DON'T SHOOT ALBATROSSES

Cuillin Bantock

Don't Shoot Albatrosses is based on a talk, of the same title, that I gave at The Art in Perpetuity Trust in 2007 and again, at Morley College in 2010. The talks were associated with the exhibition ***Bounty*** at these two venues. Following a number of requests that I make the material permanent in some way, I here present it in a readable form, recast under a series of headings for ease of understanding.

Introduction

The historical period under consideration is the thirty years between 1780 and 1810, but there will be frequent reference fore and aft of this time. Almost inadvertently, the argument throws light on the genesis of one of the first, and major, writings of the Romantic Movement, Coleridge's ***The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere***.

Five Books

William Pitt by William Hague (1).

Pitt was Prime Minister, standing as an Independent Whig, from 1783 when he was twenty four to 1801 when he resigned in protest at George III's refusal to give the vote to the Irish. He was PM again from 1804 to his death two years later. While never noticeably intoxicated, he was probably only rarely wholly sober; it seems likely that he died of liver failure due to excessive consumption of port.

Pitt's thinking was far ahead of his time. He kept his cool; his touch was light, quite nonchalantly fighting a duel *on a Sunday*. His greatest success was the Union with Ireland and thereby establishing the United Kingdom as a political reality. His greatest failure was not being able to persuade *both* Parliamentary Houses to make illegal the North Atlantic Slave Trade; this had to wait.

William Wilberforce also by Hague (2). Unlike his lifelong friend Pitt, Wilberforce was very much of his time.

Wilberforce's strong evangelical feelings and highly tuned oratorial skills were important in promoting the anti-slave trade movement. He was known as *The Nightingale of the House of Commons*.

There was a son, yet another William, who was a disappointment; one suspects that the evangelical family background was rather oppressive.

Early Visions and ***Darker Reflections*** by Richard Holmes, the two-volume biography of ***Coleridge*** (3) and (4).

Coleridge, unlike his friend Wordsworth, never became either vain or an establishment figure, but the two together were instrumental in establishing the Romantic Movement in the early nineteenth century. When they lived as neighbours in Somerset in the 1790s, *romantic* was the adjective they used most: *"Look at that romantic old goat"*.

The Rational Optimist by Matt Ridley (5). Ridley's central thesis is that trade is an activity which most clearly distinguishes mankind from the rest of the animal kingdom. 97% of human genes are not just similar to those of a chimpanzee; they are identical. Somewhere in the remaining 3% is a gene (or two) which has allowed the intellectual construct: *"I will give you A if you will give me B"*. This is not the same as either sharing or reciprocating. Ridley believes further, that trade, the exchange of ideas, is the only way forwards for mankind and that any idea of 'going back to nature' or becoming 'self-sufficient' is an irrelevant sentimentality.

A particular feature of the years 1780 to 1810 was widespread societal ferment . The American Wars of Independence were just coming to an end and the French Revolution erupted a few years later, in 1789. The anti-slave trade movement was fast gathering momentum, the trade finally being made illegal in 1807.

Opinions changed rapidly, assisted by greater public access to information; ***The Times*** was first published in 1785 and ***The Observer*** in 1793. An iconic shift in public perception was that accorded to the mutiny on ***HMS Bounty*** in 1789. The lead mutineer, Fletcher Christian, was initially cast as the villain, with William Bligh, the captain, as hero. By 1810 these roles had reversed. History itself has a history, the study of which is historiography.

But this turbulent period was more than just a weakening of the *status quo*. In England women were still burnt as witches in 1780, but by 1810 any residual medievalism had been replaced by a sensibility with a recognisably modern feel.

The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere

Synopsis

The central theme is the betrayal of friendship followed by redemption through suffering.

*

Three young men are on their way to a wedding. They are accosted by an old sailor who persuades one of them to stay and listen to the story he has to tell.

The old man had been one of a crew of a ship that was driven by storms into the south-polar ice. The crew were befriended by an albatross that led them to safety but for no obvious reason the old sailor then shot the albatross. The crew hung the dead bird round his neck.

The ship moved north in the Pacific Ocean, becalmed in torrid heat. All the crew drop dead except the old sailor whose penance was prolonged suffering, involving thirst and hallucinations. The ship and snake-infested sea appeared to rot, but the dead crew stayed the same, staring at the sailor.

Eventually the dead albatross falls into the sea and it begins to rain. The crew, though still dead, steer the ship in silence. They reach home but as a Pilot approaches to take the ship to safety, it suddenly sinks. The Pilot saves the old sailor who then meets a Hermit who condemns him to become a wanderer and to tell his story to the first person who will listen to it.

The sailor warns the young man to be faithful to man and beast. He disappears, leaving the Wedding-Guest "A sadder and a wiser man".

The Albatross

This is what you might see on any small, otherwise uninhabited, island in the southern Atlantic, such as an islet off The Falklands.

Albatrosses are surface feeders, living up to fifty years and rarely coming to land. They pair for life (so if you shoot one you are potentially shooting more). There are about twenty species, depending on how you define a species, and the image above is of a pair of black-browed albatrosses.

