and Death would soon
To the remotest corners of the land
Lie in the arbitrement of those who ruled
The capital City. (Book X, 108-11, 1805 text)

In this as in most other matters it is Southey who seems closest to Cottle. *Joan of Arc* ends with Joan crowning Charles at Rheims. Her later fortunes, her betrayal, imprisonment and ignominious death, are admitted into the poem only as dim forebodings of her future fate that Joan must ignore if she is to fulfil her sacred mission. But Southey's decision to end his poem where he does has another effect. It allows him to write a French national epic that excludes Paris almost as effectively as *Alfred* excludes London. *Joan of Arc*, like *Alfred*, is at once a national and a provincial epic, in which Joan's journey takes her from her native Domrémy, to Chinon, Orléans and at last to Rheims. The King's court has moved to Chinon, because Paris is in the hands of the English:

Paris with her servile sons
A headstrong mutable ferocious race,
Bow'd to the invader's yoke, since that sad hour
When Faction o'er her streets with giant stride
Strode Terrible, and Murder and Revenge,
As by the midnight torches' lurid light
They mark'd their mangled victims writhe convuls'd,
Listen'd the deep death groans. (3, 62-9)²⁰

²⁰ Robert Southey, *Joan of Arc, an epic poem* (Bristol: Joseph Cottle, 1796) Quotations are from this, the first edition of the poem, unless otherwise stated

A note refers to the massacre of the Armagnacs by the Burgundians in May and June 1418, but the poem goes on to observe that this is just one episode in the history of a city ‘drench’d with human blood’, and doomed centuries later to ‘know the damning guilt / Of Brissot murder’d, and the blameless wife / Of Roland!’. This is recognizably the same Paris in which, Wordsworth was to claim, he foresaw the full horrors to which the centralised nation state was exposed.

Hostility towards centralisation was, for Cottle, an expression of his religious as much as his political values. As a Baptist he professed a proudly sectarian faith, that is, a faith that insisted on the full independence of local churches. On this he was in full agreement with the Unitarian Coleridge.²¹ But his faith was also sectarian in a more informal sense in which the word may denote a broad and loose range of attitudes: amongst them, anti-Catholicism; the narrowness of mind that struck Hazlitt as characteristic of the Dissenting community as well as the attachment to civil liberties that impressed him;²² a generous sympathy for the poor together with a conviction of the moral virtue of hard work; a contempt for self-indulgence, whether revealed in drinking, gambling, or sexual laxity; a high value set on domestic virtues and on female modesty; and a tendency to adopt a preacherly tone often underlined by the use of biblical rhythms. Once again, Cottle’s *Alfred* is the best guide to this. Alfred is Cottle’s hero in large part because his translation of the Bible into English gives Cottle ample opportunity for condemnation of the wicked Catholic preference for the Vulgate. Cottle frequently dwells on the evils of war, but almost as often on the evils of strong drink. His Alfred lodges for some time with an aged cottager, and imbibes from him the simple ethic that the cottager learned from his own father:

‘Rise betimes,
‘Let thy first thoughts ascend to heavenly things,
‘Be frugal, fear not work, and never drink
‘Aught but this brook.’ (13, 319-22)

In such passages Cottle claims—and some readers will find the effect comical—an epic universality for his own provincial, nonconformist values. It is more surprising that so many of those virtues are shared by Southey’s Joan of Arc, who is represented, somewhat oddly given Southey’s Church of England upbringing, as a non-conformist heroine. Southey is loud in his condemnation of Catholic superstition while still allowing Joan her paranormal powers, and the effect is to convert Joan’s ‘voices’ into the inner voice of conscience that, for all nonconformists, supersedes the authority of the priesthood. Southey is almost as emphatic as Cottle in his condemnation of strong drink, whether imbibed by bishops, politicians, country squires,

²¹ On Cottle’s religion, see Timothy Whelan, ‘Joseph Cottle the Baptist,’ *Chales Lamb Bulletin*, 111 (July, 2000), 96-108

²² See *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed P P Howe, 21 vols, (London: J M Dent and Sons, 1930-4), IV, p 47 and VII, pp 239-42)

university dons or electors (9, 511-60), and the prophecy that most nearly prompts Joan to despair is not that she will be burnt alive, but that she will be chained to the stake with her breasts exposed (9, 266-83).

