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978-1-108-07930-3 - Early Recollections: Chiefly Relating to the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge, during his Long Residence in Bristol: Volume 1

Joseph Cottle

Excerpt

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## EARLY RECOLLECTIONS.

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It is necessary to inform the reader, of my having been a bookseller in Bristol, from the year 1791, to 1798; from the age of 21 to 28: and having imbibed from my tutor and friend, the late John Henderson, (one of the most extraordinary of men) some little taste for literature, I found myself, during that period, generally surrounded by men of cultivated minds.\*

I must here intimate, that I intend in the following pages inflexibly to adhere to an undisguised statement of occurrences as they arose, with the primary intention of elucidating a few years of the

\* My speaking so often in the first person, cannot be avoided in a work of *Auto Biography*. I submit to the necessity with reluctance, and hope it will not be ascribed to any obtrusive or ostentatious motive.

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life of Mr. Coleridge, but which will necessarily involve references to other men of genius, living and dead, with whom he was intimately associated. Brief notices will also extend to two or three other eminent individuals with whom I was once acquainted, and who were connected with Bristol. With these brief preliminary remarks I shall commence the “Recollections.”

At the close of the year 1794, a clever young quaker, of the name of Robert Lovell, who had married a Miss Fricker, informed me, that a few friends of his from Oxford and Cambridge, with himself, were about to sail to America, and on the banks of the Susquehannah, to form a “Social Colony;” in which there was to be a community of property, and where all that was selfish was to be proscribed. None, he said, were to be admitted into their number, but tried and incorruptible characters; and he felt quite assured, that he and his friends would be able to realize a state of society, free from the evils and turmoils that then agitated the world, and present an example of the eminence to which men might arrive under the unrestrained influence of sound principles. He now paid me the compliment of

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saying, they would be happy to include *me* in this select assemblage, who, under a state, which he called PANTISOCRACY, were, he hoped, to regenerate the whole complexion of society, and that, not by establishing formal laws, but by excluding all the little deteriorating passions; injustice, “wrath, anger, clamour, and evil speaking,” and thereby setting an example of “Human Perfectability.”

Young as I was, I suspected there was an old and intractable leaven in human nature, that would effectually frustrate these airy schemes of happiness which had been projected in every age, and always with the same result. At first the disclosure so confounded my understanding, that I almost fancied myself transported to some new state of things, while images of patriarchal and pristine felicity stood thick around, decked in the rain-bow’s colours. A moment’s reflection, however, dissolved the unsubstantial vision, when I asked him a few plain questions.

“How do you go?” said I. My young and ardent quaker friend, instantly replied, “We freight a ship, carrying out with us, ploughs, and all other implements of husbandry.” The thought occurred to me, that it might be more economical,

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to purchase such articles in America; but not too much to discourage the enthusiastic aspirant after happiness, I forbore all reference to the prolific accumulation of difficulties to be surmounted, and merely inquired, who were to compose his company? He said that only four, had, as yet, absolutely engaged in the enterprise; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from Cambridge; (in whom I understood the plan to have originated;) Robert Southey, and George Burnet, from Oxford, and himself. "Well," I replied, "when do you set sail?" He answered, "Very shortly. I soon expect my friends from the Universities, when all the preliminaries will be adjusted, and we shall joyfully cross the blue waves of the Atlantic." "But," said I "to freight a ship, and sail out in the high style of gentlemen agriculturists, will require funds. How do you manage this?" "We all contribute what we can," said he, "and I shall introduce all my dear friends to you, immediately on their arrival in Bristol."

Robert Lovell (though inexperienced, and constitutionally sanguine) was a good specimen of the open frankness which characterizes well-informed quakers; and he excited in me an additional interest, from a warmth of feeling, and an extent

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of reading, above the ordinary standard of the estimable class to which he belonged. He now read me some of the MS. poems of his two unknown friends, which at once established their genius in my estimation.\*

My leisure having been devoted, for many years, to reading and composition, and having a small volume of Poems, at that time in the press, I anticipated great pleasure from an introduction to two poets, who superadded to talents of a high order, all the advantages arising from learning, and a consequent familiarity with the

\* Robert Lovell, himself, was a poet, as will appear by the following, being one of his Sonnets.

