

Reviews — Recensions

Coburn, Kathleen, *In Pursuit of Coleridge*. Toronto, Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1977. 202 pp.

In Pursuit of Coleridge, writes Kathleen Coburn, “is not an autobiography. It omits much of life that has been rich in other kinds of personal rewards”. A conventional autobiography would have told us much more about the author, but it could not possibly have had the passionate cohesiveness of this book. The book is concerned exclusively with Kathleen Coburn’s career as a Coleridge scholar, begun when she was an undergraduate at Victoria College, University of Toronto, in the late ‘twenties, and still in her retirement pursued with undiminished vigour. It gives us a full and detailed account of her work on Coleridge. But it goes far beyond both the minutiae and the fascination of literary scholarship; it is a book about the fusion of scholarship and life, about the humanities as a subtle and pervasive moral force.

The account of her scholarly work, becomes, for long passages, a fascinating romance. The central figure bears the triple burden of being young, a woman, and a colonial, but by her ingenuity and determination, and the blessings of fortune, she triumphs. The triumph prepares the way for one of the great literary achievements of our time: a scholarly edition of Coleridge’s Notebooks (still in progress), and, ultimately, the first complete edition of Coleridge’s works. Kathleen Coburn never lets us forget that the hero of her story is STC. The book ends with an account of his reburial in Highgate Parish Church on the sixth of June 1961 — not a belated farewell, but a triumphant witness to the fuller life of the spirit into which Coleridge had now entered.

Kathleen Coburn emphasizes that Coleridge studies must be a cooperative enterprise, and she is uniformly generous about the contributions of others. But there was a special quality about her approach that marked her out for leadership. She was, in the tradition of her methodist upbringing, called to the study of Coleridge. In a personal prologue she tells about her developing interest in the subject. It was not a question of following a literary fashion (Coleridge was at that time the least admired of the Romantics). It was rather a squaring between Coleridge and her own beliefs and assumptions: her Irish-Scottish dissenting background drew her to Coleridge’s “personal classlessness”; and his delight in “earth, sun, and water” illuminated her passionate devotion to the Ontario of lake, rock, and forest.

An attachment that was, at the beginning, strongly theoretical, became, through her friendship with members of the Coleridge family, warmly personal. The dramatic core of the book is Kathleen Coburn’s relationship with the owner of the major Coleridge collection, Geoffrey Lord Coleridge, the third baron and grandson of the Lord Chief Justice Coleridge, “great, great, great nephew of STC”. Geoffrey was tetchy, contemptuous of the tribe of scholars, irritated at the idolization of the irresponsible poet and the neglect of the sober legal branch of the family. The key to breaking through his

defences was his wife, as sweet and tolerant as he was difficult and opinionated, and she acted as an intermediary for the young Canadian girl, who had such a strange obsession with indecipherable manuscripts and obscure volumes.

The book has many warm, affectionate portraits of men and women in British academic life. Oxford, where she took a B. Litt., and London (or, more precisely, the British Museum and its environs), which was the headquarters for the pursuit of Coleridge, are, for her, places of sweetness and light. But there are sharply critical portraits, too, especially when she moves into the professional world of publishing. She is fully aware of the technique of humorous banter, which is meant to conceal (although not too obviously) an unfavourable judgment. There is, for instance, an instructive account of a visit to Harold Nicolson, who had agreed to serve on a committee to arrange for the purchase of the Coleridge Note Books by an English library. She describes him as looking “rather red and beef-eaterish”, gradually warming up to the scheme, and then concluding, with gratuitous malice, that “if he knew ‘a really bright young man looking for a literary subject’, he thought the best subject he could suggest and would suggest would be Coleridge – but ‘he would have to be a *very* bright young man.’”

