

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

With William Wordsworth, Coleridge is considered as the founder of the English Romantic Movement in literature and one of the finest poets—at least in some unforgettable poems. While his most creative output as a poet lasted only a short time—he lost confidence in his abilities as a poet before he was 30—he went on to have an important career as a journalist, lecturer, literary critic, and philosopher particularly in the domain of Romantic Metaphysics.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was the youngest of ten children born on October 21 1772 to the Rev. John Coleridge and Ann Bowden at Ottery St. Mary, a small town in Devon, England. When his father died shortly before his ninth birthday, Coleridge was granted a place at Christ's Hospital School in London as the orphan of a clergyman. At first homesick and terrorized by the headmaster, the Rev. James Bowyer, Coleridge developed a precocious scholarship, and was thoroughly well-read in philosophy before he entered Jesus College, Cambridge in 1791. There he fell into debt, and ran away to join the army from which his brothers had to extricate him. He subsequently failed to complete his studies at Cambridge.

After meeting Robert Southey at Oxford in 1794 Coleridge took up the cause of radical politics, and with Southey and others he planned to emigrate to North America to found a Pantisocracy (or utopia) to be known as Susquehanna after the river on which it would be based. The experiment never happened but preparation for it, Southey and Coleridge married sisters from the same Bristol family: Edith Fricker for Southey and Sara for Coleridge. The marriage took place on October 4, 1795, and afterwards Coleridge settled briefly at Clevedon, site of his "Eolian Harp," before returning to Bristol where he gave lectures on politics and published a short-lived journal, *The Watchman*. About this time he met a tanner with radical views called Tom Poole who secured a cottage for him at his village, Nether Stowey (about forty miles south of Bristol) to which Coleridge moved on January 1, 1797. There he produced some of his best known poems including "Frost at Midnight" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." An annuity of £150 per annum conferred on him by the Wedgewood brothers John and Tom supplied some much-needed security. Apparently Coleridge met Wordsworth by accident when the former stumbled into their garden while walking in Dorset and within weeks the Wordsworths had rented a large mansion called Alfoxden Park three miles from Nether Stowey to be near him. friendship and collaboration with Wordsworth resulted in publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in September 1798 after a year of close companionship and collaboration during which Wordsworth enjoyed a period of astonishing productivity.

In the immediate sequel to the publication of the famous book, the Wordsworths and Coleridge set out together for Germany to study the philosophical and cultural developments in that country at close hand. Coleridge—who rapidly acquired German—soon went his own way, attending lectures at the university of Göttingen. Returning to England in July 1799, he decided to join the Wordsworths in the Lake District in Cumbria (North of England) and settled in with the Southey family at Greta Hall in Keswick while making regular visits to London where he worked for the *Morning Post*. Growing increasingly unhappy in his marriage and already suffering from opium addiction, Coleridge sought better health in Malta in 1804, returning home via Sicily and Rome two years later. He then separated legally from Sara (who kept the children and remained on with the Southneys at Greta Hall while Coleridge began to spend long periods with the Wordsworths, now settled in Dove Cottage at Grasmere in the Lake District.

In 1808 Coleridge began a series of public lecture in London in which he covered Shakespeare, Milton, and the principles of poetry, drama, and philosophy—among the most brilliant such writings in English. In 1810 he moved to London having quarrelled with Wordsworth, equally about literary and publishing matters as his passion for Sara Hutchinson, a sister of Wordsworth's wife Mary. A preface that started as a preface for his *Collected Poems* in 1815 soon developed into *Biographia Literaria*, the central prose work of his career which was published in 1817. In 1815 he put himself into the hands of James Gillman, a London doctor who brought his opium addiction under control and he remained on in Gillman's household for the remainder of his life. *Aids to Reflection* appeared in 1825 and *Table Talk* (1838)—a record of his brilliant conversation modelled on a famous book of 1566 about Martin Luther—was published by his son-in-law Henry Nelson Coleridge shortly after his death.