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Graham Barwell

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Abstract

Coleridge was a regular companion. Emigrants' diaries and journals rarely failed to describe one particular landmark experience: the first sighting of the albatross, followed by attempts to kill or capture a specimen, in the style of the Ancient Mariner. 'Who could doubt their supernatural attributes? Certainly not a spirit-chilled landswoman, with Coleridge's magic legend perpetually repeating itself to her', wrote 27-year-old Luisa [sic] Meredith, arriving in Sydney in 1839. (Lyons 13)¹

GRAHAM BARWELL

Coleridge's Albatross and the Impulse to Seabird Conservation

On the long sea journey to Australia, ... Coleridge was a regular companion. Emigrants' diaries and journals rarely failed to describe one particular landmark experience: the first sighting of the albatross, followed by attempts to kill or capture a specimen, in the style of the Ancient Mariner. 'Who could doubt their supernatural attributes? Certainly not a spirit-chilled landswoman, with Coleridge's magic legend perpetually repeating itself to her', wrote 27-year-old Luisa [sic] Meredith, arriving in Sydney in 1839. (Lyons 13)¹

What is remarkable about Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798), is that, despite its having a powerful impact on the imaginations of its readers in the nineteenth century, it had, as the epigraph indicates, almost no effect on the practices or behaviour aboard ships, whether among sailors or emigrant passengers. Even though the poet appears to be a proto-conservationist at one point in the poem, asserting that 'He prayeth best, who loveth well/Both man and bird and beast' (612–13),² his readers, at least in the English speaking world, seem to have been noticeably immune to any application to their own circumstances of the terrible consequences of the Mariner's actions in killing the friendly albatross, while being perfectly willing to give elements from the poem a special place in their imaginations. Indeed, this willingness to internalise the poem extended to everyday speech, as some of its phrases and images passed into the common vernacular.

In this essay I will examine the figure of the albatross, beginning with accounts of early European voyagers before moving to Coleridge's poem and discussing the part that poem played in establishing the bird in the imagination of readers and speakers of English. I am interested in the significance accorded to the albatross, partly as a result of the poem, and I will consider what relationship the bird and the poem have with the movement for the preservation of seabirds and the marine environment, which began in the twentieth century.

My focus is on the place of the bird in the Western imagination, primarily among the people of the North Atlantic seaboard, together with the English-speaking settler societies of the southern Pacific — Australia and New Zealand — where some albatrosses breed and are regularly encountered in the adjacent seas. It should be recognised that the bird had its special place in the culture of

indigenous peoples of the Pacific region, such as the Maori of New Zealand or the Inuit of the Bering Sea, but that significance is completely unrelated to Coleridge and is thus beyond the bounds of this paper.

By the albatross I mean those large members of the family, Diomedidae, which are known in English as albatrosses or sometimes, in the case of some of the smaller members, as mollymawks. They generally breed on remote islands and range widely across the oceans of the Southern Hemisphere particularly, but some species are also found in the North and East Central Pacific Ocean. While the taxonomy and nomenclature of the birds is still not completely settled, the most recent major study by Michael Brooke recognised twenty-one species and its nomenclature will be used here when referring to individual species. But for the most part my discussion centres around the bird in general rather than a particular species and is most concerned with those albatrosses encountered in the Southern Ocean.

* * * * *

EARLY EUROPEAN ENCOUNTERS WITH ALBATROSSES

By the time Coleridge came to write his poem near the end of the eighteenth century, the albatross was relatively little known to his fellow Europeans. The seas of the North Atlantic are not commonly visited by albatrosses, so that the birds had never formed part of the familiar avifauna of people in that part of the world and had not been invested with particular attributes, associations or myths in the same way that local birds had, like doves, or some birds from further afield, like parrots or peacocks, which had become familiar over many centuries through the exotic bird trade or by becoming naturalised.

Early European explorers who ventured south of the Tropical Zone reported encountering very large unfamiliar birds with bodies as large as swans or geese.³ These reports were often vague and confused, with the descriptions appearing to mix up albatrosses with frigatebirds — large seabirds with piratical habits which were confined to tropical and warm temperate seas.⁴ By the middle of the eighteenth century, some albatrosses had been captured as specimens and brought back to Europe, as noted by the Englishman, George Edwards, in the second part (1747) of his ornithological publication whose title indicates the exotic and unfamiliar nature of its contents: *A Natural History of Birds, Most of which Have not been Figured or Described, and Others very Little Known, from Obscure or too Brief Descriptions without Figures, or from Figures very Ill Designed*. Edwards (2: 88) remarks that he had seen two stuffed albatrosses, one in the Tower of London and one in the possession of Benjamin Cowell, Surgeon, of Lombard Street, and that he had a skeleton by him as he prepared his description and illustration, the first published unambiguous depiction of the bird (fig. 1).

It was the three exploratory voyages led by Captain James Cook in the period 1768–80 which helped make the bird better known to audiences hungry for

details of the exotic and largely unknown ‘South Seas’. Apart from the tropical and northern temperate zones of the Pacific Ocean, the three voyages covered extensive tracts of the Southern Ocean and the southern temperate zone of the Pacific, as Cook determined the non-existence of the imagined Great Southern Land and explored and mapped unfamiliar territory. The seas between about latitude 30° South and the Antarctic pack ice were inhabited by seventeen species of albatross, so the birds were frequently encountered.

