

From

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reads  
*The Friendship: Wordsworth and Coleridge*  
by Adam Sisman  
(Harper Collins, 2006)

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THERE IS SOMETHING pleasingly unpretentious and generous about this biography. It will delight the many readers who love reading biographies, any biographies, yet will also enlighten those who have a long standing obsession with its subjects, Wordsworth and Coleridge. I suspect that most readers of the *Coleridge Bulletin* belong to the latter category and I believe that they will not be disappointed by this book even though they may have some reservations about it. The main ingredients of the narrative of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's lives are well known and within this space I will briefly consider a few strengths and weaknesses of Sisman's book.

This book is about the life of the friendship between Wordsworth and Coleridge. During the last twenty years or so Gene Ruoff, Paul Magnuson, Thomas McFarland, Rosemary Ashton, Nicholas Roe, Lucy Newlyn, Richard Holmes, Kenneth Johnston, Kathleen Jones, and John Worthen, among others, have all explored aspects of the fascinating, fraught relationship between these two brilliant poets and the creative work which the dynamic between them produced or, as in the case of *The Recluse*, failed to produce. Writing about a creative relationship which loses its intense momentum of passionate, ostensibly perfectly correspondent involvement, as most relationships inevitably do, often implies taking sides for or against one of the characters involved. In the introduction Sisman refers to Edmund Blunden's question, 'why do people have to like Wordsworth and hate Coleridge and *vice versa*?' (xvi-xvii), as his own starting point, and vows 'to escape from the biographical impasse of preferring one over the other by concentrating on the friendship itself' and by focusing on the six and a half years between 1797 and Coleridge's departure for Malta, the years during which they shared their mission of 'a poem that would change the world' (xvii). But I am not sure if it is possible, or even desirable, not to favour one poet over the other, depending on which aspects of their personalities we are thinking about. Our preference for the shambolically brilliant, effusive, affectionate Coleridge pales when we consider the way in which he shirked his domestic responsibilities. Similarly, our admiration for Wordsworth's generous devotion to his family sits uneasily with his territorial manipulation of Coleridge's contributions to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. I greatly enjoyed reading Sisman's book but I was left with a feeling that the attempt at even-handed treatment of both parties in the friendship did diminish somewhat the extraordinary qualities, both positive and negative, of the two men.

Most studies of the interaction between Wordsworth and Coleridge focus largely on the earlier period of their lives. Sisman's is no exception, tracing the rise and fall of the relationship in twelve chapters which are organised in three

main parts: Strangers, Friends, Acquaintances; and condensing the post 1812 period to a disappointingly brief, final section of twenty pages. The youthful, passionate friendship was affirmative of the subjects' respective egos and conducive to groundbreaking creative work which retrospectively turned out to be a defining moment for the modern poetic consciousness about the Self and its response to context. But of course, the friendship between Coleridge and Wordsworth did not stop after both men ceased to be close friends with each other; it continued to direct and influence their lives until their deaths in 1834 and 1850. For one thing, the Wordsworths greatly assisted Southey in supporting Coleridge's wife and children who were largely abandoned by him in practical terms after 1807. Sisman's assertion that the 'friendship that had been so productive at the beginning would end in failure' (xvi) depends on the extent to which we accept Coleridge's messianic plan for Wordsworth, as delineated in the 30 May 1815 letter which is thoughtfully included by Sisman in an Appendix, as the sole determining factor of the relationship. Friendship itself, idealized as a notion but fraught with misunderstanding in actual practice, depends on the chemistry between two individuals at a given moment in a particular place. It usually involves a degree of projection onto the other person of what we ourselves would really like to be or do. Somehow the recipient of the gift of our friendship impersonates what we aspire to, and if they do not impersonate it exactly, then at the very least they somehow contain the promise of what our own aspirations focus on. In that sense the final outcome of a friendship is not so much about absolute 'failure' as perceived 'disappointment', a feeling in both parties of not having realized, conceptually and practically, the impossibly high expectations of the initial, supposedly joint, vision. A study of this friendship highlights how momentary the suspension of the incompatibilities between both men really was.

