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Joseph Cottle

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Early Recollections

The reminiscences of Bristol bookseller Joseph Cottle (1770–1853) have been described as ‘unreliable but essential’. The son of a tailor, Cottle was an avid reader, opening a bookshop in 1791. Three years later he was introduced to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey, and became the earliest publisher of their works: through them, he also knew Wordsworth, and published the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. He later fell out with all three men, and in 1837 published (despite Southey and Coleridge’s family attempting to prevent it) this quickly notorious two-volume work, through which Cottle lost an expensive libel case in which he was sued by Hannah More’s coachman. Ten years later, he recast the book as *Reminiscences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey* (also reissued in this series). Both works contain evasions and distortions, but are valuable for their account of some vital years in the lives of the great Romantics.

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Early Recollections

*Chiefly Relating to the Late
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during his Long Residence in Bristol*

VOLUME 1

JOSEPH COTTLE



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J. Woodman Sc.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE,

From a Painting by Varley (1795) in the Possession of M^r. Cottle.

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EARLY RECOLLECTIONS;

CHIEFLY RELATING

TO THE LATE

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE,

DURING HIS LONG RESIDENCE IN BRISTOL.

By JOSEPH COTTLE.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

LONGMAN, REES & CO. AND HAMILTON, ADAMS & CO.

1837.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

It was my first intention to have drawn up a brief statement of the chief incidents in Mr. Coleridge's Bristol Life, and to have sent it to the gentleman who is now officially engaged in compiling a more extended Memorial of Mr. C. At the time this intention was entertained, I was but imperfectly aware of the extent and complicated nature of my materials, and also of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, which afterward became increasingly manifest, of reducing the narrative to a compass that could have been accepted. If my original purpose had been persisted in, and the compression in question had been effected, this work would never have appeared; in which case, an exclusion, in all likelihood, would have followed, of many, if not of all its most striking features. Being therefore compelled to relinquish my primary design, or submit to a sacrifice of nine tenths of the following pages, in order that the epitome might harmonize with the purposes of another, of acknowledged competence, but, perhaps, with views somewhat different from my own, I thought it best, as well as most likely to accord with the wishes of the Reader, to withhold assent to so large a spoliation and to print the memoir in its present unutilated state.

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It must be regarded as 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; the enlightened inhabitants of which city ever warmly patronized him, and whom he thus addressed, at one of his public lectures, 1814: “You took me up in younger life, and I could wish to live and die amongst you:” so that but for these reminiscences, no memorial would be preserved of the eventful portion of Mr. Coleridge’s days, here detailed; and consequently all that follows is so much snatched from oblivion.

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It may be proper to notice that the title here adopted, of RECOLLECTIONS, is to be understood as a general, rather than as a strictly applicable phrase, since the present work is founded on numerous letters, copies of letters, and memoranda, that, for the most part, have lain in a dormant state, nearly *forty years*, and which were preserved as mementos of past scenes, personally interesting, but without the least reference to ultimate publication. Circumstances, however, have latterly arisen, which suggested to me the propriety of converting these miscellaneous papers into a record of a genius, who, when viewed in all his features, has scarcely been surpassed in modern times.

It might prove acceptable to the reader, to learn what the circumstances were, in which this work originated.

On the death of Mr. Coleridge, while I united my own inobtrusive sympathies with those of his other numerous friends; and the press, in every form, teemed with more notices of the departure

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of this master spirit, than have appeared, in reference to any one individual, since the death of Dr. Johnson, I was a stranger to the remotest intention of disturbing my own quiescent papers, though the thought occasionally passed my mind, especially when I saw mis-statements in circulation, that no individual possessed a more ample acquaintance, at least, with many of these subjects, than myself.

An influential friend now addressed to me a letter, (1835) who well knew my intimacy with Mr. Coleridge, urging me to write a memoir of him, during his residence in Bristol;* (a period in which, as a nucleus, so many men of genius were there congregated, as to justify the designa-

* "History may be formed from permanent monuments and records, but lives can only be written from personal knowledge, which is growing every day less, and in a short time is lost for ever. The delicate features of the mind, the nice discriminations of character, and the minute peculiarities of conduct, are soon obliterated."—DR. JOHNSON.

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tion, “The Augustan Age of Bristol.”) The proposal at that moment, from the repugnance every mind feels, suddenly to adopt new impressions, combined, as it was, with a confirmed reluctance to commence any laborious undertaking, assumed a decidedly repulsive aspect.

