

Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters

Series Editor: Marilyn Gaull

This series presents original biographical, critical, and scholarly studies of literary works and public figures in Great Britain, North America, and continental Europe during the nineteenth century. The volumes in *Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters* evoke the energies, achievements, contributions, cultural traditions, and individuals who reflected and generated them during the Romantic and Victorian periods. The topics: critical, textual, and historical scholarship, literary and book history, biography, cultural and comparative studies, critical theory, art, architecture, science, politics, religion, music, language, philosophy, aesthetics, law, publication, translation, domestic and public life, popular culture, and anything that influenced, impinges upon, expresses, or contributes to an understanding of the authors, works, and events of the nineteenth century. The authors consist of political figures, artists, scientists, and cultural icons including William Blake, Thomas Hardy, Charles Darwin, William Wordsworth, William Butler Yeats, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and their contemporaries.

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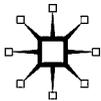
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SARA COLERIDGE
HER LIFE AND THOUGHT

Jeffrey W. Barbeau

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For my children

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PREFACE

Her great characteristic was the radiant spirituality of her intellectual and imaginative being.

—Aubrey de Vere¹

Sara Coleridge (1802–52) would not have ranked herself among the leading intellectuals of Victorian England. She rarely published in her own name and was reluctant to publicize her own writings. Much like her father, Sara’s greatest skill was talking. She once dreamed that she and John Henry Newman, a formidable adversary in so many of her writings, sat and talked, and that Newman graciously “offered to confer with me on religious topics, and explain difficulties, or somehow admit my objections.” For Sara, this was only a dream, “‘Foolish Sleep!’ Tennyson says truly.”² Her writings, some published—far too many unpublished—tell a different story. Literature, theology, metaphysics, and church politics permeated Sara’s life so much that hardly a visitor passed through her home—and there were many—with whom she did not raise some intellectual conversation. She stood her ground, picked her fights, and tangled with ministers, poets, and literary critics without distinction. Sara Coleridge was truly an *inquiring* spirit. In her own day, she was known as a writer of children’s poems (“January brings the snow...”), some little-noticed translations, and a work of fantasy. After her husband’s death, she served as the custodian of the family legacy. The event was crucial, as Alan Vardy makes clear: “His death cleared the way for his brilliant widow to take over editorship, and she established an astonishingly high standard for subsequent editors” (7). Yet, while Sara’s devotion to the preservation and defense of her father’s legacy occupied her time and shaped her thinking through much of the 1830s and 1840s, she secretly wished that she could write for the public in a bold and authoritative voice. Editing her father’s works, she thought, was a thankless but necessary task to preserve his reputation and control public perception of the Coleridge family. Editing was more than a duty, however. Editing served as a tutorial in her father’s thinking

and allowed Sara to develop a thoroughly Coleridgean frame of mind. Sara's task of transcribing notebook entries, tracing sources in English and German, and organizing lectures, essays, and marginal notes all inculcated an identifiably Coleridgean mode of reflection. Her long editorial introductions, such as those penned in defense of her father's plagiarisms in *Biographia Literaria* (1847) or her account of his views on the Bible in the second edition of *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (1849), exceeded point-by-point *apologias*; these defenses of her father's life and works manifest the mind of an author of independent thought, intimate her wide and critical reading, and reveal the depth of her private writing.

In retrospect, Sara's accomplishment was greater than anyone realized. Heir to her father's capacious mind, Sara wrote far more than her contemporaries knew or, perhaps, would have even imagined. Her intellectual vision orients around a single belief in the inner knowledge of the soul. In poetic verse, diaries, commonplace books, essays finished and unfinished, prose dialogues spanning hundreds of pages, and boxes of letters, she challenged the leading intellectuals of her day, leveled incisive critiques of her contemporaries, and composed treatises on the foremost doctrinal controversies. Sara drew from resources in the British and German Romantic tradition and translated their ideas for the needs of a new age. The concerns of her father's generation remained close, but she wrote as a woman wrestling with new social, literary, political, and ecclesial concerns. As Anne Mellor has shown in several works, women were key players in the public and "their opinions had definable impact on the social movements, economic relationships, and state-regulated policies of the day" (3). Mellor notes of female writers that there were more than nine hundred poets and five hundred novelists who published volumes in history, philosophy, and politics during the era. Women were certainly not silent during the period, but Sara could not will herself to articulate her ideas without filters. Restraint came not from external sources, for Sara's connections were sufficient for the task. Her restraint was self-imposed.