So, in Bristol in the 1790s, Cottle grouped together a school of poets united in their opposition to the war, in a defiant provincialism through which they expressed their distrust of the centralised state, and in their attachment to a set of values that might be described as sectarian, or more politely as non-conformist. His decision in 1796 to publish Southey's *Joan of Arc* in quarto and to make it, in Southey's words, 'the handsomest book that Bristol had ever yet sent forth'²³ indicates that he had identified Southey's poem as the flagship volume of the new school. Surprisingly, its other members agreed. 'Why the poem is alone sufficient to redeem the character of the age we live in from the imputation of degenerating in Poetry', wrote Lamb in June,²⁴ and in November Coleridge assured Thelwall that the poem established Southey as the peer of Homer, Milton and Tasso: 'The first and fourth books of the *Joan of Arc* are to me more interesting than the same number of Lines in any poem whatsoever'.²⁵ The reaction was almost as swift. Lamb qualified his verdict within days of announcing it: 'Perhaps I had estimated Southey's merits too much by number, weight and measure'.²⁶ By December Coleridge agreed with Thelwall that Southey was incapable of 'that *toil* of thinking, which is necessary in order to plan a *Whole*',²⁷ and by March the following year he had decided that Southey had utterly misconstrued the bent of his talents which were for dramatic rather than epic poetry.²⁸ Little wonder that when, some years later, it became known that Cottle himself was planning to publish *Alfred* in an attempt to match Southey's achievement even his own poets responded with derision.

Joan of Arc and *Alfred* are both of them poems deeply divided against themselves; epics on the horrors of war that nevertheless choose warriors as their heroes, republican epics that end one of them in a coronation and the other with Alfred reasserting his sovereignty through his defeat of the Danes. They are provincial epics, or a better term might be cottage epics. They are poems that reveal Southey and Cottle as writers ill at ease with the genre they have chosen, and both pass on their discomfort to their heroes. Southey's Joan is a woman whose 'mission' diverts her from her proper life. She is a village girl who must involve herself with court affairs that she finds distasteful, a tender-hearted maiden who must lead her people into battle and cleave her way violently through the armed ranks of the English, a woman whose true ambition is to lead a life of quiet, loving domesticity with her Theodore but is obliged instead to live a life of lonely celibacy. Cottle's Alfred seems equally

²³ Southey's own judgement. See the Preface to *Joan of Arc* in *The Poetical Works of Robert Southey* (London: Longman, Green and Co, 1876), p. 2.

²⁴ *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, Vol. VI, p. 13.

²⁵ *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1, p. 258.

²⁶ *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, Vol. VI, p. 27.

²⁷ *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1, p. 294.

²⁸ *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1, p. 313.

uncomfortable in his role as king. He is a poet and a scholar forced to become a military leader, a king whose preferred life is one of rural retirement. Hence his decision, for which his motives remain obscure, to leave his army and spend so much of the poem living the life of a humble cottager. ‘My little reign / Hath not disclosed my character’, he complains (11, 71-2). *Joan of Arc* and *Alfred* are not so much poems that betray the inappropriateness of the epic enterprise in Bristol in the 1790s as poems that take that inappropriateness as their unacknowledged subject. The provincial epic is, after all, a blatant misnomer, at any rate for most eighteenth-century commentators on the genre who thought of the epic as the most powerful expression and agent of the unity of the culture that had produced it.²⁹ For such commentators national cultures centred on their epic poems in much the same way that nation states centred on their capital cities, so that the epic poem was a peculiarly inappropriate enterprise for a school of poets dedicated to the celebration of a decentralised state.