When I considered, before I could accede to this solicitation, the mass of letters, &c. it would be necessary to examine, methodise, and transcribe, with the almost unconquerable difficulty of maintaining *fidelity*, without, in some quarter, exciting *offence* when, in addition, I remembered my advancing years, and declining health, as well as the necessity to which I should be subjected, in compiling an account of Mr. Coleridge during the required period, of referring rather largely to other friends, now living, with whom his actions and letters were intimately connected, and thus to hazard a breach both of confidence and delicacy; when the subject was viewed in this comprehensive light. I deemed it most accordant with

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discretion, as it was with inclination, to decline a compliance with my friend's request; which I accordingly did, and assigned the reasons that influenced my determination. Here I thought the affair had terminated.

On the contrary, soon after the transmission of this decided negative, I received a second letter from the same gentleman, urging me to reconsider my resolution, and enforcing his request, by saying, my compliance "would fill up an important chasm in Mr. C.'s life," of which little or nothing was known.

This second application excited a ruminating inquiry in my mind. I considered, that the information I had it in my power to convey, could be derived from no other source, so that if I declined the task, an extensive hiatus must necessarily appear in any more elaborate Life of Mr. Coleridge which should be written. Whatever my qualifications in other respects might have been, I well knew my opportunities were the

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most favourable for acquiring a thorough knowledge of the subject, in consequence of my having been exclusively privileged with intercourse and correspondence with Mr. C. during the whole of his residence in and near Bristol; by which means, I was enabled to behold him in all his shades of character; as well as capacitated for observing his actions, and witnessing all his projected, or accomplished, literary undertakings. I considered also, that my detached, and, in some cases, abbreviated memoranda, however adequate for my own requirements, would prove inefficient guides to any successor, who might wish to mould the materials into a coherent whole.

With these convictions resting on my mind, I began in some measure to relax, and thought, if facts and letters were alone given, I might with little trouble, prepare a short account of Mr. Coleridge, occupying the space merely of forty or fifty pages. This therefore was my first purpose. But there is progression in most human plans,

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I commenced now more minutely to examine my scattered papers relating to Mr. C. to which every day made large accessions, till they at length formed, almost, a portentous aggregate.

A wider field now gradually unfolded itself. I found that Mr. Coleridge's letters were far more numerous than I had anticipated, and also that my documents relating to Mr. C. embraced not only the period of his residence in Bristol, but included also his occasional visits to that city in after years. If I wrote any thing, I became convinced that "facts and letters" would be insufficient, but that they must be accompanied with explanatory remarks, and the whole thrown into the form of a narrative;—and also that it would be desirable to introduce incidental notices of various characters who were connected with Mr. Coleridge, or with Bristol, during the period described; which, with every disposition to avoid needless amplification, would probably occasion the work to extend to two volumes.

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I hesitated, but soon (whatever effort it might cost me) decided on the latter expedient ; and the more readily, as I believed it possible to curtail the notices of living friends, to an extent which would obviate objection, or that, in other cases, I might obtain permission : so that I began to perceive an *obligation* resting upon me, not to leave that to another, which, for the reasons before stated, none could do so well as myself. I may add, when I reflected on Mr. Coleridge's singular life at these periods, its instructive imports, and diversified incidents, the more important, as a subject for Biography, it appeared ; and while the last of my objections subsided, with the determination to commence the MEMOIR, I experienced an interest arising in my mind, favourable to the undertaking, with a vivid renewal of those half-forgotten scenes and images which animated my younger days. This being a simple statement of the introductory circumstances and motives, which influenced the drawing up these pages, I shall now state the

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principles on which the work has been conducted.

To please each individual, of every class of readers, I well knew would prove an ineffectual effort. *One* might wish that I had passed over all reference to the aberrations of genius, as well as to the immature projects entertained by Mr. Coleridge, in early life. Another might justify allusions to the indiscretions, as well as to the unchastened enthusiasm of youth, but protest against all notices of pecuniary transactions, and particularly of *one* noble instance of liberality. Another might allow of such introductions, as tending to elucidate the mind, as well as the circumstances of the person delineated, but object to the printing letters of a melancholy description, and especially to such as verged on a prostration of spirit. Joy might hand her nectarean chalice to Mr. C. in a succession of felicitous moments, but the sigh of misfortune, or the tear of destitution, (in deference to the reader's exquisite sensibilities) must not for one moment be tolerated.

