

**Barry Hough and Howard Davis, *Coleridge's Laws: A Study of Coleridge in Malta*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010. Pp. xxviii + 375. PB. £15.95. ISBN 9781906924126.**

In his introduction to this study of *Coleridge's Laws*, Michael John Kooy reflects on Coleridge and the rule of Law, and makes the point that this study complements Donald Sultana's authoritative account of Coleridge's sojourn in Malta during the years 1804-1805 in *Coleridge in Malta and Italy*. With its detailed account of the British system of administration and legal process, this book sheds fresh light on the complex relations between the British administrators and the Maltese public during Coleridge's sojourn on the island.

Barry Hough and Howard Davis have a remarkable story to tell about the months Coleridge spent in the service of Sir Alexander John Ball, the Civil Commissioner of Malta, in his capacity first as Under-Secretary and later as acting Public Secretary. The poet was at the time recovering from poor health, a broken marriage (to Sara Fricker), the pangs of unrequited love for another woman (Sara Hutchinson), and a deep sense of his failing poetical powers. In Malta Coleridge felt isolated from his friends, stranded in a lonely British outpost and naval base where he was mainly occupied in the dreary task of writing official reports and issuing *bandi* and *avvisi* (or official proclamations and public notices) in a language he did not quite understand (Italian, which was then the official language of the law courts).

In the early chapters Hough and Davis judiciously provide the social, political and economic context of the first years of British rule in Malta following the uprising against the French garrison by the Maltese population. This important phase of the Maltese insurrection against the French and their seeking the help of Captain Alexander Ball, who was to become the first British Civil Commissioner, is surprisingly, and, somewhat inexplicably, relegated to an Appendix at the end of the book. And yet it was an essential phase in the gradual disaffection of the Maltese when they felt that their expectations were not fulfilled.

The authors of *Coleridge's Laws* provide a thorough and rigorously researched study (drawing on new archival material) of Malta in the first decade of British rule, focusing largely on the legislative and executive powers of the civil administration and Coleridge's role (as Public Secretary) in securing the loyalty of the Maltese to the British administration.

The study shows how Coleridge found himself in a rather ambivalent situation – on the one hand, in the role of a leading civil servant, assiduous in propagating the strategic and diplomatic goals of the British administration, and, on the other, as an intellectual who was to abandon the values of the rule of law and the morality of justice which he was to write about so eloquently in his articles in *The Friend*. He was indeed to sacrifice principle to political expediency, as the authors convincingly argue. In this predicament, Coleridge reveals his uneasiness at being complicit in attempts to win over the Maltese public to support British interests. In some of his articles in *The Friend* Coleridge went so far as to argue in favour of 'expediency' and necessity against his own deeper feelings about the importance of the spirit of the law which he formerly felt to be inviolate and universal.

This book is an important contribution to Coleridge studies in that it explores the complex relations between the British administration under Ball and the Maltese people against the wider social, economic and political background in the first decade of the nineteenth century, and provides a thorough analysis of some of the main issues with which Ball was concerned, such as: the cotton industry; the 'continuation' strategy; the Maltese institutions – in particular legislation and the authority of Maltese courts; the appointment of judges and the judicial

process; the role of the Università; the arbitrary rule of the *Segnatura*; the Civil Service and the right to make appointments; *ultra vires* actions; and the proclamations issued under Coleridge's name. Some of these proclamations are usefully reproduced in an Appendix (capably translated from the Italian by Lydia Davis). In dealing with his onerous official duties Coleridge was assisted by Nicola Zammit, the Maltese Secretary, who conveniently provided a translation of the proclamations for Coleridge's benefit and who shared part of the burden of administration. The *bandi* and *avvisi*, as the authors convincingly argue, served as useful propaganda tools to influence Maltese opinion and to channel behaviour and attitudes. And yet for all his personal misgivings about the occasional disregard of the rule of law by Ball, and his gradual disaffection by some prominent Maltese (such as Vincenzo Borg), Coleridge was to write a eulogy of Ball after his death in 1809 (in *The Friend*) in the form of a character-study of this principled administrator – fulfilling the abstract idea of 'a wise and good Governor' (293) – that defends his former friend against the detractors who had accused him of despotism.

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