Cook’s ships carried scientists to collect, investigate and report on the flora and fauna new to European knowledge as well as artists to make drawings and paintings of those new species. Apart from Cook himself, many of the members of each expedition, passengers or crew, kept journals, and these, together with the specimens assiduously collected and recorded, the ethnological items obtained by trade or as gifts, and the paintings and drawings, were brought back to England as a record of a new and exotic part of the world. The official accounts of the first and second voyages were published in 1773 and 1777, each within two years of Cook’s return, and were either based on his journal, in the case of John Hawksworth’s narrative of the first voyage of 1768–71, or written by Cook himself in the case of the second voyage of 1772–75. The intense interest the Cook voyages sparked in the reading public of the time meant there was a fertile market for books relating to the voyages, so that numerous works appeared on this subject in the last quarter of the century.⁵

On the first voyage Joseph Banks, the gentleman scientist aboard, recorded in his journal the collection of the first albatross of the expedition as it made its way south in waters off modern Argentina, around latitude 37° south, on the evening of 23rd December 1768. Banks identified the bird he shot as ‘*Diomedaea exulans*’, a variant spelling of the name given today to the Wandering Albatross, and Sydney Parkinson prepared an (unfinished) watercolour of it which still survives (fig. 2).⁶ Subsequently, albatrosses were regularly encountered on this and the later voyages whenever the ships were in southern waters.

References to albatrosses in the published accounts of the voyages tend to focus on the same points of interest, especially the size of the birds and the means of catching them. In Hawksworth’s account of the first voyage, he writes of Banks going out in early February 1769 in a small boat on a calm sea west of Cape Horn to shoot birds:

The albatrosses were observed to be larger than those which had been taken northward of the Streight [the Strait of Le Maire]; one of them measured ten feet two inches from the tip of one wing to that of the other, when they were extended (2: book 1, ch. 6)

In his journal for 4th February, Cook declared this bird was ‘as large as a Goose’ (1: 55). While birds were often shot and retrieved from small boats — it being impractical to retrieve from the sea any bird shot from a moving sailing ship — other means of capturing them were used. On the second voyage, when the ships were a day south of Cape Town on 24th November 1772, Cook noted in his



Figure 1. The Albatross, coloured engraving in Joseph Banks's copy of George Edwards, *A Natural History of Birds*, part 2 (London, 1747), plate following p. 88. Banks may have written the name *Diomedea exulans* below the depiction of the bill. ©British Library Board.



Figure 2. Probable immature Wandering Albatross, unfinished watercolour by Sydney Parkinson of a bird caught 23 December 1768, No. 25 in his paintings from Cook's first voyage. ©Natural History Museum, London.

journal there were '[m]any Albatrosses about the Ship, some of which we caught with Hook and line' (2: 52). William Bayly, astronomer on the *Adventure*, gave details of the method in his journal entry for 3rd October 1772. A baited hook is laid on a piece of wood trailed behind the boat and

the whiteness of the board attracts the bird so that he pitcheth on the water by it & swims along side of it, & seeing the bait greedily swallows it hook & all & is thereby caught. (qtd. by Beaglehole 2: 41n3)

While the birds were caught for scientific purposes they were not able to be preserved as specimens, once examined, measured and described, and so this gives rise to a third commonly mentioned feature of the albatross, its suitability as a tasty item for human consumption. Immediately after the passage from his journal for November 1772 cited above, Cook notes that the birds 'were not thought dispicable food even at a time when all hands were served fresh Mutton'. The tastiness of albatross meat had been established early on the first voyage, Banks noting in his journal for 5th February 1769 that he ate 'part of the Albatrosses shot on the third, which were so good that every body commended and Eat heartily of them tho there was fresh pork upon the table'.

Occasionally, comments about albatrosses deal with other matters. On the first voyage Banks had written in his journal entry for March 1770 that Maori personal ornamentation for both sexes included ears pierced with plugs of cloth, bone, feathers or wood. 'The women also often wore bunches of the down of the albatross which is snow white near as large as a fist, which tho very odd made by no means an unelegant appearance'. On the second voyage Johann Forster, the scientist aboard the *Resolution*, likewise noted in his journal entry for 7th April 1773 the use of albatross skin for ear adornment among a Maori family they met in Dusky Sound and remarked that they gave Cook 'some Albatrosses skins' (2: 249).

As the eighteenth century drew to a close, the previously vague and confused reports of these large seabirds of the southern oceans were supplemented by more reliable information as the accounts of the voyages and the more formal scientific descriptions of new species appeared. Johann Forster, for example, published his account of three albatross species in a French journal in 1785 ('Mémoire'). While this included three plates showing the birds, illustrations in the voyage narratives were necessarily less concerned with detailed depictions of them (fig. 3).⁷ But many of the paintings based on first-hand experience of specimens were never published,⁸ so that it was still possible for a major work of eighteenth century ornithology to publish a strangely distorted picture of an albatross (fig. 4).⁹ Certainly most educated readers would not have been in a position to assess the representations of albatrosses in the light of their own experience, so that there were virtually no constraints on the way a skilled writer like Coleridge might depict the bird.



Figure 3. The Ice Islands Seen the 9th January 1773, engraving by Benjamin T. Pouncy of a drawing by William Hodges from James Cook, *A Voyage towards the South Pole and round the World Performed in his Majesty's Ships the Resolution and Adventure in the Years 1772, 1773, 1774, and 1775*, vol. 1 (London, 1777), plate XXX, Cook, James, 1728–1779, National Library of Australia (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.aus-nk5677-1-s36x-e-cd>).

Figure 4. The Wandering Albatross, engraving from [Georges-Louis Leclerc] de Buffon, *The Natural History of Birds from the French of the Count de Buffon*, trans. with preface and notes, vol. 9 (London, 1793), plate 255. (University of Sydney, Rare Books Library.)