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It was not improbable, I conceived, but that this sentiment might be proclaimed the loudest, by those who were the least solicitous, in the golden opportunity for ever past, to remove, by their timely commiserations, and out of their abundance, Mr. Coleridge's numerous and bitter sources of complaint! Another might advocate the ascription of virtues real or imaginary, in limitless extravagance; but the least hint at defects, would utterly subvert, in their estimation, all the fine architectural proportions of the edifice.

Another might desire the exclusive display of the grander incidents, and, from his partiality to the imposing and the mighty, condemn the introduction of what he chose to call, trifles. But trifles in application to one, might not be such to another. All are aware how acceptable any accession to our *trifles* would be relating to SHAKESPEARE, or NEWTON, or MILTON. It is a just complaint that we do not know enough of the minutiae of great men. They are too often pre-

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sented to us in the mass, rather than in the detail, so that our estranged spirits are not sufficiently united. Besides which, incidents, however minute, that illustrate character, are not trifles, but often component parts of a majestic whole. The feelings of every reader must confirm the opinion, that biographical interest is never so effectually excited, as when the formal drapery, the court habiliments, are thrown aside, and the subject of the narrative, escaped from constraint, in his home-dress, by his deeds and his utterance, reveals, not the factitious, but the unsophisticated man.

Another might strenuously denounce all reference to Mr. Coleridge's unhappy passion for *Opium*, or suggest, if noticed, that it should be expressed in the most general and indefinite terms, so that it should attach to him as lightly as water to the feathers of some bird of the ocean. And here I expect the strongest opposition will be discovered. I have considered this subject in

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another place, but I now cursorily ask, with the certainty of an affirmative reply, whether the Reader, instead of seeking a fictitious display, does not desire a faithful exhibition of the individual whose life he is perusing? And if this quality be deemed an indispensable requirement in each ordinary biographical sketch, how much more emphatically is it demanded, in application to so marked and original a mind as that of Mr. Coleridge?—a man who, from his intellectual eminence, ceases to be private property, but is transferred, with all his appendages, to the treasury of the public.

Without pausing therefore to determine, whether some minds, from their contracted horizons, may, or may not, condemn all beyond the limit of their own sight, I have aimed to present him in his true features, and *not* without those disclosures, essential to any Life of Mr. C. which claimed impartiality for its basis. He will be found, it is believed, in the following narrative.

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invested with all the excellencies to which he had a rightful claim, and they were many, but, it must be acknowledged, not to the exclusion of those darker traits which pertained to one portion of his life, and which he himself so unreservedly confessed and deplored.

With all these possible and probable objections, from different quarters, advancing in formidable array, my only alternative appeared to be, firmly to adopt that course which accorded with my own sense of right; duly reflecting on, and adjusting, the claims of the dead, the timid, and the public. Such, I believe, has scrupulously been done; and happy am I to subjoin, that this procedure has met with the full concurrence of many of Mr. Coleridge's oldest and truest friends.—The ultimate appeal is to the Reader.

If the obligation to convey these undissembled facts, had not been imperative, I should gladly have consigned to oblivion, that one letter of Mr. Coleridge, (had its disposition depended on myself)

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to be found at the end of the second volume ; which letter, in the perusal, will fill with anguish every friend, and extort a sigh from the stranger. But it should be recollected, that such withdrawal from the public eye, (arising out of its peculiar obligatory sanctions,) would have been injustice to the living, and treachery to the dead. This letter is the solemnizing voice of conscience ! Mr. C. lived to bewail his intemperate use of opium, as well as to writhe under its consequences, and wrote the letter in question, from the most benevolent of motives, as the best remedial effort in his power, to counteract the influences of his pernicious example ; indulging the ardent hope, that his full and spontaneous confessions might operate as a sea-mark, to apprize others of the vortex, which had “ well nigh ” involved him in irremediable destruction.

No considerate friend, it might be thought, would desire the suppression of this letter, but rather its most extended circulation ; and that,

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among other cogent reasons, from the immense *moral lesson*, enforced by it, in perpetuity, on all CONSUMERS OF OPIUM; in which they will behold, as well as in some of the other letters, the “tremendous consequences,” (to use Mr. Coleridge’s own expressions) of such practices, exemplified in the person of Mr. C. and to which terrible effects, he himself so often, and so impressively refers. It was doubtless a deep conviction of the beneficial tendencies involved in the publication, that prompted Mr. C. to direct publicity to be given to the subject of this remarkable letter, after his decease; which letter, of itself, deserves to be spread through all lands, as the most sovereign antidote to opium, the world has seen; and which, from its salutary prospective influence, may save from ruin, many yet unborn.