Sara Coleridge's intellectual independence becomes clearer when her writings are compared with her father's, especially in matters of religion. S. T. Coleridge's writings were highly philosophical and metaphysical productions. He drew from the wells of English and German theologies and relied on biblical criticism to understand the scriptures. Yet his capacious mind rarely developed traditional doctrinal statements, and contemporary theological disputes appear only in passing in book-length works. His assessment of inspiration and

the authority of the Bible in *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (1840) was the exception rather than the norm. *Aids to Reflection* (1825), for example, takes up extensive passages from writers such as Robert Leighton and Jeremy Taylor, but his own contribution, however valuable, is primarily methodological. S. T. Coleridge taught readers *how* to think rather than *what* to believe. Even in his two *Lay Sermons* (1816–17) and *On the Constitution of Church and State* (1829), Sara's father developed his ideas in the style of the periodicals, the diction of a literary critic, and the tools of philosophical theology. He was a philosophical theologian, so his writings contained few of the pious meditations that mark the disquisitions of Jeremy Taylor, the practical religion that permeates the sermons of John Wesley, or the apologetics that frame the discourses of Joseph Butler. S. T. Coleridge's theology was unlike most of the classic voices of English divinity.

Sara's ideas are creative, progressive, and innovative, but her prose style and method of argument follow English theological conventions. She wrote essays on the sacraments, long letters clarifying the grounds of doctrine, and numerous fictional dialogues on regeneration. As with her father, Sara certainly needed an editor. Her dogged method of pursuing a subject from all sides tended to tax her readers. Yet, despite such weaknesses, she drew from familiar theological authorities. References to classic and contemporary authors—such as Aquinas, Calvin, Hooker, Taylor, Waterland, Leighton, Kant, and Channing—appear throughout the pages of her works. Whether in introductions, notes, or appendixes, Sara wrote within the norms of English theology and relied on the logic, resources, and language of divinity. Her works served as a cipher for an audience largely uncomfortable with German metaphysics and philosophical theology. Much as James Marsh's "Preliminary Essay" to the first American edition of *Aids to Reflection* (1829) created a framework for the reception of her father's work in New England, Sara's theological writings advanced her father's theological reputation at home. Her intellectual creativity, however, was hidden in new editions of old texts by her father. When those new editions were read, her father's work muted, diminished, and overshadowed her own independent contributions. Nevertheless, Sara's writings uniquely conveyed ideas that belonged to her alone. She discovered her own theological voice and, by 1845, had planned at least two major new works on the doctrine of regeneration. One diary entry from the period includes a sketch for a volume of theological essays. The tantalizing range of topics—including the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, Old and New Unitarians, asceticism, sacraments, reason and faith, demonic possession, external and internal

evidence, the inspiration of Scripture, and justification by faith—reveals Sara Coleridge’s broad interest in Christian doctrine.³ Although she never produced such an opus, these themes appear throughout her writings.

Several important works have publicized Sara’s unique intellectual abilities. Her daughter Edith first published an edition of her mother’s *Memoir* and a limited selection of letters in 1873. Edith edited the letters to suit the sensibilities of the age and focused on writings related to education, literature, and theology. Edith’s collection was later abridged and republished multiple times in subsequent years. Further samples of her writings did not appear for nearly a half century, when Leslie Nathan Broughton edited *Sara Coleridge and Henry Reed*, including Reed’s Memoir of Sara, her letters to Reed, and portions of her literary marginalia on Wordsworth. Another half-century would pass before Bradford Mudge published *Sara Coleridge, A Victorian Daughter* (1989), which included a corrected edition of Sara’s autobiography and several new transcriptions from the unpublished manuscripts, including her essay “On the Disadvantages Resulting from the Possession of Beauty,” “Nervousness,” and an essay on the “British Constitution.” Peter Swaab has initiated the most comprehensive recovery effort to date by publishing two essential volumes for scholars of Romantic and Victorian literatures: *Sara Coleridge: Collected Poems* (2007) and *The Regions of Sara Coleridge’s Thought* (2012). In the latter volume, however, Swaab intentionally omits Sara’s theological writings, since “the theological works deserve a separate volume of their own” and “represent a sustained area of Sara’s thought and study” (xxxii).