THE ANCIENT MARINER'S ALBATROSS

The genesis of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is well known and set out in the edition of Coleridge's *Poetical Works* by J.C.C. Mays (1.1: 365–66). The poem was begun in November 1797 as a collaboration with William Wordsworth during the time Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy, were living near Coleridge in Somerset. It was proposed as a way of defraying the expenses of a walking tour the three of them undertook that month, but Wordsworth withdrew from the joint project and Coleridge completed the poem in the first months of 1798. The finished poem recounts the circumstances in which a guest at a wedding meets the old sailor of the title who insists on telling his unfortunate story of a voyage into polar regions and thence to the tropics. This voyage begins well but misfortune strikes as the crew endure terrible privations as a result of offending the Polar Spirit. They are becalmed in the tropics and all, apart from the Mariner, die of thirst, only to be returned to life temporarily as zombies, as the ship is blown back home by winds driven by favourable spirits. There the ship sinks, the Mariner is rescued and begs one of his rescuers, the Hermit, to hear his confession, but subsequently finds himself constrained to wander and retell his story whenever he is struck down again by the agony of guilt.

His guilt comes from his awareness that it was his killing a friendly albatross that offended the Polar Spirit and led to the deaths of all his shipmates. This bird appears when the ship is alone among the icebergs, it accepts food offered by the crew and accompanies the ship for nine days as it sails north, until it is shot by the Mariner. The crew first deplore the killing then approve of it, based on a perceived relationship between the bird and the weather they encounter, but finish up blaming the Mariner and hang the dead bird from his neck. This remains until the Mariner blesses the water-snakes, when it falls from his neck into the sea, a wind stirs and the ship with its zombie crew begins its long voyage home.

Though some of the poem's inspiration comes from Cook's voyages of exploration, Coleridge does not localise it in the present but gives it semi-medieval flavour, partly in accordance with its presentation of the Mariner as a type of the Wandering Jew and partly in recognition of a contemporary literary taste for the Gothic, especially in the form of old ballads.¹⁰ The original spelling of the poem's title, 'The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere', the deliberate use of archaisms such as *eftsoons* (12) or *swound* (62), and the presence of characters like the Hermit all indicate a setting in earlier times.¹¹ This is why Coleridge has the Mariner shooting the bird with a crossbow rather than the muskets Banks and the Forsters used on Cook's voyages.

The poem was first published in the 1798 first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, which contained works by both Coleridge and Wordsworth, though neither author was named. 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' was the first poem in this collection. It was revised and republished in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), and from then on Coleridge kept tinkering with it as it reappeared in subsequent collections, adding its epigraph and prose gloss in 1817.¹²

The sources Coleridge drew on have been extensively studied¹³ and it has long been known that the shooting of the albatross came from Wordsworth, who had been reading George Shelvocke's account of his round the world voyage, 1719–22.¹⁴ In the narrative of the voyage, Shelvocke reports how in late September–early October 1719 his ship was driven well south of Cape Horn by continuous bad weather. At this time they saw no signs of life

except a disconsolate black Albitross [sic], who accompanied us for several days, hovering about us as if he had lost himself, till Hatley, (my second Captain) observing, in one of his melancholy fits, that this bird was always hovering near us, imagin'd, from his colour, that it might be some ill omen. That which, I suppose, induced him the more to encourage his superstition, was the continued series of contrary tempestuous winds, which had oppres'd us ever since we had got into this sea. But be that as it would, he, after some fruitless attempts, at length, shot the Albitross, not doubting (perhaps) that we should have a fair wind after it. (72–73)

Shelvocke does not indicate whether the death of the bird brought the result Hatley desired, though he comments on how on sailing in these waters is truly melancholy since they had been separated from their accompanying ship, were far from any port and were in constant danger of losing their masts (73–74). He notes that they made slow progress back northward over the next month until they eventually reached the coast of Chile in mid November.

Apart from Shelvocke, whose influence he denied,¹⁵ and the narratives of the Cook voyages, it is unclear whether Coleridge had any other sources of information about albatrosses. He may have heard something about them from those close to him. There was, for instance, a stuffed albatross in the museum set up by Peter Crosthwaite at Keswick, Cumberland, which Wordsworth visited in 1794.¹⁶ On the other hand, Bernard Smith has argued that Wordsworth's suggestion of the killing of an albatross may have been supplemented by stories Coleridge had heard in his schooldays at Christ's Hospital, where one of his teachers was William Wales, who had served as meteorologist and astronomer aboard the *Resolution* with Cook, 1772–75 (154–57). Whether Wales was an influence or not,¹⁷ Coleridge certainly had no first-hand experience of the bird at sea, even though he was keenly interested at this stage in his life in many current developments in the scientific understanding of the world including the literature of discovery.¹⁸

In his poem Coleridge provided a number of details about the albatross: it appeared out of the fog when the ship was in the polar region (63–64); it ate unfamiliar food provided by the sailors (67);¹⁹ it accompanied the ship, flying round and round it (68), coming to the sailors' call (73–74) and perching on the mast or rigging for nine nights (75–76); it was hung from the Ancient Mariner's neck (141–42); it was harmless (400) and loved the man who shot it (404). There is no indication of the colour of the bird, though Shelvocke's albatross was black. Apparently on the assumption that Coleridge likewise had a dark bird in mind, there have been a number of attempts to identify the Mariner's

