

The Scholarly Adventures of Kathleen Coburn

by Ann Vanderhoof
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"From childhood I was interested in the Romantic poets," says Kathleen Coburn, as she describes a life of fascination with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. "It's been a snowball experience, with one thing cheerfully leading to another." Besides routine work, this experience has produced research on Coleridge that at times has been as exciting as a case at Scotland Yard. "Scholarship is not necessarily dull," she says, her eyes twinkling at the thought. "There's fun in it—so much to keep you going and learning!"

Retired since 1971 from active teaching in the English Department at Victoria, Kathleen Coburn remains the curator of Victoria College's [Coleridge Collection](#), which she acquired from a direct descendant of the poet. Housed on the third floor of the E.J. Pratt Library, it is used by scholars from around the world.

With 50 years' pursuit of Coleridge already behind her following her graduation from Vic in 1928, Coburn remains captivated by her subject. She is the editor of Coleridge's Notebooks, which were almost entirely unknown before she started her work on them because they had been kept private and inaccessible in the Coleridge family. She is also the general editor of the *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* series, published by the Bollingen Foundation at Princeton University; the editor of *Inquiring Spirit: A New Presentation of Coleridge from His Published and Unpublished Prose Writings*; and author of *Experience into Thought: Perspectives in the Coleridge Notebooks*, the last two books published by the University of Toronto Press. She tells the story of her own scholarly adventures in a third book, *In Pursuit of Coleridge*, published by Clarke Irwin in 1977.

She is still hot on the trail of the poet. Toronto is only her part-time home. She lives in London for three or four months each year in a flat "just a five-minute walk from the British Museum." The Museum houses the Coleridge Notebooks. And each summer since 1939, she has lived on an island in Georgian Bay, seventeen miles from Parry Sound, where she continues to work every morning, as she has for the past 40 years. "That's what keeps me so strong and healthy," she says with a laugh. "It's a wonderful place to combine physical activity, leisure, and work."

"When I began to think about Coleridge in 1928, he was considered a minor poet, an addendum to courses on Wordsworth," she explains. "I don't think that it's boastful to say that the publication of the *Notebooks* and *Letters* and now the *Collected Works* has changed the view of Coleridge's stature and increased the understanding of his influence."

She attributes the encouragement of her own interest in Colridge to two of her professors during the last year of her undergraduate course at Victoria in philosophy, English, and history: [Pelham Edgar](#) and G.S. Brett. "Things they said stirred up questions in my mind about the relationship between English poetry and criticism and German philosophy. Without them, the various roads that came together for me might never have met. They encouraged me, connived a bit in cutting the red tape of the graduate department of English, and sent me on my way!"

She received an I.O.D.E. scholarship for study at Oxford University in 1930, and it was during her first school holiday there that she was introduced to the Coleridge family in Devonshire. Geoffrey Lord Coleridge, who was the great-great-grandson of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's brother and who owned the main family collection of Coleridgeana, including the Notebooks, had been approached by other scholars asking to work with the manuscripts and annotated books of the poet in his library, but had always turned them down.

Kathleen Coburn succeeded where the others had failed. "Lord Coleridge was not impressed but half-

frightened by scholars or academics,” she explains. “I was a young girl, and my introduction was through a beloved aunt. I felt it did me no harm to be a woman in that situation. Also, I was not pushing too hard. I was prepared to go at whatever pace life required, something I think I learned from my mother. I saw certain scholars try to blunder in and thunder their importance, forgetting that these custodians of his manuscripts had no intellectual interest in the poet. I was also interested in them (Lord and Lady Coleridge), and I enjoyed the sparring and teasing from him.” *In Pursuit of Coleridge*, for instance, recounts how Lord Coleridge used to call her “Bookie” and teased her no end about her fascination with such a disreputable fellow as Samuel Taylor.

Coburn says there was no one point at which she suddenly knew Coleridge was to be her life’s work. “Partly because I didn’t know what I was getting into, it just rolled on,” she explains. “For example, when I realized how pestered Lord and Lady Coleridge were, I suggested that I get money to have the Notebooks photographed. Lord Coleridge asked, ‘What good would that be to you, Bookie?’ and without having thought about it two seconds before, I said, ‘Then maybe I could edit them.’” As she recounts her adventures, one becomes convinced not only that her Coleridge snowball grew as it rolled onward, but also that her hands were behind it, giving the necessary shove if it threatened to slow down.

When Lord Coleridge agreed to the photographs, Coburn of course had no idea of where the money for the project would come from, but Edward Wallace, then president of Victoria, arranged for a grant from the Carnegie Foundation. Two sets of photographs were made, one set which Coburn and Victoria presented to the British Museum, the other owned by Coburn, which she says she will eventually give to Victoria.

Several times her research has taken on the character of a good mystery. One such occasion involved the reports on Coleridge’s Philosophical Lectures. Reverend G.H.B. Coleridge, whom Coburn says was “as genial and approachable by Coleridgians as his cousin Geoffrey Lord Coleridge was not,” had sworn to her that the lecture reports had been in a trunk lost between London and Torquay.