It was a point that Southey’s and Cottle’s colleagues quickly grasped. Lamb concluded that the true value of *Joan of Arc* was located in the ‘anecdotes interspersed among the Battles,’³⁰ and Coleridge agreed. Southey’s true talent was for the ‘soothing & sonnetlike description’ in which Coleridge continued to think Southey ‘unrivalled.’³¹ The cumbersome epic framework of *Joan of Arc* was only a distraction. By 1801, when Cottle published *Alfred*, Lamb repeated his point with a good deal more asperity:

Four-and-twenty Books to read in the dog-days! I got as far as the Mad Monk the first day, & fainted. Mr. Cottle’s genius strongly points him to the *Pastoral*, but his inclinations divert him perpetually from his calling.³²

Cottle thought the epic poem the proper mark of the cultural importance of the school of poets that he published; the twelve books of *Joan of Arc*, the twenty-four books of *Alfred*, both poems issued in imposing quarto volumes. But it seemed to Lamb and Coleridge that the provincial epic was not so much a radical generic innovation as a contradiction in terms. That recognition, I suspect, does much to explain why it was that in the years following the publication of *Joan of Arc*, almost all of Cottle’s poets, including Southey, involved themselves in a range of apparently erratic generic experiments: reviving established genres such as the sonnet, the tragedy, and various kinds of topographical poetry such as the retirement poem and the inscription poem; cultivating generic hybrids, the best remembered of which is the lyrical ballad;

²⁹ The transition from a notion of epic as formally unified to the notion that the epic poem at once expressed and produced the unity of the culture within which it was written is most commonly associated with Vico and Herder, but it was very widely disseminated

³⁰ *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, Vol VI, p 15

³¹ *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1, p 293

³² *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, Vol VI, p 185

and devising genres which the poets thought of as quite new, the Coleridgean conversation poem, for example, or the poems that Southey titled ‘English Eclogues’ and described as bearing ‘no resemblance to any poems in our language’.³³

There is some evidence that Cottle himself came to agree that the true monument to the west-country school of poetry over which he presided was not *Alfred* nor *Joan of Arc*, not even *Lyrical Ballads*, the volume through which he has achieved his modest place in literary history. He agreed to publish *Lyrical Ballads* after Wordsworth had recited some poems that struck him as having ‘a peculiar, but decided merit’ and would, he thought, be ‘well received.’³⁴ It meant declining Coleridge’s suggestion that he publish ‘Wordsworth’s Salisbury Plain & Tale of a Woman which two poems with a few others which he would add & the notes will make a volume.’³⁵ When he looked back at that decision almost forty years later he seems to have had second thoughts. In a note to *Early Recollections* he wrote, ‘This Poem of “Salisbury Plain” (except an extract in Vol. 1, *Lyrical Ballads*) has not yet been published. It was always with me a great favourite, and, with the exception of the “Excursion,” the poem of all others, on which I thought Mr. Wordsworth might most advantageously rest his fame as a poet.’³⁶ In 1798 Cottle had passed up the opportunity to publish together in one volume ‘Adventures on Salisbury Plain’ and the poem that was to become the first book of *The Excursion*: he had missed his opportunity, he may by then have recognised, of bringing out the volume that would have best defined his whole project.