The largest species is the wandering albatross:

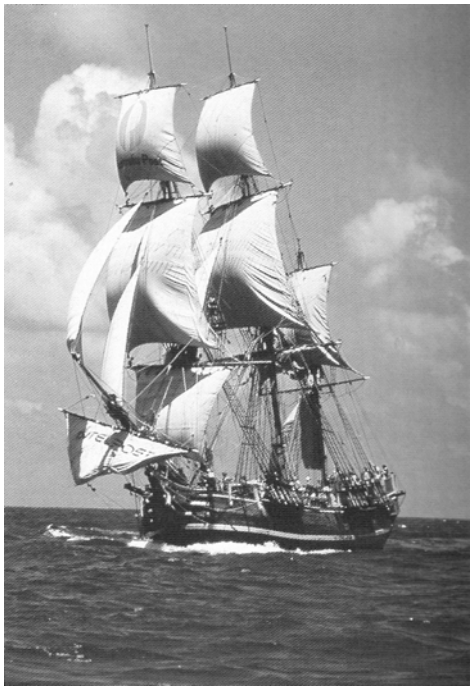
This has a wingspan of eleven feet, making it the largest living bird, though condors are heavier.

1788

In the March of this year, from a small three-masted cutter somewhere off Patagonia, one of the crew shot an albatross. Its wingspan and weight were carefully measured by the captain, William Bligh, and it was then eaten.

The ship was ***HMS Bounty***, attempting to negotiate a passage round The Horn of South America, on its way from Deptford Docks in London to Tahiti, one of the Society Islands in the Pacific. Conditions were difficult, the ship making no progress against head winds, and spending a month in the same place.

This is not the Bounty , but it may well have looked something like this under sail.



And nor is this the Bounty, the real one having being burnt to the waterline three years after it left London. This image is of the replica that was made for one of the cinematic versions of the story.

William Bligh

In the years before his command of the Bounty, Bligh had been involved, as a junior officer, in the third leg of the North Atlantic Slave Trade: the transport of sugar and rum from Jamaica to Britain. This was to contribute to the later change in public perception of his role in the mutiny.

Bligh was the son of a modest customs official; today he would probably be called lower middle class. Short-fused, obsessively punctilious over trivia, he seemed to labour under a permanent sense of grievance about lack of promotion, or lack of acknowledgement of success. The Navy was highly elitist at this time and Bligh was a natural outsider. Might some of these traits be read in the above images?

To set against all that, he was an extremely accomplished cartographer and illustrator, a skilful navigator, up-to-date in his ideas about diet at sea, reluctant to inflict the standard practice of flogging as a naval punishment and unwilling to enforce the practice of ducking those of his crew on their first crossing the Equator. And after the mutiny he did bring the Loyalists nearly 4,000 miles to Timor in an open boat with a freeboard of only seven inches without a single casualty. He had a fine command of naval invective.

A typical inapt occasion arose after the Battle of Copenhagen a few years after the Bounty episode. Bligh had been in the front line and had done rather well, despite the high casualties. He took a skiff across to the admiral to ask for a written testimonial to say how well he had done. Nelson just laughed in his face and told him to go away.

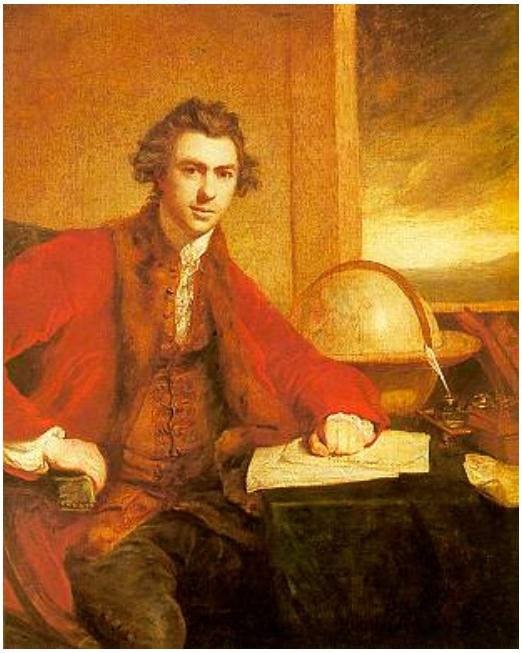
In a period of history which was essentially male-dominated, a particularly attractive characteristic of Bligh stands out. He really loved his wife. Betsy collected sea shells and he always bothered to bring some new ones back from his voyages. And the letter he wrote to her from Timor, after the open-boat voyage, achieves a tragic grandeur:

“Know this, my own dear Betsy, I have lost the Bounty.”

1772

The purpose of Bligh's voyage to Tahiti had been to collect breadfruit plants and take them to the West Indies where they would be cultivated as a food supplement for the slaves working the sugar plantations. The breadfruit only rarely produces seed, so that it was necessary to transport the growing plants themselves.

The idea behind this scheme had originated sixteen years earlier from Joseph Banks.