When Coburn was turned loose in his library, however, she discovered one cupboard different from the others. It had apparently been an old chimney at one time, and it deepened mid-way up the wall. After practically swimming “breaststroke into the cupboard,” Coburn unearthed the missing Philosophical Lectures, in folio-sized manuscript books between marbled-paper covers. Now in Victoria’s Coleridge Room, “they are written in the hand of the reporter who transcribed them from his shorthand notes,” Coburn says.

The discovery of the Lectures led to yet another mystery. Coburn knew that Coleridge’s notes for the Lectures were in Notebook 25, which she had catalogued as being in Lord Coleridge’s collection on her first visit to his library in 1930. She received permission to go back to use his library for the specific purpose of consulting Notebook 25 (after having been refused permission to use the library again a few years earlier). When she arrived, however, she could not find Notebook 25 in its place and was forced to search the large library, shelf by shelf, book by book.

After two weeks of searching, on the last afternoon of her visit she found the notebook among some French novels, where she surmised it had been mistakenly reshelfed by a dusting maid. But, as she explains, even this worked out for the best. She then had nervously to ask Lord Coleridge to let her borrow Notebook 25 to have it photographed, since her two-week visit was over. Eventually, this made it possible to convince him to let her photograph all the Notebooks.

The bulk of the Coleridge Collection at Victoria came from the collection of the Reverend G.H.B. Coleridge, S.T. Coleridge’s great-great-grandson, in whose chimney-cupboard Coburn had discovered the reports of the Philosophical Lectures. In 1952, she purchased for Victoria the portion of the collection that had not been dispersed when G.H.B. Coleridge became ill.

“I borrowed the money from Arthur Meighen until we found a donor,” she explains. The donor eventually was the Maclean Foundation. Since then, the collection has grown through additional purchases. “We’ve

had a grant from the Paul Mellon Foundation, and members of the English Department generously collected a fund when I retired, to add to the collection.” For conservation purposes, unbound manuscripts are filed in acid-free folders, but, she states. “We need more money than we’ve got for repairs to the books and for adding to the collection.”

The Victoria collection contains books annotated by the poet, one example being *Of the Church* by E.J. Field, which has a letter from S.T. Coleridge to his son on a flyleaf. “One of the values of the collection at Victoria is that we also have things the family collected after his death, such as magazines that the family bound,” Coburn says. The collection also contains transcripts made by Sara Coleridge, daughter of Samuel Taylor, “the best and most learned of the Coleridge editors,” according to Coburn, “and said to be the most beautiful woman of her day.” Coburn has amassed as well a personal collection on Coleridge, containing copies of many of the books Coleridge read in the editions in which he read them, a few manuscript bits and annotated books, as well as her set of the photographs of the Notebooks. Coburn plans to leave her entire collection to Victoria, which will more than double the size of the existing collection.

As a professor emeritus, Coburn still sees the occasional graduate student. As first a student and then a professor at Victoria, she has strong feelings about the educational process and was dismayed at the demise of the University of Toronto’s honour courses.

“Perhaps my first bit of luck was to have been born before such spacious and planned honour courses went out of existence at the University of Toronto,” she states in *In Pursuit of Coleridge*. Her honour course allowed her to read the philosophy, English literature, and history of the same period at the same time, a course designed “to create Coleridgians,” as she puts it.

She believes the honour courses disappeared because it was felt they were too restrictive, but she points out that there were options in them as well. “The democratic principle applied to education is folly,” she says. “How can students who don’t know much choose what they need to know?” And then, from the professorial side: “It’s difficult to teach adequately under those circumstances. You can have second, third, and fourth year students in one class and you don’t know what their backgrounds are.” She is all in favour of the trend to more structure in education.

As Kathleen Coburn discusses the scope of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s work and the range of his mind, the scope of her scholarship and the range of her mind are revealed. She points out the variety of Coleridge’s skills and the fact that he annotated almost 1,000 books. “He had great sensitivity to all sorts of human beings: children, workmen, women.” As an example, she selects his reference to the custom of absorbing a woman’s name into the name and family of her husband, which he called “A Nothingizing of the Female.”

Although Coburn takes obvious delight in all aspects of her work, she seems particularly proud of the most recently published volume of the *Collected Works*, the *Marginalia*. The book is set in two colours of ink, the second representing Coleridge’s comments on what he was reading. “It’s a very exciting piece of book design,” she states. “You can tell at a glance what is Coleridge’s. She also points out with a hint of pride that there have been five Canadians connected with the *Collected Works* series, four of whom were associated with Victoria. One of them, Barbara Rooke, was a student of Coburn’s and did her first teaching at Victoria.

A lifetime of work researching a great mind. An inquiring spirit investigated by someone who can certainly be termed an inquiring spirit herself. “I wouldn’t have gone on doing it if it hadn’t captured me,” she says. “Admittedly there was a certain amount of drudgery—just enough to convince one that one really wants to continue!”

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