Biographical and critical studies of Sara Coleridge have trickled out through the years. Three critical biographies and several other related studies have appeared during the past century. Eleanor Towle’s *A Poet’s Children: Hartley and Sara Coleridge* (1912) captures something of the spirit of Sara, treated alongside her brother Hartley, as a child of the poet and a correspondent with wide-ranging interests in the life of the mind. Griggs, who edited *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (6 vols.), provides a fuller, sympathetic account of Sara as a child, mother, and conversationalist in *Coleridge Fille: A Biography of Sara Coleridge* (1940). Griggs, however, prefers Sara’s role in the family social network to her metaphysics. Mudge’s aforementioned biographical study analyzes Sara’s life and thought through the lens of gender criticism. Mudge argues that Sara relied on a complicated method of editorial work to influence her contemporaries. Her editorial practice, Mudge contends, reflected patterns of

female literary nonconformity during the Victorian period. Similarly, Alan Vardy's recent *Constructing Coleridge: The Posthumous Life of the Author* (2010) includes a compelling account of how Sara's role as editor shaped the formation of S. T. Coleridge's literary and political legacy. Peter Swaab places his collection of Sara's prose writings within the constellation formed by these subsequent editors and biographers: "If Edith's interest was in the first instance theological, Mudge's was mainly in the politics of gender and in Sara's position of disadvantage as a woman writing when she did. The present edition is the first one with the primary aim of representing Sara Coleridge as a critic of books and writers" (xii). Others have contributed to the existing critical portrait of Sara Coleridge along similar, intersecting lines. Several writers—including Jones (2000) and Schofield (2009)—have clarified Sara's role as a member of the Coleridge family and her complex relationship with her father. Some have explored Sara's editorial and critical work, including Woolf (1993), Ruwe (2004), Hickey (2006), and Thomson (2009), while the role of womanhood, femininity, and poetics remains central to the conversation among writers such as Watters (1997), Low (2006), Nyffenegger (2009), and Waldegrave (2009).

Sara Coleridge: Her Life and Thought first began amidst my work on S. T. Coleridge's philosophical theology and biblical criticism. In the days before electronic resources were readily accessible, I had conversations with fellow scholars who had heard rumor of (but never read!) Sara's theological discourses in mysterious appendixes of hard-to-find editions of her father's works. In time, I managed to track down copies of some of her essays and began to formulate a theory about the primacy of faith in her writings, calling her "the consummate *theologian of the heart*—a thinker devoted to the integral power of the wholly active mind" ("Sara Coleridge" 35). My time in residence at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, where most of Sara's manuscript papers are housed, confirmed my early intuitions. At the Ransom Center, I was overwhelmed by the discovery that Sara had composed well over one thousand pages of essays on a range of topics and more than two thousand surviving letters, many devoted to theology and the church. Most astonishing of all was the fact that I had no recollection of ever seeing Sara Coleridge's life or work referenced in a study of nineteenth-century English theology nor any mention of her person in an account of the Oxford Movement and its critics.

In *Sara Coleridge: Her Life and Thought*, I build on the emerging scholarly consensus that Sara's intellectual labors were an irreplaceable

part of the preservation and reception of her father's ideas in Victorian society. This new intellectual biography examines her life and thought, however, without setting her religious interests to the side. I am deeply indebted to the authors who have gone before me, and yet the current portrait of Sara Coleridge's life remains incomplete. My analysis of her thought follows the narrative of her life. The story begins in 1802, when Sara was born to a mother and father who were no longer in love. Sara barely knew her father, but learned to respect him from afar. She benefited from living with her mother and the family of her uncle, Robert Southey, at Greta Hall in Keswick. She held her father's dearest friend, William Wordsworth, who lived nearby, in the highest esteem. By the time Sara was preparing for marriage to Henry Nelson Coleridge in 1829, she was well-versed in literature and languages, had successfully published two translation projects to keep her mind occupied, and penned an insightful essay on the nature of beauty. In marriage and life in London, Sara Coleridge suffered immeasurably from multiple miscarriages, postpartum depression, the death of three infants, and an unyielding addiction to narcotics. Nevertheless, she faithfully assisted her husband with editions of her father's literary remains, published a book of children's poetry (1834), and created an extraordinary work of fiction in *Phantasmion* (1837). The death of her husband Henry in 1843 left Sara solely in charge of the family legacy. Sara worked tirelessly to defend her father's reputation, painstakingly traced her father's intellectual debts to German philosophers, and published one of the most influential defenses of his literary and theological reputation to date in her "Introduction" to *Biographia Literaria* (1847). All the while, Sara engaged in conversations and debate with clergyman and laity on one of the most disputed doctrines of the day: regeneration. Sara's essays *On Rationalism* (1843) and "New Treatise" (1848) weighed in on the issue, but her private manuscripts reveal the full extent of her creative and imaginative solution to the crises that faced the Church of England in the Gorham Judgment and Papal Aggression. When Sara Coleridge died of breast cancer at the age of 49, she left behind thousands of letters and fragmentary writings on topics as diverse as beauty, education, imagination, criticism, the Bible, regeneration, and suffering in life and death. The total body of Sara Coleridge's works reveals one of the most fascinating and neglected women in nineteenth-century literature, theology, and history.