Banks was a wealthy, land-owning polymath with wide-ranging interests in botany, sheep breeding, music, raising shipwrecks, mermaids and unicorns. A friend of 'farmer' George III, he was involved in the establishment of The Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew. He accompanied James Cook on his first voyage of discovery (1768-1771) to New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific islands, reputedly contributing £10,000 to the costs. Botany Bay in New South Wales is named after him. He never quite mastered written syntax:

From Joseph Banks' Diary
5 February, 1769

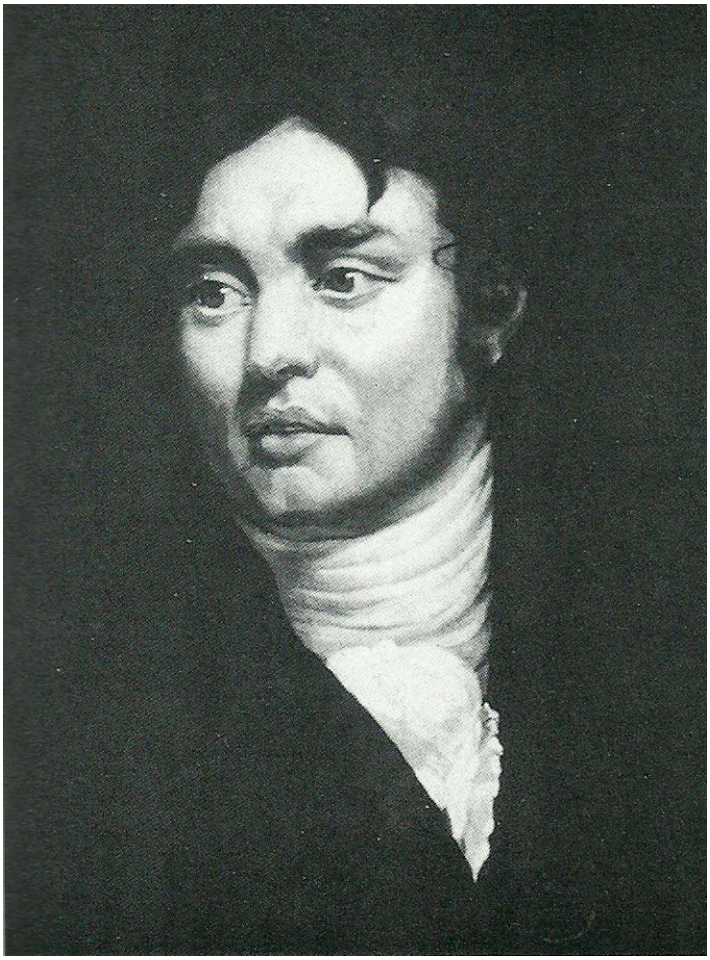
All but calm today: myself a little better… well enough to eat part of the Albatrosses shot on the third, which were so good that everybody commended them and Eat heartily of them even tho there was fresh pork upon the table.

In addition to collecting breadfruit plants for the West Indies in the Caribbean and for the Botanical Gardens in London, Banks also had the idea that Bligh could chart the Endeavour Straits after leaving Tahiti, thereby shortening by several weeks the time it took to deport criminals from London to New South Wales.

Banks was a Fellow of The Royal Society by the age of twenty six and was later its President for over forty years. He had correspondents all over the world but from middle-age was largely confined to a wheelchair in his home in Soho Square due to gout and considerable overweight.

1772 is important in another way; Cook set out on his second voyage (1772-1775) in search of ‘the great southern continent’ which everyone said was there. He sailed right round Antarctica but found only ice; he never made *terra firma*. On his return journey, he brought a south sea islander, Omai, back to London.

But also, in 1772, a large, greedy baby was born in the Devon village of Ottery St Mary. He was later invariably depicted with his mouth a bit open, so it is possible he suffered from chronic adenoids.



He was christened Samuel Taylor, but usually called Sam, which he hated, and was the tenth and last child in the Coleridge family.The father was both vicar and school teacher and Samuel’s mother was his second wife.

It was an achieving family. The sons went into the professions, becoming teachers and priests, or entering the navy. The boy Samuel Taylor grew up feeling rejected and isolated, though was particularly fond of the two siblings nearest to him in age. Reading was a major pastime: *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Arabian Nights*, and a story about an English hermit on an island who shot a large white bird, were particular favourites.

1782

When Coleridge was ten his father died rather suddenly and the boy was despatched to a Charity School in London. Charles Lamb, a few years younger, later to be famous for his bowdlerized versions of Shakespeare: ***Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare***, was at the same school and the two became lifelong friends. One of their teachers was William Wales who had earlier been the astronomer on Cook's second voyage. Wales regularly regaled the boys with stories of the ice:

From William Wales' Log
23 February, 1773

About 19 hrs a very large island of ice
burst in an instant into three large, and
many small pieces, just as we came
abreast of it. We could hear no report
for the noise of the sea and the
whistling of the wind in the rigging.

Later picked up by Coleridge in The Rime:

The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around:
It crack'd and growl'd, and roar'd and howl'd
Like noises of a swound.
At length did cross an albatross,
Through the Fog it came:
And an it were a Christian Soul,
We hail'd it in God's name.
The Marineres gave it biscuit-worms
And round and round it flew;
The ice did split with a Thunder-fit;
The Helmsman steer'd us thro'.