Sisman emphasizes the importance of time and place for people and their friendships by starting off with the iconic 1797 moment of Coleridge bounding across the fields to Dorothy and William. More than just the portrayal of a meeting, the scene contrasts Coleridge's need to move in and out of others' lives, his fundamental homelessness, his preference for being a lodger as opposed to a resident, with the Wordsworths' ability to stand united on their chosen ground, selectively admitting others to their self-sufficient circle. That sense of stability which we associate with Wordsworth was hard won and Sisman evokes the excitement and turmoil, both political and personal, which underlie the young Wordsworth's turbulent life with bold, confident strokes.

About forty percent of the book is devoted to Wordsworth's and Coleridge's separate history. For some readers this amount of attention to the history which precedes their actual friendship may be considered excessive, but it did not bother me, given the acumen with which Sisman addresses the vital experiences which fundamentally shaped the friendship. Sisman is at his best when he writes about the excitement and promise of the revolutionary climate in France for British radicals and its disappointing outcome. Not only do we

get a sense of the spine chilling violence of the aftermath, we also get a subtle understanding of the cultural differences with respect to rank and class in England and France. Sisman paints one of the best cultural backgrounds to Wordsworth's relationship with Annette Vallon in Wordsworth scholarship to date. Both personally and politically France was the defining experience for the young Wordsworth. It made him aware of how torn one might feel about the same event: '[i]n France, Wordsworth had come to feel himself a patriot; in England he was made to feel a traitor' (31). One always has the sense in this book that Wordsworth's personal journey takes him towards domestic contentment, for instance the adoption of young Basil Montagu into the Wordsworth household at a fee of 50 pounds per annum also draws attention to the Wordsworths' interest in and love of children: 'Our grand study has been to make him *happy*' (124).

Coleridge liked the idea of children more than actually taking care of them on a day by day basis. Sisman's verdict about Coleridge's relationship with his own family emphasizes his fundamental restlessness which would ultimately prove to be fatal for his domestic life: 'However much he loved them, he found it easy to leave them' (255). While the Wordsworths fulfilled their domestic aspirations, Coleridge loved upholding domestic bliss as an ideal which he chose not to live for. I loved the way in which Sisman evokes the different domestic instincts of both men, for instance in his sly reference to Coleridge's claim about his husbandry: "I am already an expert Gardener" he boasted after he had been in Nether Stowey only a few weeks in January, not the most demanding month for horticulturists' (167). That same restlessness which caused so much havoc in his personal life was also one of the main attractions of the young Coleridge. Sisman's portrait of Coleridge emphasizes his brilliance throughout the book. We observe the 'loose-limbed and scruffy' Coleridge as one of the young defenders of William Frenn in Cambridge, holding forth in the Salutation and Cat, wittily responding to a heckling audience during his provocative 1795 lectures, always erratic, impulsive and very loquacious indeed. Coleridge himself created the sense of great expectations, the tantalizing anticipations, with which his name was imbued. The more worrying aspects of Coleridge's effervescent and absolutist need for higher things include his penchant for hyperbole, the histrionics when he felt slighted, occasionally laughable self-righteousness, and the ultimate impossibility of satisfactory relationships with men and women because of his perfectionist demands which became even more complicated when the addiction to laudanum took hold.

But most important for our understanding of the relationship between Wordsworth and Coleridge in the first third of the book is the way in which it sets up all the other relationships which had a direct bearing upon the friendship. In all of these it becomes obvious that Wordsworth's dearest friends were his family while Coleridge wanted *his* family to consist of his dearest friends. In Chapter 11 Sisman writes convincingly about Coleridge's

