

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE AND AN AMERICAN NAVAL HERO IN MALTA

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It is not to be expected that in the early nineteenth century, only a short time after the American Revolution, the English in general should have had kindly feelings or words for their kinsmen in the United States. However, there was a notable exception in the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge than whom, according to his son Hartley, 'the Americans, as a nation, had no better friend in England; he contemplated their growth with interest, and prophesied highly of their destiny'. In his table talk he not only regretted the anti-American articles in some of the leading reviews on the ground that the Yankees were very sensitive to criticism, especially from the English, but he also warmed eloquently to 'the august conception' of 'the possible destiny of the United States of America as a nation of a hundred millions of freemen — stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific — living under the laws of Alfred and speaking the language of Shakespeare and Milton': a prophecy which, in our own day, has come a long way towards fulfilment (indeed it has been fulfilled almost twice over in respect of population) even if it is hardly true that the language of Shakespeare and Milton is the standard guide of Congress oratory or of White House conferences (least of all of Texan yokels), and even if the laws of Alfred (or, for that matter, his code of morals) are not quite indistinguishable from the practices current in Trade Unions on the other side of the Atlantic.

Coleridge's interest in the then young republic had started in the ardent flush of youth when, spurred by his fellow-poet Southey and by the democratic ideas of the French Revolution, he had for a while poured all the verbal, as opposed to physical, energy, of which his enthusiastic nature was capable, on 'an experiment with a dozen families in the wilds of America'. This had been the scheme to establish a colony — 'pantisocracy', as its authors had called it — on the banks of the Susquehanna: a proposal which, like many others of his of earlier and later dates, had indeed 'gone west' but in the opposite sense to that originally contemplated!

The most damaging consequence of this otherwise harmless experiment had been the unhappiness he had permanently brought upon himself by marrying a woman of 'incompatible temper' as his demographic contribution

to the projected colony on the Susquehanna. Several years after this personal tragedy and only a few months before his decision to separate from Sarah Coleridge, he had fallen in with two Americans on his way back to England from Malta. The first had been the well-known painter, Washington Allston, with whom he had become acquainted in Rome and to whom he had directed letters bearing the address of the celebrated Café Greco in Via Condotti, the haunt of artists and writers. Long after this meeting, when their acquaintance had ripened into warm friendship, he described Allston in his table talk as 'a man of genius, and the best painter yet produced by America'. To him we are indebted for two of the best-known portraits of the poet, one of which, perhaps the better-known of the two, is in the National Portrait Gallery in London while the other is in the Houghton Library of Harvard University. The latter is in an unfinished state, the reason for this being that Coleridge had to flee from Rome to avoid arrest.

When he left Malta in September 1805, his intention had been to travel to England overland via northern Italy and Germany but he had only gone as far as Rome when this route had been made impossible for him by the troops of Napoleon. It was then that he had met another American, namely, Captain Derkheim, who had given him passage from Leghorn in the *Gosport*. At first he had had ample reason to be grateful to Darkheim for having looked after him like a nurse throughout a prolonged and distressful sea voyage, but on landing in England he had experienced a sharp change of feeling when he had learned that the captain had sailed away without living up to his promise of making delivery of the precious books and the few mementoes which he had brought with him from Malta. These had included 'five bottles of Ottar of White Roses, which were presented to me by the Minister of the Dey of Tunis, as a mark of acknowledgement for my having pleaded for the Dey in the Court of Admiralty at Malta'. He had intended to present them to his wife but his earnest remonstrances had elicited no reply except the intelligence that the captain had been courting a woman, at which he had truefully concluded that the attar of roses had become an instrument of amorous diplomacy.

Neither Allston nor Derkheim could compare in adventure and fame with a fellow-countryman of theirs with whom Coleridge had made friends in Malta soon after his arrival in 1804. This had been the naval officer Stephen Decatur who had become a hero overnight as the result of an intrepid action in the harbour of Tripoli during the American War against the Barbary States. In view of the present-day emergence of the United States as the leading naval power in the Mediterranean, it is pertinent to observe that the first incursion of that country into this area took place

more than one hundred and fifty years ago when the newly formed republic sent a squadron of warships to put a stop to the piratical activities of Tripoli and Algiers. This action had provided further proof that the Order of St John as established in Malta had become obsolete since it had not only abdicated its military function by surrendering the island to Buonaparte, but had also had its naval function, namely, the protection of Christian vessels against the Moslems, taken over by the great powers, as was soon to be seen when Lord Exmouth's fleet delivered the *coup de grace* to the commercial depredations of the Arabs and to the system of tribute which the Christian powers had sanctioned.