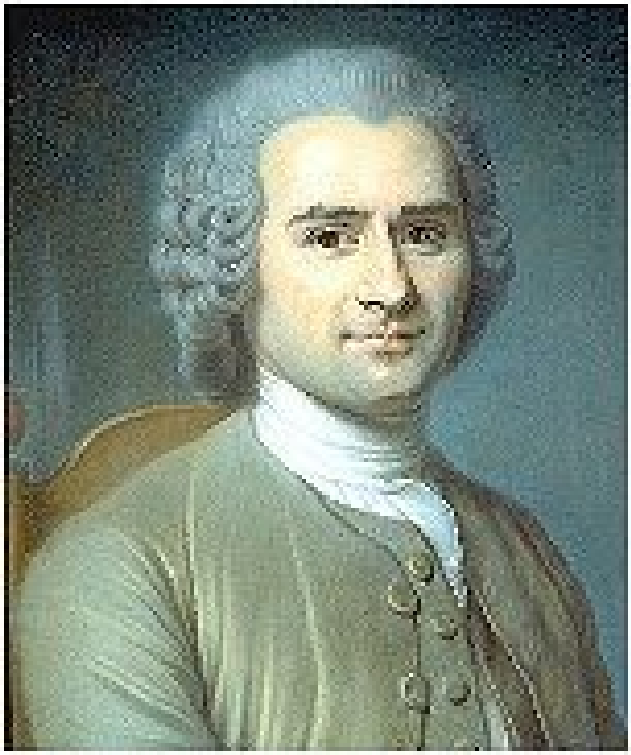
In this same year, 1772, Rousseau's ***Confessions*** were published posthumously. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a Swiss copyist, lived very simply, yet his philosophical writings had far reaching consequences for European thought.

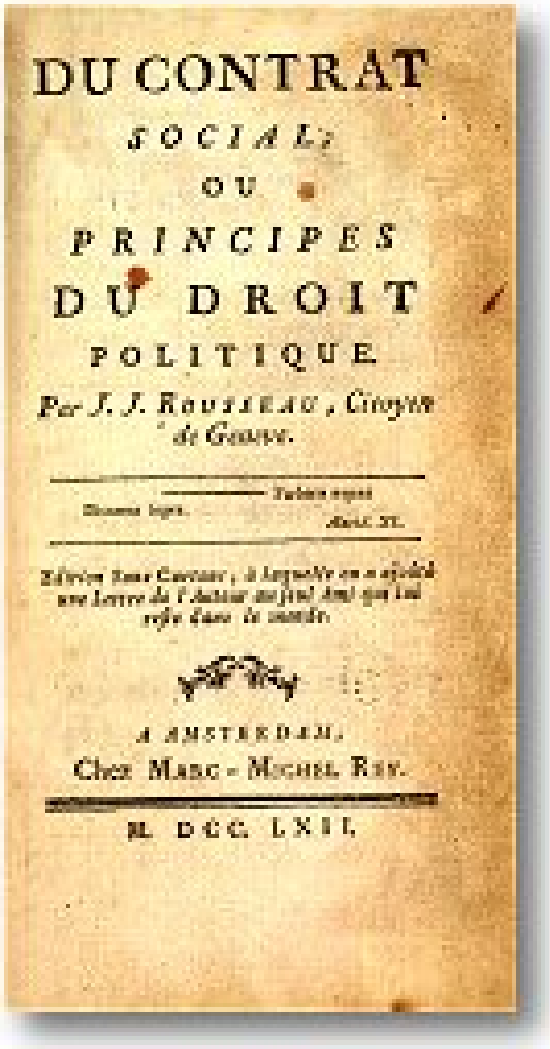
His main thesis had two components of which one was *the need for wholeness – that man had lost touch with himself.*

Rousseau considered that the only way forwards was that man needed to *'get back to nature'* : the *Noble Savage* idea (which in fact the English poet Dryden had proposed some eighty years earlier).

Confessions are an attempt at achieving 'wholeness' – they comprise the first *'kiss and tell'* autobiography. Urinating in a neighbour's cooking pot is something any naughty little boy might have done, but only Rousseau felt it worth recording.

Of far greater significance is Rousseau's ***Social Contract***, published twenty years earlier.




DU CONTRAT
SOCIAL;
OU
PRINCIPES
DU DROIT
POLITIQUE.
Par J. J. ROUSSEAU, Citoyen de Geneve.
A AMSTERDAM,
Chez MARC-MICHEL REY.
M. DCC. LXII.

It opens: *'Man is born free but is everywhere in chains'*. This is quite possibly the most important book that has ever been published, the central thesis being that *no man is born with the right to rule another*. Society now takes this so much for granted that it is difficult to appreciate its impact in 1762. Among other consequences, it led

directly to the violence and rabid excesses of the French Revolution nearly twenty years later.

1783

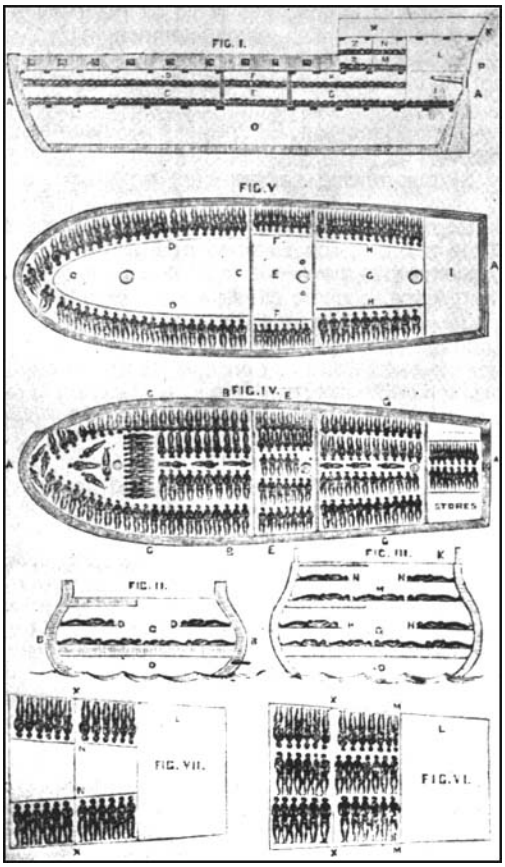
In the year that Pitt first became Prime Minister, the Quakers established the first Abolitionist Movement in England. The main advocate was Thomas Clarkson who devoted his whole life to the abolition of the slave trade.