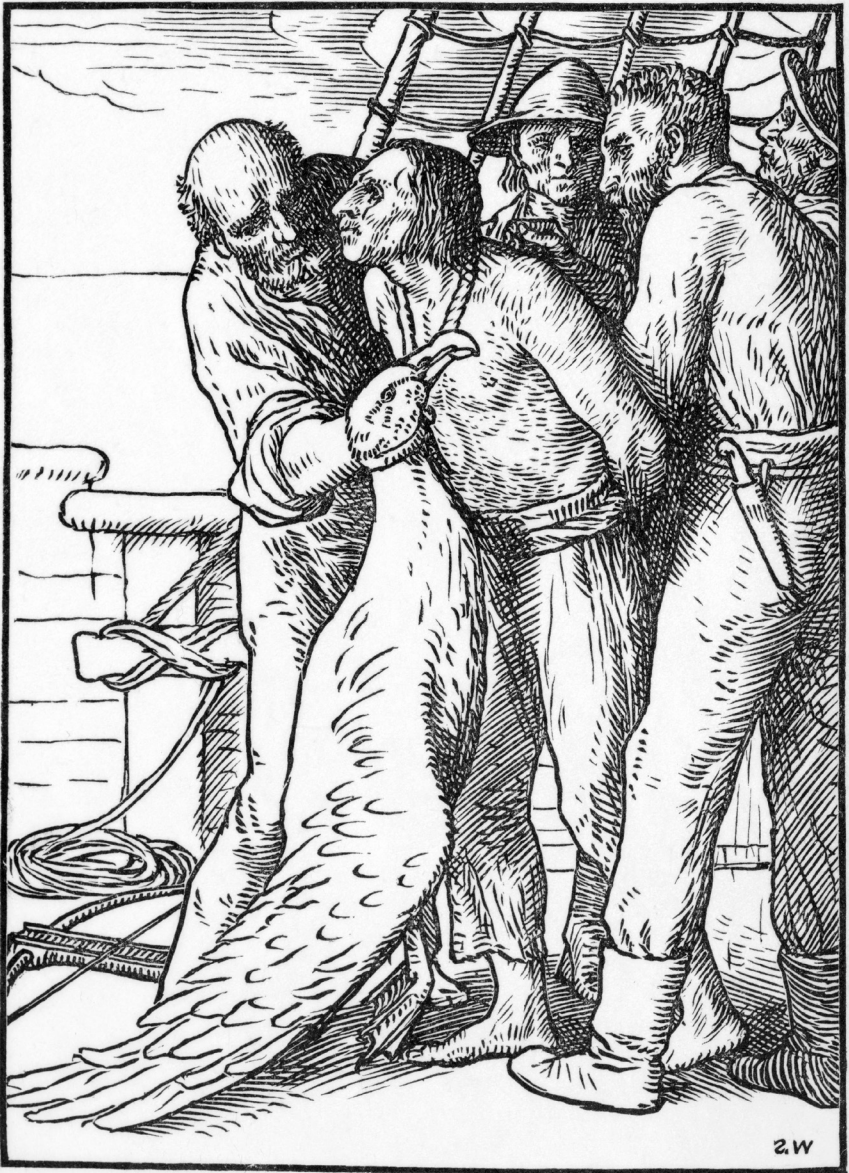


Figure 5. The Mariner wearing the albatross, woodcut by William Strang, frontispiece to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (London: Edward Arnold, New York: Samuel Buckley, 1903). Fine Printing Collection, Special Printed Collections, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

albatross. John Livingston Lowes identified it as ‘the so-called “sooty albatross”’ (206–207), one species of which the Light-mantled Sooty Albatross (*Phoebetria palpebrata*) ranges around southern South America, though other species have been suggested, including a juvenile Wandering Albatross (*Diomedea exulans*), a Brown Skua (*Catharacta lonnbergi*), or a juvenile Southern or Northern Giant-Petrel (*Macronectes giganteus* or *halli*).²⁰ The most recent editor, Mays (1.1: 377n), assumes Coleridge must have had in mind one of the two sooty albatross (*Phoebetria*) species.

It seems to be missing the point to assume that Coleridge was thinking of a particular species, since the bird in his poem behaves in some respects unlike living albatrosses. While some albatrosses commonly follow ships, they do not respond to the calls of sailors (unless this is accompanied by food which they find attractive being thrown overboard), the maggots of the 1798 version would be too small to be an appealing food, and the notion of roosting on the ship — ‘In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud, / It perched for vespers nine’ (75–76) — is much more applicable to other species of seabirds, like gulls, terns and noddies, for instance.²¹ Bourne felt that Coleridge had probably deduced the habits of the bird from watching gulls and this might also explain why he imagined the dead bird being slung from the Mariner’s neck. To anyone familiar with the size and bulk of the larger albatrosses, this picture is somewhat ludicrous if taken too literally, and the difficulty of the literal reading has troubled many readers, Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance.²² The scene Coleridge offers also poses a challenge for illustrators of the poem. While some avoid the problem by not illustrating the bird, others represent a bird ranging from rather small and gull-like to a large animal almost the same size as the Mariner (figs 5 & 6).²³ For those choosing the latter option, there is the further challenge of the weight of such a bird. Often this is addressed by showing the Mariner with the bird dragging on the ground (figs 7 & 8).²⁴ One illustrator, bearing in mind that the Mariner had the bird round his neck for a period of time, shows the bird as a skeleton as it eventually falls into the sea (fig. 9).²⁵

Having barely any experience of sea-going himself at the time of writing the poem, Coleridge was unlikely to have been much concerned with the relationship of his bird to any real creature. While the albatross has a central role in the poem as the innocent victim of the Mariner’s unmotivated violence, with its death providing the cause for the Polar Spirit’s vengeance on him and his shipmates, Coleridge’s primary poetic focus is on the spiritual and emotional states the Mariner experiences as the ship continues its journey. But even though this was the case, the poem with its depiction of the bird nevertheless had a decisive influence on the entry of the albatross into the popular imagination of the English-speaking world.