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I offer my deepest thanks to my wife Aimee for her faithful love and generous heart. Elizabeth, Rebekah, Benjamin, Samuel,

and Jacob are each so dear to me that no words could ever express my devotion to each one of them. The unique bond between a father and his children is an underlying theme in this study. I can think of no more appropriate gesture than to dedicate this book to them.

ABBREVIATIONS

AV	Aubrey de Vere
BL (1847)	STC, <i>Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Life and Opinions</i> (1847)
BL (1983)	STC, <i>Biographia Literaria</i> , ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (1983)
CIS (1840)	STC, <i>Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit</i> (1840)
CIS (1849)	STC, <i>Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit and Some Miscellaneous Pieces</i> (1849)
CL	STC, <i>The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i> (1956–1971)
CM	STC, <i>Marginalia</i> (1980–2001)
CN	STC, <i>The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i> (1957–2002)
DC	Derwent Coleridge
EC	Edith Coleridge
EOT	STC, <i>Essays on His Own Times: Forming a Second Series of The Friend</i> (1850)
ET	Emily Trevenen
FDM	Frederick Denison Maurice
FGC	Francis George Coleridge
HC	Hartley Coleridge
HCR	Henry Crabb Robinson, <i>Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers</i> (1838)
HNC	Henry Nelson Coleridge
HRC	Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center
IF	Isabella Fenwick
JC	Jerwood Centre
JCH	Julius Charles Hare
JTC	John Taylor Coleridge
LHC	<i>Letters of Hartley Coleridge</i> (1941)
LRS	<i>Letters of Robert Southey: A Selection</i> (1912)
MAT	SFC, <i>Minnow among Tritons: Mrs. S. T. Coleridge's Letters to Thomas Poole, 1799–1834</i> (1934)
MLSC	SC, <i>Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge</i> (1873)

MPC	Mary Pridham Coleridge
MS	Mary Stranger
NLS (1849)	STC, <i>Notes and Lectures upon Shakespeare</i> (1849)
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> (2004)
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> (2013)
PLV	SC, <i>Pretty Lessons in Verse for Good Children</i> (1839)
PW (1852)	STC, <i>The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i> , ed. Derwent and Sara Coleridge (1852)
PW (2001)	STC, <i>Poetical Works</i> (2001)
QRBF	SC, “Review of Alexander Dyce’s ‘The Works of Beaumont and Fletcher’ and George Darley’s ‘The Works of Beaumont and Fletcher’” (1848)
QRTP	SC, “Review of ‘The Princess, a Medley’” (1848)
RD 1	SC, <i>Regeneration Dialogues</i> , 239 pp. (HRC)
RD 2	SC, <i>Regeneration Dialogues</i> (Part II), 204 pp. (HRC)
RD 3	SC, <i>Regeneration Dialogues</i> (Part I, Chapter I), 79 pp. (HRC)
RD 4	SC, <i>Regeneration Dialogues</i> (On the Idea of Personality in Reference to the Incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ), 89 pp. (1851) (HRC)
Reg 1	SC, <i>Regeneration</i> (Esoteric and Exoteric Doctrine), 76 pp. (HRC)
Reg 2	SC, <i>Regeneration</i> (Remarks on Lord Lyttelton’s Letter), 58 pp. (1850) (HRC)
Reg 3	SC, <i>Regeneration</i> (Scripture Texts), 46 pp. (HRC)
RS	Robert Southey
RSCT	SC, <i>The Regions of Sara Coleridge’s Thought</i> (2012)
SC	Sara Coleridge
SCAB	SC, “Autobiography” in Mudge, <i>Sara Coleridge: A Victorian Daughter</i> (1989)
SCCP	SC, <i>Sara Coleridge: Collected Poems</i> (2007)
SCDB	SC, “On the Disadvantages Resulting from the Possession of Beauty” in Mudge, <i>Sara Coleridge: A Victorian Daughter</i> (1989)
SCHR	SC, <i>Sara Coleridge and Henry Reed</i> (1937)
SCNT	SC, “Extracts from a New Treatise on Regeneration” (1848)
SCOR (1843)	SC, <i>On Rationalism</i> (1843)

SCOR (1848)	SC, <i>On Rationalism, with a Particular Application to the Doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration</i> (1848)
SFC	Sara (Fricker) Coleridge
STC	Samuel Taylor Coleridge
SW&F	STC, <i>Shorter Works and Fragments</i> (1995)