Cottle’s school of poets was most easily defined geographically, by its connection with the West Country, and by its opposition to the war on Revolutionary France. On both counts ‘Adventures on Salisbury Plain’ would have recommended itself to Cottle. But it is ‘The Ruined Cottage’ that seems the more closely implicated in the project.³⁷ E. P. Thompson was the first to suggest that Wordsworth found the clue for Margaret’s story in *Joan of Arc*.³⁸

Of unrecorded name
Died the mean man; yet did he leave behind
One who did never say her daily prayers
Of him forgetful; who to every tale
Of the distant war, lending an eager ear,
Grew pale and trembled. At her cottage door,

³³ See the Preface to *English Eclogues* in *The Poetical Works of Robert Southey* (London: Longman, Green and Co, 1876), p. 149

³⁴ Joseph Cottle, *Early Recollections*, 1, p. 309

³⁵ *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1, p. 239

³⁶ Joseph Cottle, *Early Recollections*, 1, p. 314 (note)

³⁷ All quotations from *The Ruined Cottage* are from the ‘B’ manuscript as given in *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, ed. James Butler (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), this being the version of the poem closest to the version read by Cottle in 1798

³⁸ See E. P. Thompson, ‘Disenchantment or Default?: A Lay Sermon,’ in *Power and Consciousness*, ed. Conor Cruise O’Brien and William Dean Vanecch (London: University of London Press, 1969), p. 151

The wretched one shall sit, and with dim eye
 Gaze o'er the plain, where on his parting steps
 Her last look hung. Nor ever shall she know
 Her husband dead, but tortur'd with vain hope,
 Gaze on—then heart-sick turn to her poor babe,
 And weep it fatherless. (7, 320-31)

But Southey, who knew Wordsworth's poem in manuscript, may have anticipated Thompson's discovery. At any rate, when he revised this passage for the 1798 edition of his poem, he brings his war widow still closer to Wordsworth's Margaret:

Nor ever shall she know
 Her husband dead, but cherishing a hope,
 Whose falsehood inwardly she knows too well,
 Feel life itself with that false hope decay...³⁹

The poem fixed itself in Cottle's mind too. As he wanders through Wessex his Alfred is struck by the devastation wrought by the Danish invasion:

How beat my heart,
 When as I pass'd some cottage, roofless, burnt,
 I saw the little garden, still adorn'd
 With many an humble plant, and bedded round,
 With the wild thyme, tho' half o'ergrown with weeds,
 That springing up, declared no master near
 To check them, or relieve the scatter'd flowers
 That from beneath peep'd out. (11,131-42)

Wordsworth had taken one of the 'Anecdotes interspersed among the battles' that Lamb admired in *Joan of Arc* and freed it from its incongruous context. In a crass, some might say characteristically crass, manoeuvre, Cottle undoes all that work. The 'Anecdote', the 'soothing & sonnetlike description,' is welded back into the ponderous epic machinery from which Wordsworth had released it.

Southey and Cottle both write cottage epics. Southey takes as his hero a young woman obliged against her will to abandon her village home for the court and the camp, and Cottle chooses a poet and a scholar who, by an accident of birth, is also a king and hence disqualified from the life of rural retirement that he would prefer. The heroes are incongruous, because so is the project. Southey and Cottle write epics as a way of claiming authority for their own provincial, non-conformist values, but the genre they choose contradicts the values that they espouse. As Wordsworth shows, the value of the provincial is better sustained by a 'tale of silent suffering, hardly clothed / In

³⁹ Robert Southey, *Joan of Arc*, second edition (Bristol: N Biggs for Longman, 1798), Book VII, 334-7