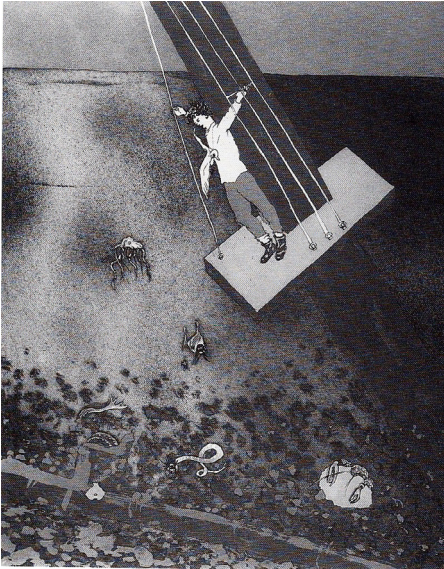


Figure 6. 'The Water Snakes', acquatint by Patrick Procter for his illustrated *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (London: Alecto Editions, 1976). © Editions Alecto Ltd 1976.



Figure 7. The Mariner wearing the albatross and pointing to the spectre ship, engraving by Joseph Noel Paton for his illustrated *Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (London: Art-Union of London, 1863), plate 8. (Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.)

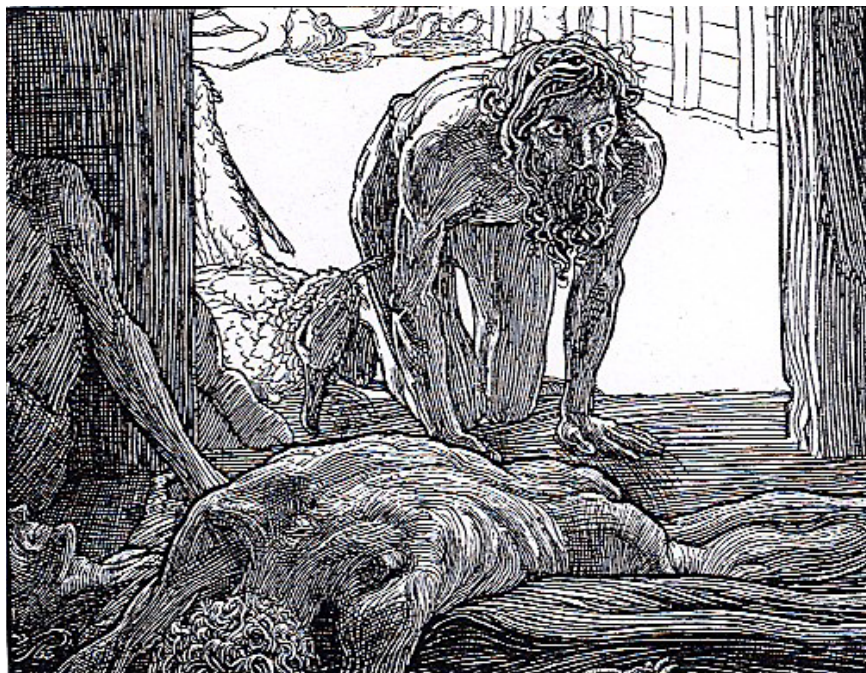
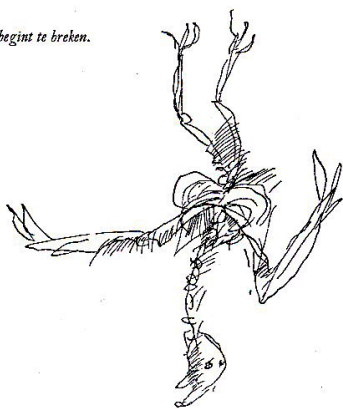


Figure 8. The Mariner dragging the albatross behind him, woodcut by Gerald Metcalfe for *The Poems of Coleridge* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head; New York: John Lane, [1907]), 180.
©British Library Board.

De ban begint te breken.



*Door de genade der Heilige Moeder
wordt de oude zee-man
met regen gelaafd.*

Figure 9. The skeletal albatross when the Mariner is released from his burden, drawing by Mart Kempers for *De Ballade van de oude matroos*, translated by Anthonie Donker (Utrecht: De Roos, 1967), 28.
©British Library Board.

THE INFLUENCE OF 'THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER'

The poem on first publication was not a great success. The reviews had been mixed,²⁶ and Coleridge himself later observed that purchasers of the collection may have been labouring under a misconception as to its content: 'I was told by Longmans that the greater part of the Lyrical Ballads had been sold to seafaring men, who having heard of the Ancient Mariner, concluded that it was a naval song-book, or, at all events, that it had some relation to nautical matters' ('Thomas Allsop's Report' 375, section headed After 15 Sept. 1821). Wordsworth had been more forthright about the contribution of the poem to the failure of *Lyrical Ballads* to sell well. Writing to Joseph Cottle on 24th June 1799, he confided that from 'what I can gather it seems that The Ancient Mariner has upon the whole been an injury to the volume, I mean that the old words and the strangeness of it have deterred readers from going on' (1: 266). In the second edition (1800), Wordsworth included a note making apologies for the poem which Coleridge had in the meantime extensively revised in an effort to prune the archaisms.²⁷

For the remainder of his life Coleridge continued to tinker with the poem as it was republished several times (Mays 2.1: 504–509) and came to occupy what Mays called 'a central prophetic significance in the body of his poems' (1.1: 368). After the poet's death in 1834, the poem continued to be republished, appearing with increasing frequency in single editions in the latter part of the century. The first of many illustrated editions appeared in 1837 with etchings by the Scottish artist, David Scott, and the poem's entry into the canon of English poetry was marked by the production of editions for the school market.²⁸ William Jameson wouldn't have been the only school child who had been forced to learn chunks of the poem by heart and found it not to his taste (68).