The reader is requested especially to bear in mind, that this one letter, to the publication of which some of Mr. Coleridge’s friends may entertain an invincible objection, is one which preemi-

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nently demands the sacrifice of private feeling to public utility. Can any reflecting, it might almost be said, any rational mind, deliberately desire the suppression of this penitential letter, in which Mr. Coleridge, for the good of others, magnanimously forgets its bearing on himself, and makes a full and voluntary confession of the sins he had committed against "himself," his "friends," his "children," and his "God," by persisting, through so many years, in the intemperate use of, what he latterly and justly called, "the accursed drug?" In the agony of remorse, at the retrospection, he required that this letter, of bitter compunctious self-accusation, should hereafter be given to the public; using the following strong expressions. "After my death, I earnestly entreat, that a full and unqualified narrative of my wretchedness, and its guilty cause, may be made public, that, at least, some little good may be effected by the direful example!" This is the most redeeming letter, Samuel Taylor Coleridge

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ever penned. A callous heart could not have written it. A Christian, awaking from his temporary lethargy, might. While it powerfully propitiates the reader, it almost converts condemnation into compassion.

The Individuals who would aim to suppress this letter, (perhaps from a kind motive) on the failure of their endeavours, (from the same mistaken feeling) might strive to neutralize its effect, by affirming that it was written under a narcotic influence, as were also, on a like supposition, the other letters of Mr. Coleridge, which so feelingly advert to his wants, and his opium.

In order to correct this misapprehension of Mr. Coleridge's real condition, it is only necessary to state, that, at the period when he wrote this one letter, as well as the other letters referred to, however disturbed his conscience may have been, and passively subjugated his will, his understanding, his reasoning faculty, was as clear and vigorous as at any period of his life; and which assertion

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is supported by the internal testimony of those writings which he produced, when his indulgence in opium prevailed the most.* This being an undeniable fact, *who* can be authorized in affirming, that Mr. Coleridge's thoughts, when he wrote these letters, were obscured by his deteriorating indulgences? or, hazard the declaration, equally invalid, that his wishes, with respect to the publication of his *Testamentary Letter*, were ever different from those he had so deliberately avowed?

It should be remembered, that if I have deemed it right not to conceal Mr. Coleridge's disastrous habits, and characteristic peculiarities, I, on the contrary, have borne ample testimony to the grander features of his character; and this I did, not more in justice to him, than as a contribution to my own happiness. I may be allowed to subjoin, that, in the following work, I have

* See in particular, Mr. Coleridge's Letters on the Fine Arts, in the Appendix, written in the year 1814.

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endeavoured, however imperfect the accomplishment, to exhibit an example of what Biography *ought to be*, in order to redeem its character, an undisguised portraiture of the man, rather than a stream of undeviating eulogy.

If there be those who still persist in censuring every allusion to Mr. Coleridge's intemperate use of opium, (and I have reason to think there are) it would be equitable in such, to recollect, if stronger arguments will not reconcile, that I have advanced nothing on this, or any other subject, with which the public, in a less correct form, are not already acquainted, so that it might be the wiser part, in some of Mr. Coleridge's friends, neither to extenuate, nor ineffectually attempt to conceal his habits, and their disastrous effects, (applying at least, to one period of his life) but to acquiesce in allowing them to stand out, in conformity with Mr. C.'s own express injunction, as heralds, proclaiming to contemporaries and successors, a loud and salutary warning.

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It affords to all who knew Mr. Coleridge, the purest pleasure to reflect, that his inveterate passion for opium was eventually overcome; and the lacerated feelings he so long endured, show, to a memorable extent, the deadly struggle for mastery, sustained, in a mind like his, between inveterate habit, and an awakened conscience; when, as might be expected, in the protracted conflict, the better principle triumphed.

In the succeeding pages, while much has been conceded to truth, it is no small honour reflected on Mr. Coleridge, that his conversation, and his writings, were ever the powerful advocates of Religion and Virtue. His splendid conversations have passed away, but his writings, in all their exuberance of genius, will shed an imperishable lustre on his name, when, in the really important sense, all besides his merits, and his misfortunes, will be forgotten.

I cannot withhold a final remark, with which my own mind is greatly affected. The whole of