

Sara Coleridge

Professor Peter Swaab, p.swaab@ucl.ac.uk

University College London

London, England

Definition

Sara Coleridge (1802-1852), the only daughter of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), was a literary critic, philosopher, theologian, translator, and a commentator on politics and society. She was also an accomplished poet and a fluent, vigorous letter-writer. Her published works comprised a volume of poems for small children, a novel for older children, two long review articles for the *Quarterly Review*, and the important introductory discussions on theological, literary and political themes which she contributed to the editions of S.T. Coleridge published between his death in 1834 and her own in 1852.

Keywords

Sara Coleridge; children's poetry; theology; Samuel Taylor Coleridge; editing; Coleridge family; poetry.

Main Text

“Her father had looked down into her eyes and left in them the light of his own.” This was Aubrey de Vere's view of Sara Coleridge (1802-1852), a tribute to both the intellect and character of the only daughter of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). While Sara's literary achievements were less seminal and momentous than her father's, the intellectual affinities between father and daughter are striking: both

display exceptional depth and reach of thought, erudition, range, probity in intellectual dispute, vivacity and idiosyncrasy of style and method. “Sara is the inheritrix of his mind and his genius,” wrote her brother Hartley (Swaab 2012, ix).

Sara had powerful abilities as a literary critic, philosopher, theologian, and a commentator on politics and society. She was also an accomplished poet and a fluent, vigorous letter-writer. In her lifetime her published works comprised a volume of poems for small children, a novel for older children, two long review articles for the *Quarterly Review*, and the important introductory discussions on theological, literary and political themes which she contributed to the editions of S.T. Coleridge published between his death in 1834 and her own in 1852. After Sara’s death her daughter Edith published a *Memoir and Letters* (1873) illuminating her mother’s impressive attainments, which had been partly obscured by their modest setting as editorial contributions, and further showing from Sara’s letters her charm, seriousness and humour. The *Memoir* went through five editions in two years; readers evidently found Sara interesting and impressive. But her reputation faded again in the twentieth century, and she remained an obscure figure until in recent years the publication of new editions of her work by Mudge in 1989, Swaab in 2007 and 2012, and Schofield in 2020, together with critical and biographical studies by Low (2006), Vardy (2010), Waldegave (2013), Barbeau (2014) and Schofield (2018).

Sara Coleridge was born in 1802 in Keswick, and raised under the roof of her uncle Robert Southey. Here she lived alongside Southey’s family with her mother, Sarah (née Fricker), and her two brothers, Hartley and Derwent. She rarely saw her father, separated as he was from his wife and living mainly in London. Southey gave her the run of his immense library and encouraged her reading and literary activity (see Low 2006, 103-42), the first fruits of which were her accomplished and

precocious translation of Martin Dobrizhoffer's *History of the Abipones* (1822) which Sara completed after Derwent abandoned the commission. The Wordsworth family were also important figures for the young Sara. Dora Wordsworth was and remained a close friend (see Waldegrave 2013) and William Wordsworth was a central formative figure in her life: "to Mr W. and my father I owe my thoughts more than to all other men put together." she wrote to Isabella Fenwick in 1847, the year she dedicated the second edition of her father's *Biographia Literaria* to Wordsworth from "Your Child in heart and faithful Friend Sara Coleridge" (Swaab 2012, 82, xi).

In 1820 Sara Coleridge visited London, where she was celebrated both for her beauty and brains. There she fell in love with her cousin Henry Nelson Coleridge; a long seven-year engagement ensued before his family approved their marriage in 1829. They had two children, Herbert and Edith (the twins Berkeley and Florence did not survive infancy). Despite Sara's severe post-natal depression and generally uncertain health it was a happy and loving marriage, invigorated by shared literary engagements. Sara wrote poems to entertain and educate the children, and Henry arranged their publication as *Pretty Lessons in Verse for Good Children* (1834). During one of the worst of her periods of illness she also wrote *Phantasmion* (1837), a fairy story full of magic and romance.

The death of S.T. Coleridge shaped the literary output of Sara's later years. Together with her husband she took charge of producing new editions of Coleridge's works, a hugely influential project of recovery, championship and familial piety motivated partly by the unfair biographical accounts that followed her father's death. When Henry died in 1843 Sara took on the central editorial role. She became "the most significant single individual in the long history of constructing Coleridge" (Vardy, 3). Her major contributions were a book-length "Essay on Rationalism"

published in the 1843 edition of *Aids to Reflections*, the 184-page introduction to *Biographia Literaria* (1847), and the excavation of Coleridge's fugitive political essays in the three volumes that she titled *Essays on His Own Times* (1850).

Much of her work in these editions was topical and controversial. She aimed to continue the work of S.T. Coleridge into the Victorian age and to articulate philosophically grounded Coleridgean responses to the major issues of the day, especially in religion. Her "Essay on Rationalism" was intended as a reply to the Oxford Movement critique of the Anglican church, and to Newman's writings in particular, while her introduction to *Biographia Literaria* defended Coleridge as the authentic voice alongside Luther and Kant of a long Protestant tradition. The introduction to *Essays on His Own Times* included a remarkable extended discussion of the historical injustices of English government in Ireland, and a principled condemnation of its failures of responsibility during the years of famine in the 1840s. Sara's politics can be described as those of a radical conservative, but she was never an apologist for the status quo.

Summary

Beyond the editions of S.T. Coleridge, Sara Coleridge continued during her widowhood to write poems, prompted partly by her ardent friendship with the younger poet Aubrey de Vere. She also wrote several essays on literary and religious themes, and worked in her final years on a long theological work entitled *Regeneration* (of which selections are published for the first time in Schofield 2020).

Cross-References: Children's Poetry; Children's Writing; Editors; Fairy-tales; Literary Criticism; *Phantasmion*; Philosophy; Religion; Theology

References

- Barbeau, Jeffrey. 2014. *Sara Coleridge: Her Life and Thought*. New York and Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Coleridge, Edith. 1873. *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge* (2 vols). London: Henry S. King and Co.
- Coleridge, Sara. 1837. *Phantasmion*. London: William Pickering.
- Coleridge, Sara. 1834. *Pretty Lessons in Verse for Good Children; with some Lessons in Latin in Easy Rhyme*. London: John W. Parker.
- Low, Dennis. 2006. *The Literary Protégées of the Lake Poets*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.
- Mudge, Bradford Keyes. 1989. *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter: Her Life and Essays*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Schofield, Robin. 2018. *The Vocation of Sara Coleridge: Authorship and Religion*. Houndsmill, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scholfield, Robin. 2020. *Sara Coleridge and the Oxford Movement*. Houndsmill, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Swaab, Peter. 2007. *Collected Poems of Sara Coleridge*. Manchester: Carcanet Press.
- Swaab, Peter. 2012. *The Regions of Sara Coleridge's Thought: Selected Literary Criticism*. New York and Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vardy, Alan. 2010. *Constructing Coleridge: The Posthumous Life of the Author*. New York and Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Waldegrave, Katie. 2013. *The Poets' Daughters: Dora Wordsworth and Sara Coleridge*. London: Hutchinson.