The first of several American squadrons had put in at Malta in 1803 with Decatur on board one of the vessels as first lieutenant. Here he had been involved in an incident which had had a fatal outcome. According to his biographer, he had accompanied a friend of his, a midshipman named Bainbridge, to the theatre (presumably *Il Teatro Manoel* in Valletta) and there the latter was made a target for sneering remarks from some British officers who had set near them. After further provocation in the lobby Bainbridge had knocked down one of the offenders who had promptly delivered a challenge to a duel. The challenger, so runs the story, had been a professional duellist whereas Bainbridge had been no more than an inexperienced boy. He had, however, accepted the challenge but Decatur as his second had intervened to save him from certain death: 'as the friend of the challenged party, he selected pistols for weapons, fixed the distance at four yards, and the word to be given, 'Take aim', and to fire at the word 'Fire'. The second of the challenger objected to these terms, and proposed ten paces. He said to Decatur, 'This looks like murder, Sir'. Decatur replied, 'No Sir; this looks like death, but not like murder. Your friend is a professed duellist; mine is wholly inexperienced. I am no duellist, but I am acquainted with the use of the pistol. If you insist upon ten paces, I will fight your friend at that distance'. The Englishman replied, 'We have no quarrel with you, Sir.' Decatur refusing to consent to any modification of his terms, unless he was substituted for Joseph Bainbridge, the parties met upon footing. Decatur gave the word, 'Take aim', and kept their pistols extended until he observed the hand of the Englishman to become unsteady. He then gave the word, 'Fire', Bainbridge's ball passed through his adversary's hat. The Englishman, sure of his man at ten paces, missed Bainbridge entirely. Decatur now informed young Bainbridge, that he could not save his life unless he fired low. It was the business of the Englishman, who had given the first offence wholly without provocation, to offer atonement; but no such offer was made. The combatants were again placed face to face, the word given as before, and the Englishman

fell mortally wounded below the eye.' (It is surprising that up to now this incident seems to have escaped the notice of Hollywood which has spread to the remotest corners of the earth celluloid American heroes who always carry off the prizes: gold, cups, ships, forts, women and all!) Seriously, however, this incident had threatened to issue in diplomatic complications because the English officer who had been killed had turned out to be the secretary of the Governor, Sir Alexander Ball, who had promptly demanded the persons of Bainbridge and Decatur for trial in the local court. The American squadron, however, had sailed away and the two young officers had been sent home. (Shades of Formosa!)

The biographer of Decatur would have his readers believe that in the following year (1804) Coleridge had obtained his post as secretary to Ball as a result of the vacancy which had been caused by the death of Bainbridge's challenger. Of course, this is untrue. Coleridge had succeeded no dead man but had merely acted as substitute for Chapman who had gone to Asia Minor. It is a fact, however, that only a few months after this incident, even before Coleridge had actually been appointed public secretary, Decatur had made the second of his three appearances in the Mediterranean, this time in his first command, although he was only twenty-four years old, and had apparently been received as *persona grata* in Malta, which, with Sicily, had been used as a supply and repair base by the American squadrons. He had become friendly enough with Coleridge to confess to him his opposition to the expansion on which his country had embarked in the beginning of the nineteenth century and which had culminated only a year before in the so-called Louisiana Purchase by which America had acquired from Napoleon a vast territory five times the size of continental France and now comprising a very large part of the southern and western states. This fact of history nowadays tends to be forgotten: that in the nineteenth century it was not only the British, the French and the Dutch who were 'imperialists' in the sense of expansionists, but also the Americans; only there was this difference: the so-called 'colonial powers' expanded *oversea* whereas the original American union of thirteen states became a colossal continental federation of forty-eight states by expanding (and for the same commercial reasons which had prompted the Europeans to expand) *overland*, over territory, to be exact, belonging to Indians, Frenchmen and Spaniards.

Decatur had seen a danger to national unity in this rapid expansion and had 'deplored the occupation of Louisiana by the United States, and wished that province had been possessed by England'. This opinion was subsequently adduced by Coleridge on more than one occasion in support of his general principle — obviously based on a historical interpretation —

that 'a Nation, to be great, ought to be compressed in its increment by nations more civilized than itself – as Greece by Persia; and Rome by Etruria, the Italian states, and Carthage'. Therefore, according to Coleridge, Decatur had not only dissented from the southern expansion which had become a *fait accompli* but had also declared that it would have been a mistake if his country had attempted to annex Canada in a northern expansion. In disclosing these opinions Decatur had given an impression of himself which is not altogether consistent with the implications of the toast which he gave when he had become a national hero and by which he is still remembered even by non-Americans: 'Our country!', so ran his toast, 'In her intercourse with foreign nations may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong!'

