

THE PERSON FROM PORLOCK - AND WHAT HAPPENED TO THE REST OF KUBLA KHAN.

When Coleridge finally published *Kubla Khan* he prefaced the poem with this story about its origins:

"The following fragment is here published at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity, and as far as the Author's own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed poetic merits.

In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in "Purchas's Pilgrimage:" "Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall." The author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purpose of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream ..."

This is what Coleridge claims in the preface. Did this alliterative yet anonymous individual really exist? Or is he a perfect excuse for Coleridge's chronic inability to see things through (albeit an excuse that can only plausibly be used once)?

Whatever the case, the 'person from Porlock' has entered the work of other writers as acquisitive as Coleridge himself. *Kubla Khan* and its creation have provided inspiration to Stevie Smith, whose *Thoughts on the Person from Porlock* include the idea that Coleridge was already stuck, that the person was called Porson, that his grandmother was one of the Rutlandshire warlocks (and not from Porlock), and that he had a cat called Flo. In Douglas Adams' *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* a ghost has made Coleridge finish *Kubla Khan* and alter parts of *The Ancient Mariner* for his own nefarious purposes. Dirk Gently has to go back in time to stop Coleridge finishing *Kubla Khan* and thus save the world. And Fred Porlock interrupts Sherlock Holmes in *The Valley of Fear*.

CRITICAL REACTIONS

William Hazlitt called *Kubla Khan* "nonsense verses". Yet his suggestion that it was not a poem but a "musical composition" is favourably taken up in Henry Nelson Coleridge's "...the whole passage sounds all at once as an outburst or crash of harps in the still air of autumn." Leigh Hunt was enthusiastic: "We could repeat such verses as the following down a green glade, a whole summer's morning"; and by 1885 it was written that, "Lovers of poetry... listen to these wonderful lines as the voice of Poesy itself." In the twentieth century the poem's reputation was firmly established. For John Livingston Lowes: "...*Kubla Khan*' is as near enchantment, I suppose, as we are like to come in this dull world." In our time, the poem is seen not just as having an aura of "natural magic" (Virginia Radley), but also as "...one of (Coleridge's) greatest meditations on the nature of poetry and poetic creation." (David Jasper).



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KUBLA KHAN - A TRAVELLER'S TALE

Kubla Khan is full of images from Coleridge's omnivorous reading. We know he had read James Ridley's *Tales of the Genii* in which sultans, brooks and rivulets, mountains and spacious caverns figure large. John Milton's "delicious Paradise" and "fertile ground", Samuel Purchas's "sumptuous house of pleasure" and "Damosels skilfull in Songs", and Herodotus's "fountains...unfathomable" are all echoed in the poem. Dryden translates from Virgil that "Alpheus...has found...a secret passage under ground" and James Bruce, whose account of his Nile explorations was published in 1790, writes of a prophecy that Abyssinia will be set free after the slaying of a king. All these elements, and more besides, are woven into Coleridge's poem.



Background: John Martin 'Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion' painted in 1827.

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Coleridge Memorial Project

KUBLA KHAN

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

AND HIS MASTERPIECE

A GUIDE TO THE POETRY STONES AT OTTERY ST MARY

COLERIDGE THE TRAVELLER

Coleridge was a great traveller - particularly on foot. He walked prodigious distances through Wales: "there are immense and rugged defiles in the mountains, which in winter must form cataracts most tremendous"; through Scotland: "...huge mountains, some craggy and bare, but the most green with deep pinky channels worn by Torrents", and around the Lake District, scene of his famously dangerous descent from Scafell: "...when the sight of the Craggs above me on each side, & the impetuous Clouds just over them, posting so luridly and so rapidly northward, overawed me I lay in a state of almost prophetic Trance & Delight."

He read the works of other travellers too, and we can see elements from his travel books re-appearing in *Kubla Khan*. We know he read of William Bartram's "subterraneous rivers" and of James Bruce's "...his long hair floating all around his face." He must also have read Sir John Barrow's *Travels in China* in which he describes the emperor's garden at Yuen-min-Yuen: "Bold rocky promontories are seen jutting into a lake, and vallies retiring, some choaked with wood, others in a state of high cultivation. In particular spots, where pleasure-houses... were erected, the views appeared to have been studied." As this account was not published until 1805, it supports the argument that Coleridge worked on *Kubla Khan* between its initial composition and its publication.

Travelling, either in the real world or in his imagination, was central to Coleridge's writing. In *Kubla Khan*, he takes us on a journey through an imagined Romantic landscape, offering us a glimpse of the sublime.



Kubla Khan

Samuel Taylor Coleridge and KUBLA KHAN

KUBLA KHAN ON THE POETRY STONES

The Poetry Stones are in the Land of Canaan, in Ottery St Mary. They run for seventy metres along the edge of the path through the park to the river and the Kings School. They were installed in 2012.