Clarke is reputed to have carried out over 20,000 interviews in Bristol and Liverpool, mostly with seamen, about conditions in the slave ships. He was often involved in quayside brawls with ship owners. He amassed a collection of slave-branding irons and the instruments used to restrain Africans on the way to the coast after their capture in the interior. Coleridge later described Clarkson as *"a natural steam engine"*, but he was no orator; political promotion of the abolitionist movement was left to Wilberforce.

The Quaker movement itself goes back to the seventeenth century and was started by George Fox in Charles II's reign.

The Quakers considered all men equal before God (which is why they refused to remove their hats when they met the king, who was amused), with the emphasis on simplicity and integrity.

But in 1788, the year that William Bligh set out on his ill-fated breadfruit voyage, the Quakers published the stowage plan of ***HMS Brookes***:



They even provided toy models of the ship so that children could try to fit in the right number of model slaves made of wood.

In this same year Cowper's lightweight poem nonetheless highlights some of the growing unease:

Pity for Poor Africans

I own I am shock'd by the purchase of slaves,
And fear those who buy them and sell them are knaves;
What I hear of their hardships, their tortures and groans,
Is almost enough to draw pity from stones.
I pity them greatly, but I must be mum,
For how could we do without sugar and rum?

William Cowper, 1788

It is tempting to interpret Jane Austen's ***Mansfield Park*** (1811), at least in part as an expression of dissent over the slave trade. The story involves a young girl, Fanny Price, from a poor background, who is sent to live with her rich cousin's family, the Bertrams.

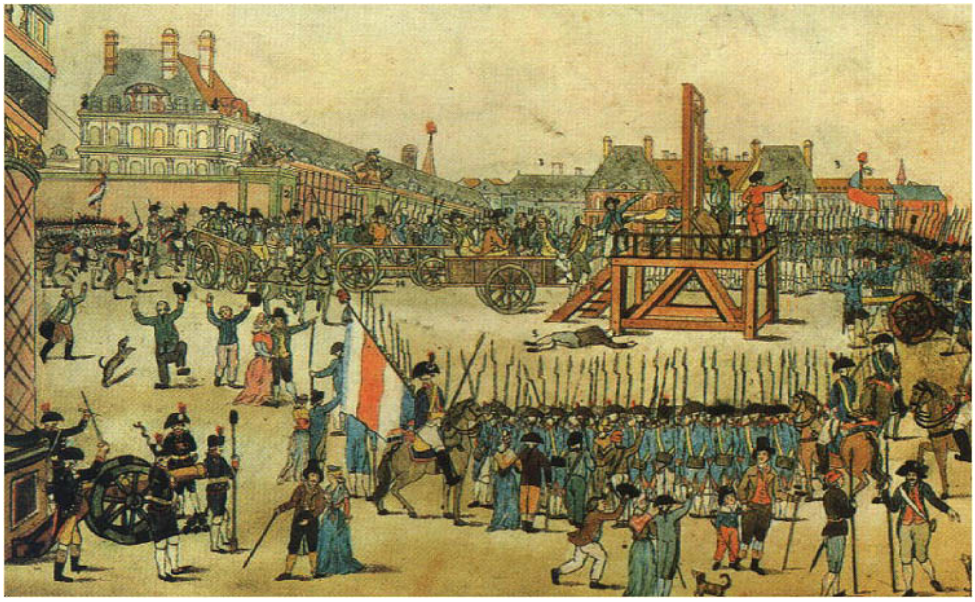
The authoritarian Sir Thomas has four children, Tom, Maria, Julia and Edmund, all older than Fanny. The Bertram money comes from plantations in Antigua, and twice does Fanny try to ask her terrifying uncle about the slaves, but each time she is ignored, pushed aside. Later Tom is sent to Antigua and returns sick and enfeebled, becoming a permanent semi-invalid. Both daughters elope; one of them, Maria, is already married. She ends up sent away, living *'in another country, remote and private…shut up with little society'*. All this may be Austen's comment on intemperance and wealth distastefully acquired.

1789

In the middle of the year the French Revolution broke with the storming of the Bastille. Over the next few years revolution became widespread in France and a twenty-two year war with Britain began. Two main revolutionary parties emerged, the Girondins and the more extreme Jacobins. The latter were led by Maximilien Robespierre, whose hero was Rousseau, and who was responsible for the execution of 16,000 people over a period of three months: The Reign of Terror following the execution of Louis XVI in 1793.

This figure of 16,000, which includes women and children, is a conservative estimate; some authorities put it as high as 40,000.

Robespierre was finally apprehended by the more moderate Girondins. What exactly occurred at the moment of arrest will never be known; he may have tried to shoot himself but all that happened was that most of his lower jaw was blown away.



He was guillotined the next day. Upside-down. That is, lying on his back so that he could see what was coming. But he was screaming so loudly as his bandages were taken off, what he might have seen hardly mattered.

1790

Coleridge starts his lifelong addiction to opium. The initial stimulus may have been the sudden death of the two siblings to whom he was most attached.

