

## Samuel Taylor Coleridge

1772-1834

“Religion is the Poetry and Philosophy of all mankind; unites in itself whatever is most excellent in either, and while it at one and the same time calls into action and supplies with the noblest materials both the imaginative and the intellective faculties, superadds the interest of the most substantial and homefelt reality to both, to the poetic vision and the philosophic idea.”

—*A Lay Sermon* (1817)

### Contribution



Although generally known today for his poetry and literary criticism, in addition to his friendship and collaborative work with William Wordsworth on *Lyrical Ballads* (1st edition, 1798), Coleridge's most widely influential works have been neither “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” nor his lectures on Shakespeare and Milton. Rather, they have been his philosophical and theological works. Influenced by, among others, Cudworth, Spinoza, Berkeley, Kant, and Schelling, Coleridge integrated modern German criticism and English idealism and did much to advance the early nineteenth century reaction against the evidenciary shool of Paley and Lardner. Moreover, his philosophical approach to theology and biblical criticism helped inestimably in preparing his country for the theology of Schleiermacher, his contemporary. Julia Wedgwood (1833-1913) has rightly dubbed Coleridge “the father of the Broad Church.”

## A Brief Chronology of His Life

Born on 21 October 1772 in the vicarage of Ottery St. Mary, east of Exeter in Devonshire, Samuel Taylor Coleridge is the youngest in a family of thirteen, including his three half-sisters and parents. In 1782, after the death of his father, he is sent to Christ's Hospital, London, where he develops a lasting friendship with Charles Lamb. It is at Christ's Hospital, in 1790, that he is medicated with opium for rheumatic fever.



Christ Hospital

In the autumn of 1791, having won an exhibition scholarship, Coleridge enters Jesus College, Cambridge. In June 1792, he wins the Brown Gold Medal for his "Ode on the Slave Trade." As a ringleader of the faction led by Unitarian and egalitarian William Frend, Coleridge is closely involved with Frend's trial for blasphemy and sedition in 1793. After the long vacation that year, Coleridge lives wildly in London until, in December, beset with enormous debts and having published only one poem, he enlists (under the pseudonym Silas Tomkyn Comberbache) in a regiment of Light Dragoons. Through his brother George's intervention, Coleridge is discharged for "insanity" in April 1794 and immediately returns to Cambridge.



Robert Southey

In June 1794, he meets poet Robert Southey, with whom he publishes *The Fall of Robespierre* and conspires to follow Joseph Priestley to Pennsylvania in order to establish a "Pantisocracy" (a pastoral, self-governing commune) on the banks of the Susquehanna River. At the beginning of 1795, Coleridge leaves Cambridge without a degree and moves with Southey to Bristol. There, under the patronage of Unitarian publisher Joseph Cottle, Coleridge begins his career of public speaking.



William Wordsworth

In September 1795, he makes the acquaintance of fellow poet William Wordsworth. In October 1795, one month after a bitter separation from Southey, Coleridge marries Sara Fricker.

Under Cottle's continued patronage, Coleridge begins publication in March 1796 of a Unitarian and democrat journal, *The Watchman*. By this time, his use of opium (or its liquid form, laudanum) for pain relief had passed into the phase of early addiction. On 16 April 1796, he releases *Poems on Various Subjects*. On 13 May 1796, the last issue of the financially unsuccessful *Watchman* is published. In September 1796, Sara gives birth to David Hartley Coleridge.



At the beginning of 1797, the Coleridges move into a cottage (image to the left) in Nether Stowey, on the road between Bridgewater and Watchet in Somersetshire. In April, Coleridge, at work on his verse tragedy, *Osorio*, discusses joint publication with Wordsworth, then at work on his verse play, *The Borderers*. On 4 June 1797, after preaching at a Unitarian chapel, Coleridge walks to the Wordsworths' home in Dorset and persuades William and Dorothy to move to Nether Stowey. They move to Alfoxden, four miles from Nether Stowey, at the beginning of July. On 28 October 1797, Coleridge's *Poems* makes its appearance.

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After preaching his inaugural sermon as the Unitarian minister at Shrewsbury—to an audience that includes a young William Hazlitt—he receives, on 17 January 1798, the patronage of a lifetime annuity from Thomas Wedgwood, and so Coleridge abandons the ministry in order to pursue a literary life. The *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is completed on 23 March 1798, after which Coleridge and Wordsworth finalize plans to publish a collaborative volume of verse.

The Coleridges' second son, Berkeley, is born on 14 May 1798.

Before departing to Germany in September 1798, Coleridge and Wordsworth leave the completed collection of their collaborative volume with Joseph Cottle at Bristol. *Lyrical Ballads* appears in print in the following month.

Berkeley dies of complications from smallpox on 11 February 1799. Nevertheless, Coleridge remains at Gottingen from 12 February to 24 June. There he converses with Eichhorn. At the end of July, he arrives back at Nether Stowey.

In October, Coleridge, before exploring the Lake District with the Wordsworths, meets Sara Hutchinson. Afterwards, the Wordsworths settle just outside of Grasmere, while Coleridge secretly pursues his romantic interest in "Asra."



Grasmere

In November 1799, he accepts a position in London with the *Morning Post* as a journalist and begins his translation of Schiller's *Wallenstein*.



Greta Hall

In April 1800, he visits the Wordsworths and Sara Hutchinson. Wordsworth solicits his assistance in a second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and Coleridge, abandoning his position as journalist, moves into Greta Hall at Keswick, in Westmoreland. His wife and Hartley join him at the end of June. He tries desperately to complete "Christabel" for inclusion in the second edition of *LB*, but when it is completed at the end of August, Wordsworth rejects it. The volume is published with "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" moved to the very back of the book. Coleridge's confidence in his abilities as a poet is crushed.

