

News from Nether Stowey

Table Talk: an Evening with Coleridge

Compiled and performed by Dennis Harkness

18 October 2008, St Mary Redcliffe Bristol

THERE was something uncanny about the venue chosen to host this event: the shadow filled gothic church where Chatterton found fame and Coleridge got married. Although the candlelit table from which Dennis Harkness in the person of Coleridge talked to the audience was set in 1830's Highgate, in the course of the evening he ranged through his past thoroughly enough to make the sizeable audience feel they were visiting the St Mary Redcliffe of his Highgate reminiscences.

The monologue form is a perfect vehicle for recreating the effect of hearing a constant stream of Coleridge's famous one-versation and I found the performance a revelation. At last Coleridge's words were ringing out in their proper context, and even the hoary old chestnuts sparkled with the freshness of true re-creation. The material, *Table Talk*, augmented by letters, notebooks, and poems was skilfully woven and Harkness brought to life a convincing and engaging elderly Coleridge. The material was selected to make the evening entertaining for a non-specialist audience, and I felt something close to pride at seeing this proof of how table-charming Coleridge must have been. It is easy to dismiss the contemporary accounts of Coleridge the talker as colourful exaggerations (for example the Lamb button incident), but Harkness's discursive flow gave a sense of that tap that once turned on could flow forever, and showed how Coleridge might have held the attention of a room full of people for an extended period. This was particularly true of the first half of the show, which lasted about an hour, where the subject matter followed associative jumps exactly in the way a well lubricated table companion can hold forth and ramble entertainingly when in congenial company.

In the course of the second half of the show Coleridge told us his life story in terms of his relationships with women. He started with his views on the qualities particular to women (carefully selected and feminist-friendly enough to get cheers from the audience) and then took us through his life in terms of his mother, and his separation from her, his recovery of emotional solace with the Evans family and his growing attachment to Mary Evans. Then followed marriage to Sara Fricker, love for Sara Hutchinson, badinage with Mary Morgan and her sister Charlotte, and finally the deep attachment to Ann Gillman at the end of his life. This was an interesting choice as the thread for his life story, but Harkness's impersonation had already brought out the sentimental (feminine?) side of Coleridge's character that any reader of the late notebooks or letters would recognise. His childlike doting quality came across movingly.

The life story with its succession of dates felt a bit constrained by the need

to get the events of a whole life into a 45 minute time slot, and it had a slight taint of information-giving. The first half was much more free associative and loose in the way that one would image Coleridge to have been at a table. Time is something of a problem for a one man show of this kind. Too short and there is not enough room to present a rounded picture, too long and it becomes a challenge to the performer to bring in enough variety to keep the audience attentive. Harkness did extraordinarily well to hold an audience with his glittering eye (or perhaps rheumy eye) for an evening of more than two hours including interval. The evening was a fundraiser for the Bristol based charity For-ethiopia, a setting that helped create a warm atmosphere and an opportunity for an 'Ethiopian maid' joke.

There is to be another performance of *Table Talk* at the Kilve Study Weekend 4-6 September 2009. If ever you needed a further incentive to come to Kilve – this is it. It will also be performed at the Budleigh Salterton Literary Festival on 18 September 2009. Any further performances will be advertised on the Friends of Coleridge website. Look out for it – even if it doesn't come to a Table near you, it is well worth a journey.

Notice & Agenda of The Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting will be held on Saturday, March 14, 2009, at 10.30am at 11 Castle Street, Nether Stowey, Somerset, TA5 1LN. Any addition to the agenda should be sent in writing to the Honorary Secretary at this address at least two weeks before the date of the meeting.

1. Minutes of the AGM held on March 22, 2008
2. Matters Arising
3. Chairman's Report
4. Treasurer's Report
5. Subscriptions
6. Cottage Report
7. Stewards' Report
8. Constitution
9. Committee
10. AOB

Coleridge Cottage Centenary 2009

The acquisition of Coleridge Cottage by the National Trust in 1909 will be celebrated in Nether Stowey on June 20, 2009, happily coinciding with the annual Women's Walk which marks Tom Poole's founding of the Stowey Female Friendly Society.

A number of celebratory events will take place between May and July. Details will be placed on our website (friendsofcoleridge.com) where you may also read David Miall's interesting account of Professor William Knight's campaign to save the Cottage for the nation.