1791

William Pitt makes his first abolitionist speech. In the same year Thomas Paine publishes ***Rights of Man*** in support of the French Revolution. The text was so strongly anti-monarchist, and so against the hereditary principle that Paine was obliged to move to France, being declared a criminal in England.

1793

Coleridge, now aged twenty one, starts at Cambridge and publishes his first two Odes, both in Greek, on the Slave Trade and on Robespierre. He is soon to disappear into the army under the pseudonym of Silas Tompkyn Comberbache. He seems to have been an energetic but shambling young man. No good on a horse – he kept sliding off behind – he was put in charge of the Pest House, the army sick bay. At one point, for a whole week, he was shut in a room with a hallucinating soldier recovering from smallpox. It may have been this which later prompted some of the imagery of The Rime:

Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea
*****
And every tongue thro' utter drouth
Was wither'd at the root
*****
Seven days, seven nights I saw that curse,
And yet I could not die.

Coleridge later made an extensive tour of Wales, on foot, with a Cambridge friend, walking up to thirty miles a day. Crossing the Bristol Channel by ferry would have been his only exposure to boat travel before working on The Rime a few years later. Whilst in Harlech he climbed up the outside walls of the castle (which may have been ivy-covered).

He later almost ran up Pen Maen Mawr on the north coast, in pouring rain, noting his 'grinning thirst' on the summit and not being able to find any water to drink. In The Rime we find:

Water, water everywhere
Ne any drop to drink.
*****
With throat unslak'd, with black lips bak'd
Agape they heard me call.

1795

Coleridge is now in Clevedon in Somerset. He marries and meets Wordsworth who is living with his sister. Dorothy. The four of them set up homes further west, Coleridge and his wife at Nether Stowey, and Wordsworth and Dorothy, rather more grandly, at Holford. The two writers are in permanent discussion, unwittingly contributing to the emergence of the Romantic Movement. Coleridge grows his own vegetables, refuses to put down mousetraps in his home, which he calls The Hovel, all this being a conscious Rousseauesque 'return to nature'. He and Wordsworth have a lot of fun mapping the streams on the Quantocks. Coleridge makes notes on 'Christian the mutineer', the mutiny on the Bounty now being a general topic of discussion.

And it was here that Coleridge and Wordsworth together planned The Rime, intended to be a rapidly-produced pot-boiler to act as a money-spinner. They made a three-day walking tour, westwards along the Somerset coast, beyond Minehead, and then returning inland, to plan the detail.

Wordsworth contributed the idea that the story should be told to a stranger:

He holds him with his glittering eye –
The wedding guest stood still
And listens like a three year's child;
The Marinere has his will.
The wedding guest sate on a stone,
He cannot chuse but hear:
And thus spake on that ancyent man,
The bright-eyed Marinere.

Some of the imagery that found its way into The Rime was drawn from the local landscape, the 'ribb'd Sea-sand' being a distinct reference to the ridging in the mud which is very marked when the tide recedes along the Somerset coast.

'I fear thee, ancyent Marinere!
I fear thy skinny hand;
And thou art long and lank and brown
As is the ribb'd Sea-sand.'

The western wave was all aflame
The day was well nigh close!
Almost upon the western wave
Rested the broad bright Sun;
When that strange shape drove suddenly
Betwixt us and the Sun.

This may well refer to the strange lighting effects which sometimes occur when the sun is setting beyond the Bristol Channel and a yacht passes across with the sun behind it.

It was Wordsworth who suggested that the mariner had committed a crime and Coleridge used his memory of his childhood reading of the English hermit.

In the event, ***The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*** took Coleridge five months to write. The form of the whole is loosely based on Captain Cook's second voyage of discovery – round Antarctica and then moving northwards to the tropics.

Coleridge deliberately used archaic forms of spelling to heighten the atmosphere of something both hypnotic and incantatory, but which is also intensely personal.

The Rime was published anonymously as part of ***Lyrical Ballads*** in 1798. This is the largest contribution with only three further works from Coleridge as against nineteen from Wordsworth.

The Ballads effectively launched the Romantic Movement. In one sense the title is oxy-moronic since a true ballad has a repetitive, drone-like, hurdy-gurdy element and a lyric is something felt more personally. The Rime combines them:

Alone, alone, all all alone
Alone on the wide wide Sea
And Christ would take no pity on
My soul in agony.

The activities of the two men in Somerset came to the attention of the authorities; it was thought that they were planning a Jacobin uprising in England. A slightly indignant report was sent to Westminster:

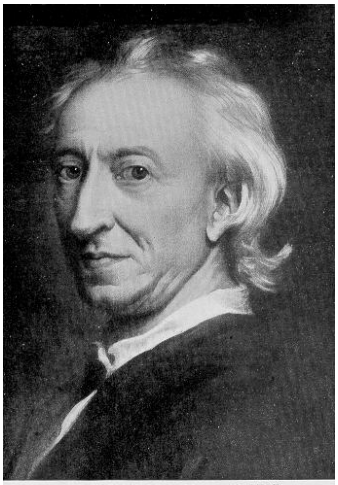
"They sit around on the hillsides, on campstools, with their portfolios".

Artists in general, at this time, were far more politically conscious than many are today. A climax in the French Revolution was Napoleon declaring himself Emperor in 1804.