## STONEHENGE.

Was it a spirit on yon shapeless pile?  
 It wore, methought, a hoary Druid's form,  
 Musing on ancient days! The dying storm  
 Moan'd in his lifted locks. Thou, night! the while  
 Dost listen to his sad harp's wild complaint,  
 Mother of shadows! as to thee he pours  
 The broken strain, and plaintively deplores  
 The fall of Druid fame! Hark! murmurs faint  
 Breathe on the wavy air! and now more loud  
 Swells the deep dirge; accustomed to complain  
 Of holy rites unpaid, and of the crowd  
 Whose ceaseless steps the sacred haunts profane,  
 O'er the wild plain the hurrying tempest flies,  
 And, mid the storm unheard, the song of sorrow dies.

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best models of antiquity. Independently of which, they excited an interest, and awakened a peculiar solicitude, from their being about so soon to leave their “father land,” and to depart permanently for a foreign shore.

One morning, shortly after, Robert Lovell called on me, and introduced Robert Southey. Never will the impression be effaced, produced on me by this young man. Tall, dignified, possessing great suavity of manners; an eye, piercing, with a countenance full of genius, kindness, and intelligence. I gave him at once the right hand of fellowship, and, to the present moment, it has never, on either side, been withdrawn. I had read so much of poetry, and sympathized so much with poets in all their eccentricities and vicissitudes, that, to see before me the realization of a character, which, in the abstract, most absorbed my regards, gave me a degree of satisfaction, which it would be difficult to express.

I must now make a brief reference to George Burnet, who, in this epidemic delusion, had given his sanction to, and embarked all his prospects in life, on this Pantisocratical scheme. He was a young man, about the age of twenty; the son of a respectable Somersetshire farmer, who

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*A Woodman R!*

**ROBERT SOUTHEY.**

*From a Drawing by Hancock (1796) in the Possession of Mr Cottle.*

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had bestowed on him his portion, by giving him an University education, as an introduction to the Church, into which he would probably have entered, but for this his transatlantic pursuit of happiness. His talents were not conspicuous, but his manners were unassuming, and honesty was depicted on his countenance. He possessed also that habitual good temper, and those accommodating manners, which would prove a desirable accession, in any society; and it soon appeared, without indicating any disrespect, that his was a subordinate part to act in the new drama, and not the less valuable, for its wanting splendour.

After some considerable delay, it was at length announced, that, on the coming morning, Samuel Taylor Coleridge would arrive in Bristol, as the nearest and most convenient port; and where he was to reside but a short time, before the favouring gales were to waft him and his friends, across the Atlantic. Robert Lovell, at length, introduced Mr. C. I instantly desried his intellectual character; exhibiting as he did, an eye, a brow, and a forehead, indicative of commanding genius. Interviews succeeded, and these increased the impression of respect. Each of my new friends read me his productions. Each accepted my invi-

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tations, and gave me those repeated proofs of good opinion, ripening fast into esteem, that I could not be insensible to the kindness of their manners, which, it may truly be affirmed, infused into my heart a brotherly feeling, that more than identified their interests with my own.

I introduced them to several intelligent friends, and their own merits soon augmented the number, so that their acquaintance became progressively extended, and their society coveted. Bristol was now found a very pleasant residence; and though the ship was not engaged, nor the least preparation made for so long a voyage, still the delights and wide-spreading advantages of Pantisocracy, formed one of their everlasting themes of conversation; and, considering the barrenness of the subject, it was, in no common degree, amusing, to hear these young enthusiasts repel every objection to the practicability of their scheme, and magnify the condition to which it was to introduce them, where thorns and briars were, no doubt, to be expelled, and their couch to be strewed with down and roses.

It will excite merely an innocent smile in the reader, at the extravagance of a youthful and ardent mind, when he learns that Robert Lovell