The scene of the “pursuit” is set for the most part in England and the United States. From the United States, through the Bollingen Foundation, came the major financial support for her work. The Canadian contribution, in pre-Canada Council days, was mainly in the realm of the spirit. Kathleen Coburn is grateful for her undergraduate preparation at Toronto, in particular, for the Honour course in Philosophy, English, and History (like Oxford Modern Greats, she observes, with English substituted for Economics) – a course that seemed to be designed for Coleridgeans. She recalls the urbane helpfulness of Pelham Edgar in his class at Victoria on the Romantic poets, and the willingness of George Sidney Brett, at the time, Canada’s most distinguished philosopher, to direct her M.A. thesis on Coleridge, when the English department drew back from the responsibility. There are other less tranquil observations on the Canadian academic scene: she is caustic about the belief of the head of the graduate department of English at Toronto, A. S. P. Woodhouse, that for Canada (and, at times, it would seem, for the whole of the western world), the University of Toronto was the only respectable place for English studies, and she is even more caustic about the clumsy anti-feminism shown by some Victoria College administrators.

But Kathleen Coburn always remained a staunch Canadian, “irredeemably” so, as she observes on the first page of the book. She maintained her loyalty to college and University, and even more important, she treasured the summers she spent in her Ontario retreat. As a young girl she had known the Muskoka lakes, and from 1939 on she found a blessed haven on a Georgian Bay island. In the penultimate chapter, she meditates “on the whole experience of editing Coleridge” and concludes that “the rhythms of life and the rhythms of work. . . here on this island. . . seem peculiarly to interact as one harmony, and have been doing so from the beginning and will to the end”. The chapter then swells into a song of praise of her summer home.

The invocation of the timeless land as a great resolving and transforming force is a principal theme in Canadian Literature. In contemporary Canadian fiction, for instance, you find it in writers as different as Hugh MacLennan and Margaret Atwood. Kathleen

Coburn's invocation is peculiarly moving and convincing; it is at once large and expansive and meticulously detailed, like Coleridge himself.

I cannot recall another Canadian book that resembles *In Pursuit of Coleridge* in its easy blending of reminiscence, comment and reflection, precise recording of events, and personal confession. If it is alone in its *genre*, it does not depend on that for its distinction. It is a splendid book, and it needs no rivals to set it off.

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Chevrolet, Daniel (avec la collaboration de Roger Gautun et Rober Cuq), *L'université et la formation continue: signe et sens d'une situation de l'éducation*. Tournai, Casterman, Coll. "Orientations/E3", 1977. 193 pp.

La plupart des universités françaises qui se préoccupent de formation continue ne le font de façon active et organisée que depuis cinq ans environ. Au cours de cette période, elles ont parcouru un chemin impressionnant tant du point de vue des structures et des personnels spécialisés mis en place que du nombre des actions de formation continue organisées à l'intention des clientèles adultes.

Et pourtant, "si l'on voit se concrétiser un succès relatif mais indéniable de l'université dans ce domaine, il faut reconnaître qu'il tient plus aux universitaires qu'à l'université". En somme, l'université, en tant qu'institution publique de haut savoir, ne joue pas, ici, son rôle véritable et, par conséquent, ne répond pas aux attentes de la société.

Or, selon la thèse avancée par M. Chevrolet, cela est dû principalement à la situation qui a été faite à l'université dans le grand projet social d'une éducation permanente: cette situation est telle que, loin de devenir l'outil du renouveau social unanimement souhaité et la structure fondamentale de l'université nouvelle issue de la loi d'orientation, la formation continue, "conçue comme un corps étranger . . . ne tarde pas à engendrer, selon le cas, découragement, malaise et agressivité".

Pour comprendre cette situation, il faut se rappeler que la loi de juillet 1971, "portant organisation de la formation continue dans le cadre de l'éducation permanente" a créé un véritable "marché de la formation continue" dans lequel les employeurs deviennent des "demandeurs" et les institutions d'enseignement des "fournisseurs".

Or c'est précisément à une analyse très poussée de ce système, où l'université est assimilée à une entreprise fabricante d'une "éducation-produit" que M. Chevrolet s'attaque dans son livre. Rien n'y manque: depuis la description du cadre historique et institutionnel dans lequel s'est développée la formation continue avec toutes ses difficultés, en passant par "les implications pédagogiques et sociales d'un "marché" de l'éducation permanente", pour aboutir à des règles d'un "bon usage" de l'université.

Le jugement porté sur les responsables d'un tel système et sur les différents partenaires qu'on y retrouve (entreprises, organismes privés de formation, patrons, Secrétariat d'Etat aux universités) est parfois très sévère, alors que la part de responsabilité attribuable à