

Funeral at Highgate

On Saturday 2 August, 1834, a small but dignified funeral *cortège* set out from Number Three, The Grove, Highgate; a handsome hearse drawn by four coal-black horses, hearse and horses alike lavishly adorned with black plumes. Two elegant mourning carriages followed the hearse. The coffin, draped with a pall as handsome as the hearse, contained the mortal remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, poet, philosopher and sage, a renowned literary giant of the age.

The *cortège* proceeded to the nearby parish church of St Michael's where the clergyman, Mr Mence, was waiting to receive the coffin.

There were nine persons, all male, in the mourning party; two of them, by their appearance, clearly brothers. They, and four of the other gentlemen, reverently bore the coffin into the church, where a handful of neighbours, and servants from the Grove, completed the congregation. During the service many were openly in tears. After the service the coffin was carried back to the hearse and conveyed the short distance from St Michael's to the burial ground in Highgate Old Churchyard. Here the Gillmans, in whose household Coleridge had lived for the past eighteen years, had purchased a vault for use of their family – the remains of Miss Lucy Harding, Mrs Gillman's sister, had already been placed there. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, seen by the Gillmans as virtually one of their own, was laid alongside Miss Harding: a lady for whose company, in life, he had felt no particular fondness. Yet now, it seemed, his dust was fated to repose with hers so long as dust should last.

The final prayers were said, the vault was closed. The mourners returned to Number Three, The Grove.



Remarkable to relate, apart from the Coleridge brothers not a soul at the poet's funeral had any connection with the forty-four years of his life prior to his coming to Highgate. The old familiar faces belonging to the first two thirds of his meteoric career were notable for their absence: Charles Lamb, loyal and loving friend dating back to schooldays when they had been Bluecoat Boys together; Tom Poole, beloved neighbour during the golden period of domestic bliss at Nether Stowey; Robert Southey, known to

Coleridge since they had met as undergraduates, later to become brothers-in-law as well as fellow Lake Poets; William Wordsworth, whose arrival at Stowey had prompted a poetic partnership crowned by the immortal *annus mirabilis* of *Lyrical Ballads*; Basil Montagu, who had extended a helpful hand in difficult times.

Where were they?

Lamb, broken hearted, had asked to be spared the ordeal of being present. Tom Poole, having visited Coleridge earlier that summer, felt that at his age (close on seventy) he could not easily face another journey from Somerset so hot on the heels of the last. Southey, who as Poet Laureate and professional man of letters had pressing work to do, explained that he must remain chained to his desk in Keswick. Wordsworth, who seemed almost to have lost his power of speech at the news of Coleridge's death, sent a stilted note of condolence from all at Rydal Mount, his home near Grasmere; only losing his stiff formality when he asked that they might be 'remembered most tenderly' to Mrs Coleridge. Basil Montagu wrote affectionately, but like the others could not attend the funeral.¹

Age, distance, commitments, and overwhelmed feelings were accepted from this fraternity of old comrades as valid reasons for absence. Mr James Gillman, respected apothecary and surgeon, under whose roof Coleridge had lived as an honoured permanent guest, was another whose claim to be overwhelmed was respected; he took to his bed and his elder son, the Reverend James Gillman, was present in his stead, together with Joseph Henry Green, distinguished anatomist and surgeon; Douglas J.W. Kinnaird, a director of Drury Lane theatre, present as a mark of respect to Coleridge as dramatist; two disciples and former pupils of Coleridge, John Sterling and Charles Stutfield; Mr Steinmetz, father of another of Coleridge's pupils, the much loved, recently deceased Adam Steinmetz; and John Peirse Kennard, a frequent guest at the celebrated Attic Nights – when Coleridge, euphoric with talk, had entertained his friends in his attic chamber.

Back at the Grove, now a shrine to lamentation, the funeral party was received by a tearful Mrs Gillman, robed in deep mourning. Suitable refreshments were served; then came the reading of the will. It was read by Green, who, having been Coleridge's closest friend during the Highgate years as well as amanuensis and ardent disciple in transcendental philosophy, had finally assumed the ultimate responsibility of chief executor. Green had difficulty in reading the will; he was so 'greatly overcome', as indeed was everyone else present. It was a 'long and affecting document'.²

To Green were bequeathed all Coleridge's 'Books, manuscripts, and personal Estates and Effects' with the exception of the poet's pictures and engravings 'in the House of my dear friends, James and Anne Gillman, my more than Friends, the Guardians of my Health, Happiness, and

Interests, during the years of my Life that I have enjoyed the proofs of their constant, zealous, and disinterested affection, as an Inmate and Member of their family'. The engravings and pictures were bequeathed to Anne Gillman, 'the Wife of my dear friend, my love for whom, and my sense of her unremitting goodness, tenderness, and never wearied kindness to me, I hope & humbly trust, will follow me, as a part of my abiding Being into that state into which I hope to rise.' To Gillman himself Coleridge presented his treasured 'Manuscript volume lettered, *Artist: Manuscript – Birds, Acharnians, Knights*', presented to the poet by his friend and patron, John Hookham Frere.