bodily form' (293-4). Jonathan Wordsworth remains, for me, the best reader of *The Ruined Cottage*, not just in his admiration but in his impatience, as when he finds the poem 'appallingly propagandist', deformed by 'overt moralizing' and by 'priggishness as grotesque as anything the later Wordsworth ever produced.'⁴⁰ His irritation reveals his sensitivity to the peculiarity of the poem's narrative voice, from which many readers seem to have been distracted by Wordsworth's insistence to Isabella Fenwick that the Pedlar was 'chiefly an idea of what I fancied my own character might have become in his circumstances.'⁴¹ This may be true but the Pedlar, unsurprisingly, is what he is, precisely because of those circumstances—the circumstances of his schooling, for example, which was quite unlike Wordsworth's. Instead of a classical education he 'learned to read / His bible' (54-5), and the rhythms of the Bible continue to inform his every utterance, so that the pious tags which intersperse his speech seem wholly unselfconscious, as when Margaret and Robert's children are described as 'their best hope next to the God in heaven,' (184) or, however much it rankles with many modern critics, when the Pedlar remarks that to the misery produced by two bad harvests 'It pleased heaven to add / A worse affliction in the plague of war' (187-8). The Pedlar's school is defined by its distance from any metropolitan centre, 'Far from the sight of city spire, or sound / Of Minster church' (57-8), and the Pedlar's profession seems chosen as a guarantee that his wandering life will remain at a distance from cities. His is a definitively provincial existence, and so are the values that he espouses. Southey and Cottle are strident in their approval of water-drinking: Wordsworth explains why. Through his focus on the well on which a spider's web encroaches, and the 'useless fragment of a wooden bowl' (145), he makes of the water that Margaret was in the habit of offering to wayfarers the proper mark of the community that joins human beings each to each. The broken bowl is 'useless', and the epithet signals the Pedlar's attachment to the central provincial values of industry and thrift. Robert's youthful virtues are all of them summed up in the description of him as 'an industrious man' (172), and the decline of both husband and wife is marked by phrases such as 'the idle loom' (470) and 'a sleepy hand of negligence' (440). Weeds represent an offence against ethical rather than aesthetic standards—'worthless stone-crop' (368), 'unprofitable bind-weed' (372), and the toadstool with its 'lazy head' (488)—and the values against which they offend are definingly and defiantly provincial. Even the Pedlar's literary taste is marked by its distance from London: 'His eye / Flashing poetic fire, he would repeat / The songs of Burns.' (70-2)

Unlikely as it may seem, the Pedlar seems to be modelled on Southey's Joan of Arc. She is the 'destined Maid': he is the 'chosen son' (76). She hears voices, and so does he, though the voices he hears are firmly naturalised:

⁴⁰ Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity: A Critical Study of Wordsworth's Ruined Cottage* (London: Nelson, 1969), pp 17-8

⁴¹ *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed Jared Curtis (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), p 79

To him was given an ear which deeply felt
 The voice of Nature in the obscure wind,
 The sounding mountain and the running stream.(77-9)

The Pedlar is even, like Joan, suspected of ‘madness’ (93). But Southey, like Cottle after him, faced with the problem of how to confer dignity and authority on the provincial values that his character embodies, can think only of dressing her up as an epic hero. Wordsworth devises for his Pedlar a voice that can assume that dignity and that authority without any need for fancy dress. One of the chief functions of the young man to whom the Pedlar tells the story is to point out his success:

He had rehearsed
 Her homely tale with such familiar power,
 With such a countenance of love, an eye
 So busy, that the things of which he spake
 Seemed present . . . (266-70)

There is nothing quite like the voice that speaks *The Ruined Cottage* in Wordsworth’s earlier poetry. It is distinguished by the almost oxymoronic quality that the young man calls ‘familiar power,’ and located in a character, the Pedlar, whose authority is wholly unqualified by the quiet acceptance of his own social status that leads him to address his young auditor as ‘sir’. His is the voice that Southey and Cottle were both straining after, the voice of quiet, confident, provincial authority, which is why *The Ruined Cottage*, as Joseph Cottle himself, it may be, came to recognize, is the masterpiece of what I have called west-country romanticism. In this poem of Wordsworth’s Cottle’s project finally and fully justified itself, but it may also be the case that Wordsworth would not have written *The Ruined Cottage* in quite the way he did if it had not been for Cottle’s project. He can seem a ridiculous figure, Joseph Cottle, garrulous, egotistical, imitative, muddled, his legs swaddled up against the rheumatism, memorable now only for the people with whose lives his own briefly made contact, but it may be that he had a greater influence on his more talented younger colleagues than they recognised at the time, or than we have recognised since.