

REVIEWS

William Christie,^{*} *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: a Literary Life*, Basingstoke, 2006, xviii + 250pp.

This is one in a series (fifty so far) of literary lives offered 'not in the spirit of traditional biography but aiming to trace the professional, publishing and social contexts which shaped their writing'. That is a difficult distinction to maintain, and it is no criticism of the present volume to say that it often overrides the distinction – readably, independently and rewardingly. It can do so mainly because this particular literary life pivots on its subject's own version. Coleridge's two volume *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* was largely composed – or discomposed: 'derangement' is Christie's word – in 1815. It was published in 1817 with some plagiarism, considerable padding, a good deal of digressive and irrelevant matter, autobiography, and passages of penetrating and idiosyncratic literary criticism and romantic theory and psychology. Coleridge himself apologised for 'so immethodical a miscellany' almost from the start. Written at one of the lowest points of his life, the *Biographia* reaches back to his beginnings. He claimed, in a letter Christie quotes, that it contained 'the Reservoir of my Reflections and Reading for 25 years past'. (And of other people's, one might add.) For the earlier years, it can be supported by the autobiographical letters and remarks of the 1790s.

The *Biographia*, then, reaches back to Coleridge's roots, personal and poetical; professional, political, social and philosophical. It includes his celebration of Wordsworth's genius, his defensive analysis of the 1800 *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*; and, central for most readers since, the few paragraphs on the poetic imagination. It is this last which, as Christie perhaps overstates it, has made Coleridge 'synonymous with the dream and discipline of English Literature'.

And yet, Coleridge's addiction to 'metaphysical Theories ... toys by the bedside of a Child deadly-sick' was tempered by or absorbed into much of his best earlier poetry: the Conversation Poems 'Frost at Midnight', 'This Lime Tree Bower', and 'The Nightingale'. They show, in Christie's phrase, 'the apparently casual rhythms of the mind' without straining after theory. This is true too of his great lament for happiness lost in theorising, 'Dejection: an Ode'. It is to be regretted that, from pressure on space no doubt, there is not more extended discussion of the Ode, of its origins and different versions, and of its intertwining relationship with two of Wordsworth's greatest poems, 'Immortality' and 'Resolution and Independence'.

The supernatural poems, as they are called, are more difficult to negotiate. In 'Kubla Khan', one way (not taken here) to understand the notorious interruption by the person from Porlock is to suppose that it occurred not where the poem now ends but in the middle. Thus the later lines become a triumphant effort to recover the symbolic pleasure dome; not a false paradise as is Milton's Mount Amara (Coleridge's Mount Abora) but a parallel one, as in the *Biographia's* formulation the poet's secondary imagination echoes the primary act of creation. 'The Ancient Mariner', as Christie stresses, is different: a carefully crafted literary ballad, an artifice. It may be because of this that wildly different readings 'abound and spawn like creatures of the Coleridgean deep'. Even so, the difficult proposal that none of the direct or indirect personae of the poem need to be taken at their word, and that the poem is itself about interpretation, seems to breed yet more creatures of the deep who are not to be 'bless'd unaware'.

Christie's characterisation of Coleridge's *Notebooks* (now edited in five double volumes) as the expression of a mind 'taken hostage by the rich and endless diversity of its own experience', and containing the poetry he could not write, catches their nature well. The entries stand in contrast to the journalism he undertook for the *Morning Post* and the *Courier* from the turn of the century, work which Christie sets admirably in the context of the dramatic rise of newspapers. Coleridge went on to publish the essays of *The Friend* and other writings. He became a noted, if unreliable, lecturer on literature, seeing Hamlet as (like himself) having retired into his own mind. His later work other

than drama tended to metaphysics and to religious symbolism, and his reliance on opium increased. All of this is recounted perceptively and sympathetically. But with the *Biographia*, as Christie remarks, Coleridge had largely said his piece. There, he pleaded, 'By what I *have* effected, am I to be judged by my fellow men; what I *could* have done, is a question for my own conscience'. Part of what he effected was a culture which made a fine study like this one possible.

It would have been helpful to give the dates of the Coleridge letters quoted, as well as references to the *Collected Letters*: not all readers will have the six volumes to hand. I have noticed three minor errors of the press.

Geoffrey Little*

* *William Christie is senior lecturer in English at the University of Sydney. Geoffrey Little is honorary associate professor and editor of this journal.*

Abbé Jean Paulmier, *Mémoires touchant l'établissement d'une mission chrestienne dans le troisième monde. Autrement appelé, la Terre australe, méridionale, antartique, & inconnuë.* Édition critique établie, présentée et annotée par Margaret Sankey,* Paris: Honoré Champion éditeur, 2006. 400 pp.

For many years Margaret Sankey's research has centred on the imaginary voyage in seventeenth-century French literature and on travel accounts published in Paris on Australian themes through to the early 1800s. Alongside the names of Cyrano de Bergerac and of Nicolas Baudin has to be put that of Jean Paulmier, who in the present volume is rescued from the semi-obscurity into which he had fallen even amongst collectors and devotees of books on the Great South Land.

Not that Paulmier and Gonneville were completely unknown to students of History at the University of Sydney. G. Arnold Wood's *The Discovery of Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1922), a prescribed text for Second Year in 1925, allots a few pages to the story first revealed in print in the 1663 *Mémoires*. The first sale of the Rodney Davidson