In poor health and depression, Coleridge turns to Kant and opium during the first half of 1801. In July, he visits the Hutchinsons, and by November has returned to his work for the *Morning Post*.

Coleridge returns to Greta Hall in March 1802. A few weeks later, in response to Wordsworth's Ode on "Intimations of Immortality," he writes his Ode on "Dejection." It is published on the day of Wordsworth's marriage to Mary Hutchinson. In December 1802 a daughter, Sara, is born. In June a new edition of *Poems* is released. Two months later Coleridge departs on a Scotland tour with the Wordsworths. After a fortnight Coleridge goes off on his own, but he is detained as a suspected spy and, before he is able to return home, is overcome by the effects of opium withdrawal and has to be nursed back to health.

On 6 April 1804 he leaves England for Sicily and, before arriving at Gibraltar on 18 May, nearly dies from complications due to prolonged opium usage. In Malta, Coleridge becomes the guest of Governor Alexander Ball. From January to September 1805 he works under Ball as Acting Public

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Secretary. In Italy, from October 1805 to June 1806, Coleridge befriends German writer J. L. Tieck and studies Schelling. He arrives back in England in August.

After reuniting with Wordsworth in October, he joins the Wordsworths and Sara Hutchinson at Coleorton Farm in December. There, despite his jealousy over the affectionate relationship between Wordsworth and Sara, he submits to Wordsworth's patriarchal guidance. Tensions mount.

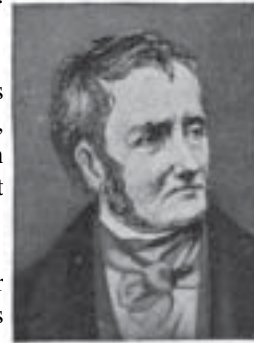


William Hazlitt

In the summer of 1807 he returns to Nether Stowey. In August he meets Thomas De Quincey in Bristol.

In 1808, between January and June, he gives lectures on literary subjects, primarily Shakespeare and Milton, to the Royal Institution in London. The series is often postponed and is prematurely terminated as a result of Coleridge's physical condition.

He returns to Grasmere at the beginning of September and commences work on preparing and publishing his literary, philosophical, and political journal, *The Friend*. The first issue is dated 1 June 1809.



Thomas DeQuincey

In October 1810, a confidence of Wordsworth's is betrayed to Coleridge, and the friendship of the two poets is broken beyond repair (despite the diplomatic efforts of Crabb Robinson in May 1812). John Morgan comes to Coleridge's rescue and provides him with a home for the next year and a half.

From May to October 1811 Coleridge works as a journalist for the *Courier*. During this period, Crabb Robinson introduces him to the congenial writings of Jean-Paul Richter.

From November 1811 to January 1812 Coleridge delivers "A Course of Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton, in Illustration of the Principles of Poetry." In January 1813, Coleridge's verse tragedy, *Osorio*, renamed as *Remorse*, premieres in Drury Lane. The play receives harsh reviews, although it is financially successful.

Between December 1813 and September 1814, he is in treatment for addiction and suicidal depression. Out of this experience, he emerges with a renewed commitment to Christianity. In 1815, between April and September, he writes the *Biographia Literaria*, initially intended as a biographical preface to his collected poetry, *Sybylline Leaves*. The two works are published as companion volumes in October. Hartley, now an Oxford student, stays with his father during most of this period, from June to October.



Hartley Coleridge

Coleridge, after returning to London in March 1816, succumbs again to heavy opium use. In the following month, James Gillman, of the Royal College of Surgeons, takes him as a boarder into Moreton House, Highgate. There Coleridge, for the remainder of his life, has his habits monitored and generally managed. As a result, his literary productivity increases dramatically. *Christabel*, in a volume with "Kubla Khan," is published in May, *The Statesman's Manual* in December. *A Lay Sermon* follows in April 1817.

From January to March 1818, he lectures on poetry and drama. From December to March 1819, he delivers his lectures *On the History of Philosophy* at the Philosophical Society.

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In April 1819 Hartley is elected as fellow of Oriel College, Oxford. At the end of the probationary year, Hartley is dismissed from his fellowship on account of public drunkenness. In October 1820, as Derwent enters St. John's, Cambridge, Coleridge meets with Edward Copleston, Provost of Oriel, to protest Hartley's dismissal. The plea is unsuccessful.

Beginnin in the spring of 1822, Dr. Gillman permits Coleridge to entertain guests on Thursday evenings. In December Henry Nelson Coleridge begins transcribing his uncle's famous "table talk" at Highgate. In June 1824, Coleridge entertains Thomas Carlyle and D. Gabriele Rossetti.

*Aids to Reflection* is published in May 1825. As an Appendix to the book, he writes a series of "Letters" on the subject of biblical inspiration, but postpones their publication. These "Letters" will be posthumously published in 1840 under the title *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*.

In the summer of 1828, Coleridge reunites with Wordsworth for a six-week tour in Germany and Holland. Upon his return, he is visited by John Sterling. At about this time, Coleridge's *Poetical Works* (3 volumes) is published.

In September 1829, Coleridge's daughter, Sara, marries her cousin Henry Nelson, and in the following year settle in Hampstead. In December 1829, *On the Constitution of the Church and State* is released.

In 1833, Harley Coleridge publishes his *Poems*, dedicated to his father.

On 25 July 1834 Coleridge dies at Highgate.

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For the information compiled in this chronological outline, I am indebted to Richard Holmes's *Coleridge: Early Visions, 1772-1804* (1989) and *Coleridge: Darker Reflections, 1804-1834* (1998), and to the "Chronological Table" printed in each volume of the *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*.

Tod E. Jones