As its familiarity increased, the poem entered into the mindset of English passengers on board ships sailing into the Southern Ocean, like Louisa Meredith in 1839, as well as impacting on the mental worlds of writers from other countries who had made similar journeys. Charles Baudelaire, for instance, who had sailed as a young man at least as far as L'île de la Réunion and Mauritius on a voyage to India in 1841–42, wrote a poem on the albatross in which his view of the bird, which he would have seen on the voyage round the Cape of Good Hope, seems to have been influenced by Coleridge.²⁹ Herman Melville recognised Coleridge's influence on the conception of the albatross, though he denied the poet's particular influence on his own view. In *Moby Dick* (1851) he has Ishmael declare that 'Nature' not Coleridge is responsible for the spiritual associations of the albatross (1: 236) and in a note on the passage speaks of his first reactions to a captured albatross, observing that they did not come from the English poet since he had then neither 'read the Rhyme, nor knew the bird to be an albatross. Yet, in saying this, I do but indirectly burnish a little brighter the noble merit of the poem and the poet' (1: 237n).

By the latter part of the nineteenth century as the poem entered into the school curriculum and children were forced to learn parts by heart, phrases and other

elements of the poem became widely recognised, so much so that the expression, 'to have an albatross round one's neck', eventually entered into ordinary speech as a metaphorical reference to an unwanted burden.³⁰ New editions of the poem continued to appear with great regularity in England and the United States; some illustrated, many in limited editions targeted at bibliophiles, and others directed at children. It was also translated into a number of European languages, French, Czech, and Dutch, for example, sometimes several times into the same language. As the twentieth century progressed the poem became so familiar that it was often the subject of parodies or other forms of humorous treatment.³¹ But even as the attitudes toward the canonical texts of English literature changed, the poem still retained its place in the school and university curriculum.³²

Even though other writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries wrote about the albatross,³³ it was Coleridge's poem which had by far the greatest impact. R.G. Brown calls the albatross in that poem 'one of the best-known ornithological references in English literature', while the distinguished author of a standard account of the zoology of albatrosses, W.L.N. Tickell, declared that the poem 'established the public conception of [the] albatross' (5), having had a far greater effect than any natural history of the birds (373).

* * * * *

THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BIRD

If Coleridge did fix the bird in the public imagination, it is worth asking just what kind of picture he established. Apart from some of the traits mentioned above, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' invests the bird with the following associations. It followed the ship because it is friendly, well-disposed to sailors and indeed loved the Mariner (ll. 71–78, 404–405). Harmless (401) and of good omen (71–74 gloss), it is a fellow living thing in a desolate region (57–58, 63–66). The sailors claim that it both makes the wind blow and that it brings fog and mist (91–102). Killing the bird is thus either reprehensible or a worthy action. The tenor of those particular lines jars with the stanzas which immediately precede and follow, since the ship is said to still benefit from 'the good south wind' blowing behind it after the bird has been killed (87–90). It is possible that Coleridge is here following Shelvocke's treatment of the relationship between the bird and conditions at sea in the lack of an immediate and direct connection between the bird's death and a change in the weather. But, regardless of awkwardness of the ascription of a connection between the bird and the weather and the inconsistent views of the sailors, the poem absolutely depends on the notion that the killing of the bird produces bad luck for the Mariner and the ship's crew.

Apart from Shelvocke, Coleridge probably drew on the Cook voyages for some of the associations he ties to the bird. On his second voyage, Cook had noted that, as the ships encountered icebergs on their way south into uncharted waters near the Antarctic pack ice, some of the albatrosses they had been seeing

gradually disappeared until only two varieties were present, the Light-mantled Sooty Albatross (one of which Johann Forster shot) and what was most likely one of the giant petrels (which Cook identified as a species of albatross). In Cook's words in the published account of the voyage, these 'were the only albatrosses that had not now forsaken us' (1: 38). Despite this, the literature of discovery reveals that sailors held some views about albatrosses which do not appear in Coleridge's poem.

Dark-plumaged birds, like the one Shelvocke's first officer, Simon Hatley, shot, were associated with the sombre clothing favoured by Quakers and hence referred to as *quakerbirds*. Cook comments on this terminology in his journal entry for 12th January 1773 (2: 76)³⁴ and George Forster likewise observes in his entry for 7th December 1772 that some of the crew of the *Resolution* used that name for the smaller dark albatross they encountered in the Southern Ocean well south of South Africa (1: 91–92). George's father, Johann, who usually refers to this bird as a 'Quackerbird' (*Resolution Journal* 2: 189–90, 213–14), went on to formally describe it as *Diomedea* [now *Phoebetria*] *palpebrata* Light-mantled Sooty Albatross ('Mémoire'), based on a bird he had shot near the Antarctic pack ice in January 1773. Later authors have also seen that bird in terms of religious dress; Robert Cushman Murphy, who first encountered it in the South Atlantic in November 1912 and went on to write an important book on South American seabirds, remarks on its 'pearly body contrasting with the dark cap and wings — giving it the fanciful appearance of a cowled monk' (*Oceanic Birds* 1: 498).

