

A Romantic Poet Re-discovered

Dr Andrew Keanie on a discovery that sheds new light on neglected genius, Hartley Coleridge.

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fading into alcoholism, lingering immaturity and obscurity, despite having been so full of potential.

*For sweet is hope's wild warbled air,
But oh! its echo is despair.*

Some critics have wondered why Hartley did not become as great as his father. They have missed the point. While some children of famous fathers are destroyed, and others empowered, Hartley is both. The paradox may be part of what is hard to pin down about Hartley in this recently-discovered picture by John Harden (1772-1847), who was born in Ireland but died in Ambleside. Hartley expressed his fondness and admiration for Harden in *Blackwood's Magazine* ('had he [Harden] not been too happy to wish for greatness [he] would have been a great painter'), seeming to recognise something of himself in his portraitist: great ability unaccompanied by great renown.

Following a brilliant undergraduate career at Merton College, Oxford, Hartley had been awarded a probationary Fellowship at Oriel College, but drink was his undoing and the Fellowship was withdrawn from him in 1820, and he never got over the shame of the whole business for the rest of his life. Or so goes the story of ruin and waste as told by his brother, Derwent Coleridge, in the memoir that accompanied the collected edition of Hartley's poems. Derwent's narrative became the preconceived understanding of Hartley Coleridge as a failure,

Hartley Coleridge (1796-1849), the eldest son of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was four years younger than Percy Bysshe Shelley and a year younger than John Keats. Like them he was a genius. Unlike them, however, he would never be recognised as among the most important poets of the English Romantic era.

The neglect is odd. After the publication of his *Poems, Songs and Sonnets* (1833) Hartley Coleridge was recognised – in the *Quarterly Review*, for example – as the most promising poet of his time, and toward the end of the nineteenth century it would be said that 'after Shakespeare our sweetest English sonneteer is Hartley Coleridge' (Samuel Waddington, *The Poets and the Poetry of the Century*, 1891).

There is a portrait of Hartley at the age of ten done by Sir David Wilkie. It is the picture of a sweet, though rather sad and vulnerable, child looking decidedly unlikely to grow into the sort of crude, insistent and passionate creature one needs to be to get on in the world. There is also a portrait of Hartley in middle age, by William Bowness, showing a white-haired apparition too dreamy and quizzical to be of any consequence.

*Together we must dwell, my dream and I, –
Unknown must live, and unlamented die...*

Having thus been projected as the lost boy or the lost man-child, Hartley Coleridge has become known (if known at all) as something of an eccentric Lakeland recluse, a scholar gypsy

albeit a charming failure. For the next two centuries Hartley Coleridge studies would continue to be characterised by tenured academics' expressions of interest, but typically in the context of their moralising condescension.

It is a mystery where John Harden's drawing of Hartley has been all these years. But it is liberating to have it on view now. It shows neither a lost boy nor a lost man-child, but instead a rather handsome and distinguished young man who, crucially, has also something contemplative and captivating about him. Almost two centuries after the supposedly defining Oriel College disaster, we now have a new visual image of the breathing and blooming man in his prime, at ease in the company of a good friend, and setting himself up as a Poet. It is a likeness that could send readers back to his work re-sensitized.

*Whither is gone the wisdom and the power
That ancient sages scatter'd with the notes
Of thought-suggesting lyres? The music floats
In the void air; e'en at this breathing hour,
In every cell and every blooming bower
The sweetness of old lays is hovering still...*