Beethoven had recently dedicated his latest symphony, the Eroica, to Napoleon, but on hearing about this self-promotion, deleted the dedication with such violence that he ruined his pen.

What had gone before: Enlightenment

Central to the Age of Reason of the seventeenth century was a belief in continuity and in a ‘perfectible system of knowledge’. Life Insurance was established in England at this time. Thinkers of this period were Boyle, Newton, Evelyn and Wren. John Evelyn’s thinking was far ahead of his time.

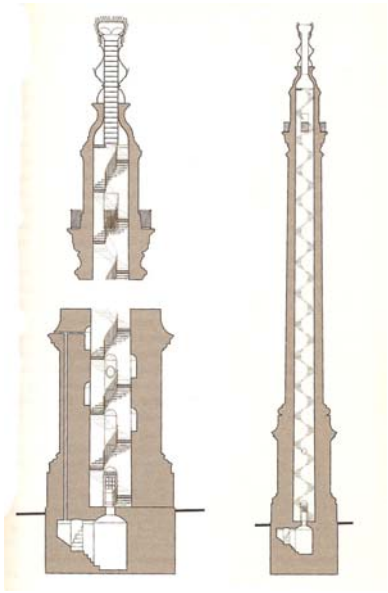


He advocated a green belt round London, a clean air act and the re-siting downwind of all London's factories.

After the 1666 fire of London, he oversaw a new sewerage system in the capital. Some of the new drainpipes, hollowed out elm tree trunks, were still in use in the 1970s.

Christopher Wren considered his science to be a more enduring contribution than his architecture.

It is not usually appreciated that Wren's Monument, built on the site of the outbreak of the Great Fire, is actually a telescope which Wren used finally to demonstrate that the earth moved in relation to the stars.



These scientists considered that their discoveries should be put to use for the benefit of society. Over a hundred years later, in his log of the Bounty voyage, Bligh proudly notes that his is the first voyage to put the discoveries of Cook to practical use.

The story of Omai tells us a great deal about English society in the late eighteenth century. Omai was the south sea islander, specifically from Huahine, one of the Society Islands, whom Cook brought back to London in 1875 on his return from the voyage to the Antarctic.

Beautiful, tall, elegant and well-mannered, Omai became an instant darling of fashionable London. Here, at last, was the Noble Savage. On meeting George III, he made a magnificent bow, declaiming: *"How do, King Tosh."*

He was painted by Reynolds, feted by Joseph Banks, and plied with gifts. Returning him to the Pacific was given as the public reason for Cook's third voyage; the real reason was the search for a north-west passage between the Pacific and the Arctic. Among Omai's presents for his home in Huahine, was a complete suite of Chippendale dining room furniture, a 'cellar' of port, a jack-in-the-box, a dinner service of fine china, a wind-up musical instrument, a medieval suit of armour, chain mail, a huge bible, and some very fine bright red feathers. This really tells us more about us then than about anything else. Having lost his identity as an islander without acquiring a western one, Omai died shortly after being re-established on Huahine, disappointed that the only things appreciated at home were the red feathers.

The Romantic Movement

"I have been in hell for weeks with you."

This is one of the very few recorded statements of Fletcher Christian, just before he precipitated the mutiny against his captain on the Bounty in 1789. It epitomises the emergent sensibility in which personal feelings take precedence over responsibility or a sense of duty. In more general terms the movement was an attempt to extend what the human frame and psyche could accomplish in the search for sublimity. Ballet dancers went up *en pointe*. More leg showed. Beethoven and Chopin, hearing secret harmonies, pushed against the limitations of the available instruments; Chopin in particular was composing for a piano which did not yet exist. Of his improvisations, it was said that he was marvellous up to midnight. And after midnight became sublime. Painters made impossibly expressive images, such as this 'depiction' of Bounty Bay on Pitcairn Island:

Writers used chemistry. Coleridge solicited cannabis from Joseph Banks and sometimes invited his friends to The Hovel for what he called *"A bang"* - group smoking sessions. An early form of sundry spliffheads sitting round slowly getting stoned? If you like, but he did write ***Kubla Khan***, quite one of the most marvellous tracts of visionary imagery and rhythm in existence. It seems to have been written somewhere on the hillside between Porlock and Lynton when Coleridge was taken short on one of his walks, possibly near the site where Blackmore was later to set ***Lorna Doone*** (1869).

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure dome decree;
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

And later, he catches himself up:

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw

That is, he is commenting on the vision whilst actually having it, in a kind of poetic counterpoint.

A most certainly too, Keats used claret and water as a stimulant:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk.

This seems to convey some experience of intoxication.

The friendship between Coleridge and Wordsworth underwent many vicissitudes. At one stage they both moved to the Lake District, where Wordsworth wrote ***Daffodils***. In the original, the first line went:

I wandered lonely as a cow

It was Dorothy who later made the tactful change to 'cloud.'

It is possible to argue that the best work of the new movement was also classical in terms of resonance. That is, it built on past achievement: Beethoven 'is out of Haydn' as Chopin is 'out of Mozart' (and a host of others). That is one of the reasons why their work has survived. There is a pantheon of forgotten titans of the keyboard whose work has not stood the test of time since it was produced merely to demonstrate spectacular and mechanical pyrotechnics.