Green was entrusted to sell, at his own discretion, the effects bequeathed to him (apart from any of Coleridge's manuscripts and notes to be held back for publication). The money obtained from the sale of the effects, together with Coleridge's life insurance, was to be invested in Public Funds and the dividends of this invested stock were to be paid to Coleridge's widow, and after her death to their daughter Sara so long as she stayed single (the will had been made in 1829 before she married her cousin Henry Coleridge). If Sara married, the dividends were to be divided equally between herself and her two brothers (a codicil, dated 1830, altered this provision in favour of giving extra help to the elder of the brothers, Hartley Coleridge, who was in precarious circumstances).

This part of the will dealing with Coleridge's own family was couched in strictly business-like language, wholly devoid of testimonials to the affection, devotion, goodness or tenderness of the recipients; with the exemption of 'exemplary' daughter Sara. She, being a classical scholar of real brilliance, on the occasion of her wedding had had presented to her by her father his splendid copy of his friend William Sotheby's 1827 polyglot edition of the *Georgics*; a gift to Sara by which, her father had explained, he wished to mark his sense of 'the Talent and Industry, that have made her Mistress of the Six Languages comprized in this volume.' Now, in his will, Coleridge (who actually deeply disliked the whole idea of educated women) once more mentioned this volume, making it clear that he wished Sara to bequeath it in turn to her daughter, 'as a memento, that her Mother's accomplishments & her unusual attainments in ancient and modern Languages were not so much nor so justly the object of admiration, as their co-existence with Piety, Simplicity, and a characteristic meekness, in short with mind, manners, and character so perfectly feminine.'

Coleridge's own copy of *The Friend*, corrected and annotated by himself in his own hand, he bequeathed to Mary, wife of his younger son Derwent, in trust for her little son, the second Derwent Coleridge; the grandchild Coleridge had never seen but wished to 'possess some memento of the Paternal Grandfather who blesses him . . . and fervently commends him to the Great Father in Heaven.'

Plain gold mourning rings, with his hair, were left to Charles Lamb, Basil Montagu, Thomas Poole, Josiah Wade of Bristol, and his son Launcelot Wade (Coleridge correctly saw the Wades as having saved his life in 1813-14 when he had been in the nadir of his opium addiction). Lastly, a ring was left to Miss Sarah Hutchinson, Wordsworth's sister-in-law.

Then, 'To Robert Southey, & to William Wordsworth . . . the sentiments I have left on record in my Literary Life & in my Poems, and which are the convictions of the present moment, supersede the necessity of any other memorial of my Regard and Respect.'

Coleridge's final thoughts were for his children. Perhaps, he said, he had insufficiently concerned himself with temporal interests and this occasioned the scantiness of the provision he was able to make for them. But with earnest prayer he committed them to the care and Providence of the Father in Heaven, and affectionately left them with the last injunction, 'My dear Children *love* one another.'

Lastly, he burst into prayer and praise, acknowledging 'that from God who has graciously endowed me, a creature of the Dust . . . with the glorious capability of knowing Him, the Eternal, as the Author of my Being . . . I have received all Good, and Good alone. Yea the evils from my own corrupt yet responsible Will, He hath converted into Mercies, sanctifying them as instruments of fatherly chastisement for instruction, prevention, and restraint. Praise in the Highest, and Thanksgiving and adoring Love to the I AM with the co-eternal Word and the Spirit proceeding, One God from everlasting to everlasting, His Staff and his Rod alike comfort me! Samuel Taylor Coleridge.'³

It was as if those present heard that great voice itself, for the last time. Choked with sobs they all exchanged farewells; the mourners aware that if they ever did return to Number Three, The Grove, it would never be the same. Coleridge would no longer be there, magnetising and spellbinding them like moths drawn to a glorious lamp. Those who were returning to London walked away down Highgate Hill to catch their omnibus. The Coleridge brothers, Henry and Edward, strode off across Hampstead Heath on the three miles which would take them to Hampstead village where Henry and Sara lived in a small, modern house in Downshire Place with their two young children, Herbie and Edith, and Mrs Coleridge Senior.

It had not been expected that either Sara or her mother would attend the funeral; both were ill, Sara seriously so, and in any case it was then not the custom for females to be present at funerals. But Henry and Edward, coming as they did from the close-knit patriarchal family circle of the Ottery St Mary Coleridges, must surely have mused, as they tramped over the Heath, upon the strange and melancholy circumstances that had kept their Uncle Sam's sons, Hartley and Derwent, away from his funeral.