

COLERIDGE

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Coleridge by H. D. Traill

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H. D. TRAILL

COLERIDGE

English Men of Letters

EDITED BY JOHN MORLEY

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EDITED BY JOHN MORLEY.

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PREFATORY NOTE.

IN a tolerably well-known passage in one of his essays De Quincey enumerates the multiform attainments and powers of Coleridge, and the corresponding varieties of demand made by them on any one who should aspire to become this many-sided man's biographer. The description is slightly touched with the humorous hyperbole characteristic of its author; but it is in substance just, and I cannot but wish that it were possible, within the limits of a preface, to set out the whole of it in excuse for the many inevitable shortcomings of this volume. Having thus made an "exhibit" of it, there would only remain to add that the difficulties with which De Quincey confronts an intending biographer of Coleridge must necessarily be multiplied many-fold by the conditions under which this work is here attempted. No complete biography of Coleridge, at least on any important scale of dimensions, is in existence; no critical appreciation of his work *as a whole*, and as correlated with the circumstances and affected by the changes of his life, has, so far as I am aware, been attempted. To perform either of these two tasks adequately, or even with any approach to adequacy, a writer should at least have the elbow-room of a portly volume. To attempt the two together, therefore, and to attempt them within the limits prescribed to the manuals of this series, is an enterprise which I think should claim, from all at least who are not offended by its audacity, an almost unbounded indulgence.

The supply of material for a *Life* of Coleridge is fairly plentiful, though it is not very easily come by. For the most part it needs to be hunted up or fished up—those accustomed to the work will appreciate the difference between the two processes—from a considerable variety of contemporary documents. Completed biography of the poet-philosopher there is none, as has been said, in existence; and the one volume of the unfinished *Life* left us by Mr. Gillman—a name never to be mentioned with disrespect, however difficult it may sometimes be to avoid doing so, by any one who honours the name and genius of Coleridge—covers, and that in but a loose and rambling fashion, no more than a few years. Mr. Cottle's *Recollections of Southey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge* contains some valuable information on certain points of importance, as also does the *Letters, Conversations, etc., of S. T. C.* by Mr. Allsop. Miss Meteyard's *Group of Eminent Englishmen* throws much light on the relations between Coleridge and his early patrons, the Wedgwoods. Everything, whether critical or biographical, that De Quincey wrote on Coleridgean matters requires, with whatever discount, to be carefully studied. *The Life of Wordsworth*, by the Bishop of St. Andrews; *The Correspondence of Southey*; the Rev. Derwent Coleridge's brief account of his father's life and writings; and the prefatory memoir prefixed to the 1880 edition of Coleridge's *Poetical and Dramatic Works*, have all had to be consulted. But, after all, there remain several tantalising gaps in Coleridge's life which refuse to be bridged over; and one cannot but think that there must be enough unpublished matter in the possession of his relatives, and the representatives of his friends and correspondents, to enable some at least, though doubtless not all, of these missing links to be supplied. Perhaps upon a fitting occasion, and for an adequate purpose, these materials would be forthcoming.

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