KUBLA KHAN - THE POEM

Coleridge probably wrote *Kubla Khan* in 1797 or 1798, at Ash Farm near Culbone Church, between Porlock and Linton. He was living at Nether Stowey at the time and took frequent long walks above the Bristol Channel, both alone and with the Wordsworths. Even today, Culbone Combe, with its lush greenery and tumbling water, finds echoes in the poem. Coleridge seems to have kept the poem for private entertainment, performing it for friends. Charles Lamb said that Coleridge repeated his vision "so enchantingly that it irradiates and brings Heaven and Elysian bowers into my Parlour..." though he continued, "I am almost afraid that *Kubla Khan* is an owl that won't bear daylight". When Coleridge recited it to Lord Byron in 1816, Byron was so impressed that he recommended it to John Murray, the publisher, who agreed to publish it together with *Christabel* and *The Pains of Sleep*.

A VISION IN A DREAM

When *Kubla Khan* finally appeared in print, Coleridge sub-titled the poem "A vision in a dream". In his preface he explains how the poem came to be written. Just as the date of the poem is uncertain, so too is the date of the preface. But it is likely that it was written in 1816, therefore at least seventeen years after the poem was composed. He describes the poem as a "fragment" of the "two to three hundred lines" he had composed "in a profound sleep". Apart from the sense of loss one feels at the idea of never enjoying the missing lines, reading the preface suggests fascinating aspects of the creative process and Coleridge's psychology. By 1816 he had been addicted to opium, which he took in the form of laudanum for many years. Yet he describes it as "an anodyne" which he had been prescribed for a "slight indisposition". Elsewhere (but not for publication) he writes of "...a Reverie brought on by two grains of Opium taken to check a dysentery". It is as if he is acknowledging the influence of the drug, but at the same time playing it down. He says that he had been reading a passage from Samuel Purchas' *Pilgrimages*:

"Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed within a wall." (Coleridge does not quote accurately. Purchas actually begins: "In Xanadu did Kublai Can build a stately Pallace...") The link between drugs and visions and creativity reminds one irresistibly of the psychedelic art that came out of California in the 1960s.

COLERIDGE AND THE RIVER OTTER.

It is appropriate that Ottery's poetry stones should carry Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* from the town towards the splendid new bridge over the River Otter. The river was important to Coleridge, both in his childhood when he lived in Ottery and in his adult imagination when he rarely visited the town in person. It was to the river that he fled at the age of seven, after a quarrel with his brother Frank. He was not found until the next morning and he referred to this "exile" again and again in his writing in ways which link the river to feelings of pain and loss. Yet the River Otter was Coleridge's "Dear native brook!" where he "skimmed the smooth thin stone along thy breast." It also flowed beneath Pixies' Parlour where Coleridge had carved his initials as a child and whose mystical aura he later evoked in both poetry and prose. The river and its associations were a rich source for Coleridge's myth-making and it is no surprise to read him writing to a friend: "My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know something great - something one & indivisible - and it is only in the faith of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me the sense of sublimity or majesty!"

The poetry stones will continue what Coleridge attempted to do all his life: to make connections between experience and emotion, the physical world and ideas, words and images, and fuse them all into one marvellous whole. For Coleridge, the Otter may indeed be a "sacred river" and the tiny Pixies' Parlour "measureless"!

ROMANTIC PHILOSOPHY AND THE ARTS

There was a dramatic shift in the way we think about the natural world that took place in the late 18th century mainly as a result of the Romantic movement in the arts, and its response to the technical and economic developments of the industrial revolution. The idea that Nature would ultimately submit to human artifice was overtaken by a new idea - that the natural world was, and would always be, beyond the limits of rational understanding, and that we needed to develop new ways to see the world to achieve happiness. These new ideas fed through into all the arts and inspired the paintings of JMW Turner, John Martin, Caspar David Friedrich, Francisco Goya and Theodore Gericault; the music of Beethoven, Chopin and Berlioz; and the writings of Goethe, Pushkin and Victor Hugo among many others.



KUBLA KHAN - THE HISTORICAL FIGURE

The historical figure is **Kublai Khan**. He lived from 1215 to 1294. Marco Polo met him in 1275 and later dictated his *Travels* to China while in prison in Genoa in 1298-9. He says: 'KUBLAI, who is styled grand khan, or lord of lords, is of the middle stature, that is, neither tall nor short; his limbs are well formed, and in his whole figure there is a just proportion. His complexion is fair, and occasionally suffused with red, like the bright tint of the rose, which adds much grace to his countenance. His eyes are black and handsome, his nose is well shaped and prominent.'

WHERE WAS XANADU?

Xanadu is a real place. It is Shangdu in Inner Mongolia and Kubla Khan did build a summer palace there. Marco Polo describes it as a "...very fine marble palace..." surrounded by a park with "fountains and rivers and brooks and beautiful meadows..." It fell into ruin and was rediscovered in 1872 by Dr Bushell the botanist who wrote: "...a more complete state of ruin and desolation could hardly be imagined."

In 1989 William Dalrymple travelled to Xanadu: "Our vision of Xanadu was nearer the heath scene in Lear than the exotic pleasure garden described by Polo." He stood with his companion on what remained of Kubla Khan's throne dais and recited: "In Xanadu..."



Title page of Samuel Purchas' travel book. Coleridge was reading this before he had his 'vision'

title page of published edition of *Kubla Khan*