attempts to make the Wordsworths part of his family at Greta Hall. Dorothy, and later Mary Hutchinson as well, were the most important friends for William Wordsworth; their relationships would be close throughout the course of their long lives. For Coleridge it was Robert Southey, who shared with Wordsworth a strong sense of domestic responsibility, who played a crucial role in his early adulthood. The relationship showed all the trademark signs of what would later cause trouble in the friendship with Wordsworth: passionate intensity, inflated admiration, the suggestion of rashly made commitments in the context of enthusiasm for an ideal, a need for absolute greatness and exclusive commitment. Coleridge's demands on his friends, as Southey, Poole, Lamb, Wordsworth, and the Morgans all would experience, far exceeded what could be reasonably expected. In both the case of Southey and Wordsworth, Coleridge ended up associating with the sisters of his friends' chosen partners. His friendship with Southey led Coleridge to the major mistake of his personal life: his marriage to Sara Fricker which followed 'some kind of understanding' on the basis of one week's acquaintance in the heady days of the pantisocracy plans (76). One can only wonder why Southey did not stop Coleridge from going ahead with this marriage considering how desperately Coleridge confided in him about his fears (95), for, while being friends with Coleridge was undoubtedly risky, being married to him was another story altogether. It is to Sisman's great credit that neither Robert Southey nor Sara Fricker are vilified for somehow not being a worthy match for Coleridge's genius. Sisman is sympathetic to Sara's plight without elevating her into martyrdom. When he describes the circle of friends in Chapter 7 he points out the obvious: 'only Coleridge's wife was a discordant presence' (187). But his observation of Sara's incompatibility with Coleridge and his friends is qualified by his psychologically astute insistence on Sara's miserable loneliness in her marriage, particularly because by all accounts appearances were kept up: 'It is unlikely that Sara suspected her husband of any impropriety with Dorothy. But it was galling for her to witness almost daily the preference that he showed for another woman's company' (227). Poole's intervention in the suppression of any mention of Berkeley's death in her letters (264), Sara's clumsy but generous attempts to encourage her husband to finish his work in Germany while Coleridge is behaving like a 'carefree undergraduate' going on a walking tour in the Hartz mountains (269), and later the cruelty of the Wordsworth women towards her (334-5) make for painful reading. The narrative of Coleridge's life traces the lamentable disintegration of his family life. Sisman's portrait of the domestic lives of both men is exemplary for its detail and sensitivity.

My main reservation about Sisman's book is the rather disappointing treatment of the extraordinary poetry of both poets. It may be hard to do poetry justice in the course of a biographical narrative but considering that this friendship was bolstered by a commitment to the translation of the 'One Life' into poetic practice, a project in which 'Coleridge would be the brain, Wordsworth the hands' (220), I had expected rather more than the perfectly

adequate but almost pedestrian accounts of some of the most stirring poems of the period. I hesitate to make too much of this because Sisman never pretends to be an expert about the poetry and he does cover all the main lyrics—he even sees the humour in ‘The Nightingale’ which some critics astonishingly still fail to appreciate—but, while not expecting critical pyrotechnics, I regret that he lacked the confidence to deal with the poetry in the same sensitive, alert fashion with which he evokes the places and landscapes, the people and their relationships. His reading of ‘The Eolian Harp’ in Chapter 4, for instance, is not really alive to the many tensions which already characterise the portrayal of the relationship between the speaker and the meek daughter in the family of Christ. Sure, the speaker submits to what he knows is traditionally expected of him but, all the same, we do get a strong sense that the escapist day dream about our selves as Eolian harps carries a far greater allure. Similarly, ‘Hymn before Sunrise’ in Chapter 11 and ‘To William Wordsworth’ in Chapter 12 deserved more or better, the latter in particular providing a perfect opportunity for highlighting the many personal and poetic tensions between the two men as they relate to their great project of ‘The Recluse.’ A more explicit emphasis on the poems would have clarified how these emerged out of the ‘great Philosophical poem’ project, this ‘great ambitious project dwarfing all others’ which had become ‘a stick with which Coleridge chastised his friend’ (277). The structure of the book also favours a trajectory which does not necessarily do justice to the complexity of each poet’s development. In Chapter 6 Wordsworth is found to have ‘abandoned the poetry of protest for the poetry of the heart’ (172) while we know that, to the very end of his life, he often combines heart and protest in one poem. Sisman concludes Part Two (Chapter 10) with Coleridge’s epistolary definition of Wordsworth as ‘a great, a true Poet’ and himself as ‘only a kind of metaphysician’ (325). This leads Sisman, rather sweepingly, to conclude that ‘Coleridge’s confidence was in ruins at the age of 28’ (326), which is not really borne out by the rest of Coleridge’s life. If anything, the hyperbolic rhetoric of this letter is vintage Coleridge in the sense that Coleridge is often most confident about his position while drawing on a repertoire of self deprecation. Sisman lets the poetry beautifully speak for itself, however, by concluding his account with the heartbreakingly poignant passage from ‘Christabel’ about the fragility of friendship, the banal silliness of its demise and its permanent scars. Finally, the juxtaposed reproductions of Coleridge’s ‘Letter to Sara Hutchinson’ and Wordsworth’s ‘Intimations Ode’ on the endpapers of Sisman’s book are poignantly illustrative of both the artistic heights and private depths of the poets’ extraordinary relationship.