Another view current among some members of eighteenth-century ships' crews was reported by George Forster after he had noted the 'infinite number' of albatrosses around the *Resolution* when it was east of Cook Strait, New Zealand, on 9th June 1773:

Some of our sailors, who had formerly sailed on board of East-India ships, after comparing the facility of those voyages to the hardships of the present, propagated the ludicrous idea among their messmates, that these birds contained the departed souls of old India captains; who now, exiled to a part of the ocean which they shunned before, were forced to gather a precarious subsistence instead of enjoying their former affluence, and were made the sport of storms which they had never felt in their cabbins [sic]. This stroke, which may pass for witty enough, confirms what I have before observed of the original humour of sea-faring men. (1: 234)

Anders Sparman heard the same views expressed by some of the crew of the *Resolution* (44). How widely this view was held is difficult to say. Linnaeus, who in 1758 coined the name *Diomedea* for the genus currently applied to the large albatrosses, probably was aware of some part of this notion that the birds are reincarnated people, since he based the name on that of Diomedes, a Greek hero of the Trojan War, whose companions incurred the wrath of the goddess Venus and were changed into birds like snow-white swans ('forma ... albis proxima cygnis') in the story the Roman poet, Ovid, told in his *Metamorphoses* (bk. 15, 483–509).³⁵ Later writers refer to the notion that albatrosses are reincarnated

seamen — Annie Corder (stanzas 11–12), John Masefield and Frank Waters, for instance — sometimes specifying, as Masefield does, that it is drowned seamen particularly who come back in this way as birds. The reality of this belief is debatable; Waters speaks of ‘the pretended belief ... that when old sailors died they were transmogrified into Albatross [sic]’ (71), while L. Harrison Matthews reports that one of his shipmates who asserted his faith in this belief was scoffed at by his fellows for his credulity (39–41).

And of course there was the way in which, at least from Dampier on, the bird came to be seen by voyagers from the Northern Hemisphere as a mark of otherness, a sign that the ship had left northern and tropical waters and was entering the less familiar southern seas. As Arthur G. Guillemard put it in 1887, ‘passengers of both sexes, whether berthed in the poop or steerage, welcome with delight the first Albatross. ... now that the tropic zone has been cleared’, since they understand that it, or some other seabird, ‘alike under blue skies or lowering rain-clouds, in howling gale or favouring weather, will accompany the ship over some eight thousand miles of water until Australia’s shores are sighted’ (iv).

After Coleridge, as some of the older traditions surrounding the albatross remained current in the nineteenth century and later, other beliefs became attached to the bird. One of the more interesting is the notion that the bird is a vicious killer. John Gould, the great nineteenth-century ornithologist, who had made the long sea journey to and from Australia in 1838–40, described what he called the Wandering Albatross as having such a ‘ferocious disposition’ that it is regarded with terror by other birds: ‘So sanguinary in fact is it, that it is even said it will attack and tear out the eyes of a drowning man, a feat, from what I have observed of it, I can readily imagine it would attempt, if a human being should unhappily be placed in such a position, and be unable to defend himself’ (2: 427). It is unclear what these comments are based on; he has not confused the Wandering Albatross with the much more aggressive and ferocious giant-petrels, since these are treated (as one species) elsewhere in his book (443–45). The belief underlying Gould’s comments can be found repeated elsewhere. Tickell, among other examples, mentions a nineteenth-century French music hall song in which albatrosses attack and eat a sailor who has fallen overboard (380), while Julian Corbett, in a volume of the British official history of World War 1, reports that albatrosses attacked survivors of the German light cruiser, *Nürnberg*, sunk in the Battle of the Falkland Islands in 1914 (432). But this general belief was contested. As far back as 1887 J.F. Green had doubted whether an albatross will attack a person in the water and was certain that it would not pounce on someone who had fallen overboard (10–11).

For the most part, however, albatrosses inspired admiration for their apparently effortless flight and mastery of even the most severe weather conditions at sea.³⁶ While it was not uncommon for observers to comment on the agility and skilful flight of the sooty albatrosses,³⁷ what becomes obvious as the nineteenth century



Figure 10. The shooting of the white albatross, engraving of an illustration by Gustave Doré for his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (London, 1876), reproduced in *The Annotated Ancient Mariner*, introduction and notes by Martin Gardner (London: Anthony Bond, 1965), 117.

progresses is the way in which Coleridge's bird and the notion of albatross in general become closely associated with the great albatrosses, a group of birds comprising several species, including the Wandering Albatross,³⁸ which is widely distributed around the Southern Ocean. While the taxonomy of these albatrosses is not completely settled, with what were formerly agreed to be two species now being considered to comprise six or seven,³⁹ the specific identity of a bird seen at sea was of little consequence to most people who might have been aware of Coleridge's poem. As Murphy pointed out in 1936, '[t]o sailors, voyagers, and until recent times to ornithological recorders, any great albatross was merely *the* albatross' (*Oceanic Birds* 1: 541), as distinguished from smaller albatrosses and sooty albatrosses.

Compared to the sooty albatrosses, adult great albatrosses are generally much whiter birds and this aspect of their plumage must have helped to make the link with Coleridge's bird easy. Coleridge did not specify his bird's colour, but he did emphasise that the bird posed no threat — it was 'harmless' (409) — and he closely ties it to the notion of a Christian soul (65) and the whiteness of the polar region — it appears out of the 'snow-fog' (63–66 gloss). The implication of innocence and purity in his poem, coupled with common Western notions about race and the connections between whiteness and superiority, even nobility, would aid in the conceptualisation of the albatross among nineteenth-century readers as a predominantly white bird.⁴⁰ The extent of this imagining is evident in the illustrations in editions of Coleridge's poem. In nineteenth-century editions with black and white illustrations the bird is never shown as dark, being predominantly pale, sometimes with dark-tipped wings (figs 10 & 11).⁴¹ Early twentieth-century editions in colour often show a white bird (fig. 12).⁴² Even when the influence of Coleridge is denied, the conception of the albatross as essentially white is still evident. This is most plain in Melville, who devotes a chapter in *Moby Dick* to Ishmael's consideration of whiteness in 'natural objects' (1: 234), particularly when whiteness, when combined with a fearful creature and lacking 'kindly associations' (1: 236), magnifies the terror inspired by those animals, such as with Polar Bears and sharks. He includes the albatross among the creatures that inspire 'spiritual wonderment and pale dread', but asserts that the emotional reaction comes from 'God's great, unflattering laureate, Nature' (1: 236), not Coleridge. In Melville's note to this passage, reporting his first encounter with the bird, he emphasises its nobility, purity, whiteness and angelic appearance, calling the captured bird he saw on the deck of his ship 'a regal, feathery thing of unspotted whiteness ... [with] vast archangel wings', and declaring, '[a]s Abraham before the angels, I bowed myself; the white thing was so white' (1: 236–37n).