Since Coleridge had believed that 'language, religion, laws, government, blood – identity in these makes men of one country', he had naturally focused his expectations on that part of America called New England where 'there is ten times as much, English blood and spirit as in Virginia, the Carolinas, etc.'. He had been firmly of the opinion – and what Decatur had expressed had not shaken him in this; rather, it had strengthened him – that there could never be 'any thorough national fusion of the Northern and Southern States'. He predicted in fact that 'the Union will be shaken almost to dislocation whenever a very serious question between the states arises. The American Union has no *centre*, and it is impossible now to make one. The more they extend their borders into the Indians' land, the weaker will the national cohesion be. But I look upon the states as splendid masses to be used, by and by, in the composition of two or three great governments'. It may nowadays be urged that history has belied this prophecy, but apparently there were many on both sides of the Atlantic who would have subscribed to it when it was uttered; indeed it came near to fulfilment, not many years after, in the Civil War which broke out between the North and the South, which, it must be admitted, in certain respects are even more different from each other than northern and southern Italy. (A striking instance of this division was seen only a short time ago in the House of Representatives in the vote on the civil rights bill which affects the south where the negroes are numerous. The Congressmen did not vote according to party, Republican or Democrat, but according to geography, north or south. All the southern representatives, whether Republican or Democrat, voted to a man against the bill whereas all the northerners, with a few exceptions, voted for it.)

Coleridge had been led to believe from 'translations of twenty, at least, mercantile letters in the Court of Admiralty' in Malta that the Egyptians had been desperately longing for the English to replace the French and

the Turks who had been their rulers. Decatur had confirmed this belief through a letter from Cairo on the 13th December 1804, which apparently is the only surviving record of their correspondence. In it he had explained that he had passed off as an Englishman in Alexandria, Rosetta, Cairo and in the villages of the Nile and that 'wherever we entered or wherever we halted, we were surrounded by the wretched inhabitants; and stunned with their benedictions and prayers for blessings on us. "Will the English come? Are they coming? God grant the English may come! we have no commerce — we have no money — we have no bread! When will the English arrive?"... The reason the inhabitants of this country give for preferring the English to the French, whether true or false, is as natural as it is simple, and as influential as natural. "The English", say they, "pay for everything — the French pay for nothing, and take everything." They do not like this kind of deliverers'. This intelligence had been echoed soon after by Coleridge himself in a letter which he had written to Southey from Malta. In it, after having deplored the attitude of 'our miserable diplomatists (who) affect now to despise, now to consider as a misfortune, our language and institutions in America', he had asserted that 'the universal cry there (in Egypt) is English, English, if we can! but *Hats* at all events! (*Hats* means Europeans in contradiction to *Turbans*.)

The effect of Decatur's letter on Coleridge's thinking had been to make him take pride in his own country, not in any chauvinistic sense (he had recognised at the same time, for instance, that the slave trade, which had not then been abolished, 'is a dreadful crime, an English iniquity, and to sanction its continuance under full conviction and parliamentary confession of its injustice and inhumanity, is, if possible, still blacker guilt') but in gratitude for the stable constitution, freedom and security which the citizens of his country, compared with those of others, had enjoyed. In short, he had restrained, if not altogether shed, the radical and reforming zeal of his youth and his sojourn in Malta had continued the process towards a more conservative position in politics and religion which had begun when he had reacted against the excesses of the French Revolution.

Soon after Decatur had written from Cairo the Americans had made peace with Tripoli and he had returned home in September 1805. This had also been the date of Coleridge's departure from Malta. Only one month before — when he had tired of the island and of his work — he had written to his wife: 'I had lately a fine opening in America which I was much inclined to accept.' He had not indicated, however, whether this had had any connection with Decatur. He had merely added that he had turned it down because of his knowledge of Wordsworth's aversion to America'. The

Wordsworths and Coleridges had been living together in the Lake District and their intention had been to continue doing so, even if in another part of the country, after his return to England. In actual fact the intention came to nought principally for two reasons: Coleridge's determination to separate from his wife and the change in his health and character which, to Dorothy Wordsworth's horror, opium, which he had been taking in Malta, had effected.