The Slave Trade and Racism

This tarsier, photographed in a zoo in Madagascar, is a not-too-far-distant relative of ours. We share bi-focal vision, grasping hands and thumbs which can be opposed against the palm. But in addition, we have prehensile fingers; the tips can be individually opposed against the thumb. There are internal similarities between us and tarsiers, particularly in digestive systems, reflecting our unspecialised diets. Man is an omnivore.

At some point our ancestors dropped to the ground and became bipedal. Here are reconstructions of three ape-men, far more closely related to us than is a tarsier. They exhibit an increasing resemblance to modern man: *Homo sapiens*.

On the left is *Australopithecus afarensis* ('Lucy') dating from about three million years ago. In the middle is *Homo habilis* from about a million and half years ago, and *Homo pekinensis*, on the right, the most like us, from about three hundred thousand years ago. All these ancestors had prehensile fingers and some of them made tools.

Flint axes are worked stones. They seem to have been used for scraping flesh from bones taken from the corpses of dead animals, suggesting a scavenging lifestyle.

For several million years flint axes seem to have been made from stones local to where they were worked, used and abandoned. Later axes are often found far from their place of manufacture which suggests that some kind of exchange or trade was taking place. At some point, as well, someone must have successfully killed something with a well-aimed throw; hunting was invented. A hunting-gathering lifestyle would imply some division of labour between males and females, the former being the hunters and the females the gatherers. It was probably women who invented farming, possibly by accident, so that a settled, cave-dwelling habit was possible.

Whoever it was who said that human life was *"Brutish, short and solitary"* was wrong. It was *"Brutish, short and tribal"*. It had to be; cooperation was the only way to survive. The modern human brain is hard-wired to a group ethic. And correspondingly tends to reject or be intolerant of any counter-culture. Papua New Guinea is an island a little over a thousand miles long. There are still currently over eight hundred different languages spoken on the island, most of them unique to a particular tribe. Cliquism is an endemic human trait.

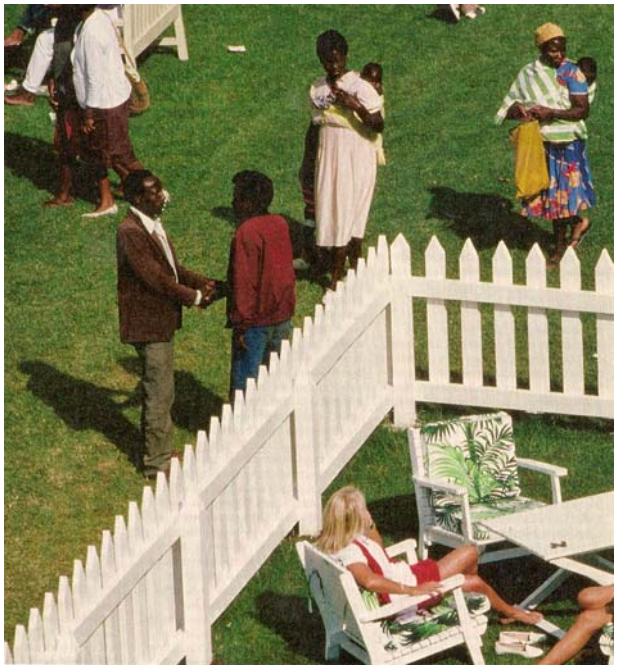
Moving fast-forwards to about 1,500BC we find the Phoenicians more or less in possession of the Mediterranean, particularly its southern coastline. They are interesting in being godless, without an emperor, and without major wars. If they had a god, it was a belief in trade. They invented handwriting and what they wrote was specifically accountancy, bills of trade, receipts of exchange. They were also the first to invent large ships, with sails, and two tiers of oarsmen as well to assist with mooring. The Phoenicians were the first to move captive people about; they invented slavery.

Fast forwards again to 1,400AD. We find the Atlantic in the possession of Iberia, with the Portuguese and Spanish forever squabbling over territorial rights. The Pope finally stepped in and 'gave' the African coast to the Portuguese and the South American one to the Spanish. And what became the North Atlantic Slave Trade began almost by accident, with the Portuguese bringing Africans back home and integrating them with their families as honoured assistants. The English and the Dutch quickly followed suit but turned the whole exercise into slavery on an industrial scale.

But was it racist? The main criteria for a slave's price were gender, teeth, age and health (anuses were frequently blocked on arrival in the West Indies to conceal symptoms of *'the flux'* or dysentery). So the criteria were economic above all else. Modern racism was still to come.

Much of the foregoing in this essay, of course, has been concerned with the growth of the British Empire. For better or for worse, by 1900 *Britain controlled the destinies of some three hundred and fifty million alien people, unable to govern themselves.*

By 2001, the Dutch Declaration of the World Conference against Racism, was able to state: *"Colonialism has led to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and racial intolerance."*



And the one facet of colonialism which fired racism was surely the missionary movement. Going into a country to obtain people is different from going into it to impose different gods. Since we're hard-wired to register social/cultural differences, these become obscenely exaggerated when religious differences are super-imposed. The jury is still out over the rise and fall of the British Empire.

November, 2010

(1) ***William Pitt the Younger***. William Hague 2004. HarperCollins
(2) ***William Wilberforce***. William Hague 2007. HarperCollins
(3) ***Coleridge - Early Visions***. Richard Holmes 2005. Harper Perennial
(4) ***Coleridge - Darker Reflections***. Richard Holmes 1998. HarperCollins
(5) ***The Rational Optimist***. Matt Ridley 2010. HarperCollins