By the twentieth century, the symbolic weight of the bird becomes even more burdensome as the range of associations attached to it grows. In illustrated editions of Coleridge's poem, it continues its association with Christian spirituality as some artists represent it in flight in a way which strongly recalls traditional

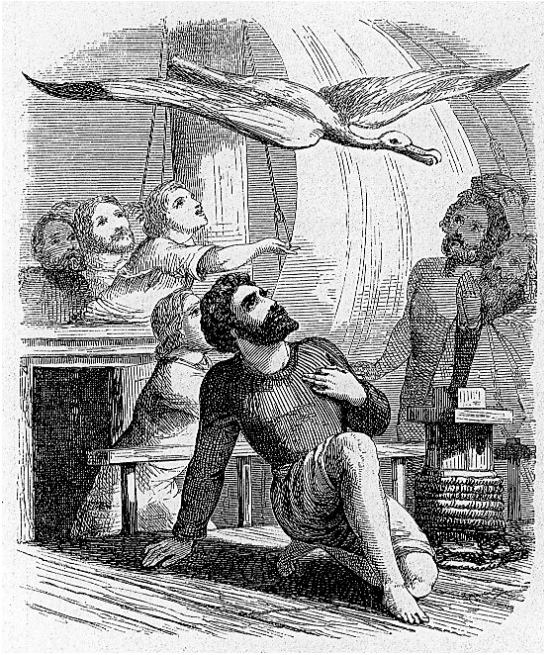
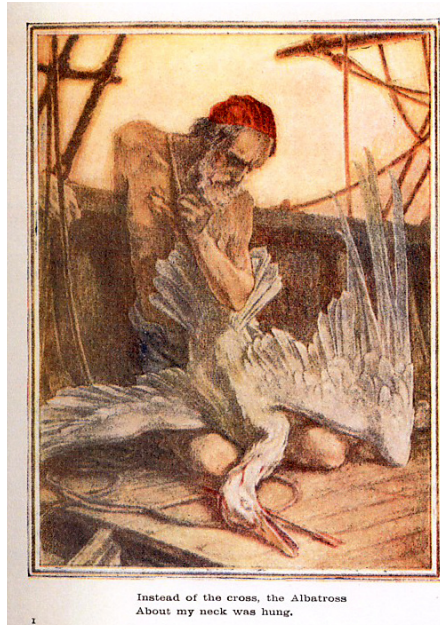


Figure 11. Albatross with black wingtips, engraving of an illustration by E.H. Wehnert for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (London: Sampson Low, Son & Co., 1857), 12. ©British Library Board.

Figure 12. Pure white albatross, colour painting by Paul Woodroffe for *The Ancient Mariner* (London and Edinburgh: T.C. and E.C. Jack, [1906]), plate 2. ©British Library Board.



Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung.



Figure 13. Seagull-like albatross with wings raised in V formation, colour drawing by Duncan Grant for his *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner in Seven Parts* ([London]: Allen and Richard Lane, 1945), plate opposite p. 9. ©British Library Board.

representations of the Holy Spirit as a dove with its wings raised up in a V (figs 13 & 14).⁴³ These religious associations extend to the Mariner himself as he is represented, for example, with arms outstretched like a crucified Christ (fig. 15),⁴⁴ the albatross hanging from his neck, or with the bird feeding from his mouth with a ship's wheel positioned halo-like behind his head (fig. 16).⁴⁵ Apart from editions of Coleridge, the bird becomes a vehicle for a wide range of meaning in writers who give it a central role in their work, from a symbol of freedom connected to the spiritual wisdom of indigenous people⁴⁶ to a representation of female sensuality and sexual appeal.⁴⁷ In accounts of their experiences in the Southern Ocean, some travellers report on beliefs about the bird which continue from those current in much earlier times; about their being reincarnated seamen, for instance.⁴⁸ Even so, in many of these cases the link to Coleridge is present, usually by explicit acknowledgement of his work.⁴⁹

But what is really striking about the associations which coalesce around the albatross is the lack of prominence of the central aspect of Coleridge's poem, that killing the bird brings bad luck and serious ill effects on its killer.

* * * * *

THE CONSEQUENCE OF KILLING AN ALBATROSS

Coleridge had always imagined the killing of the bird to be an evil act of cruelty. When the Mariner's shipmates think of the act as having produced adverse weather they describe it in all versions of the poem as a 'hellish thing' (91) while the Polar Spirit's two 'fellow daemons' refer to the Mariner's 'cruel bow' (400). In the version of the Argument of poem added to the 1800 republication of *Lyrical Ballads* (subsequently dropped), Coleridge wrote of 'how the Ancient Mariner cruelly, and in contempt of the laws of hospitality, killed a Sea-bird', a view which is developed in the glosses he added to the 1817 version of the poem. There he repeats the notion of the Mariner being inhospitable (gloss to 79–82), referring to

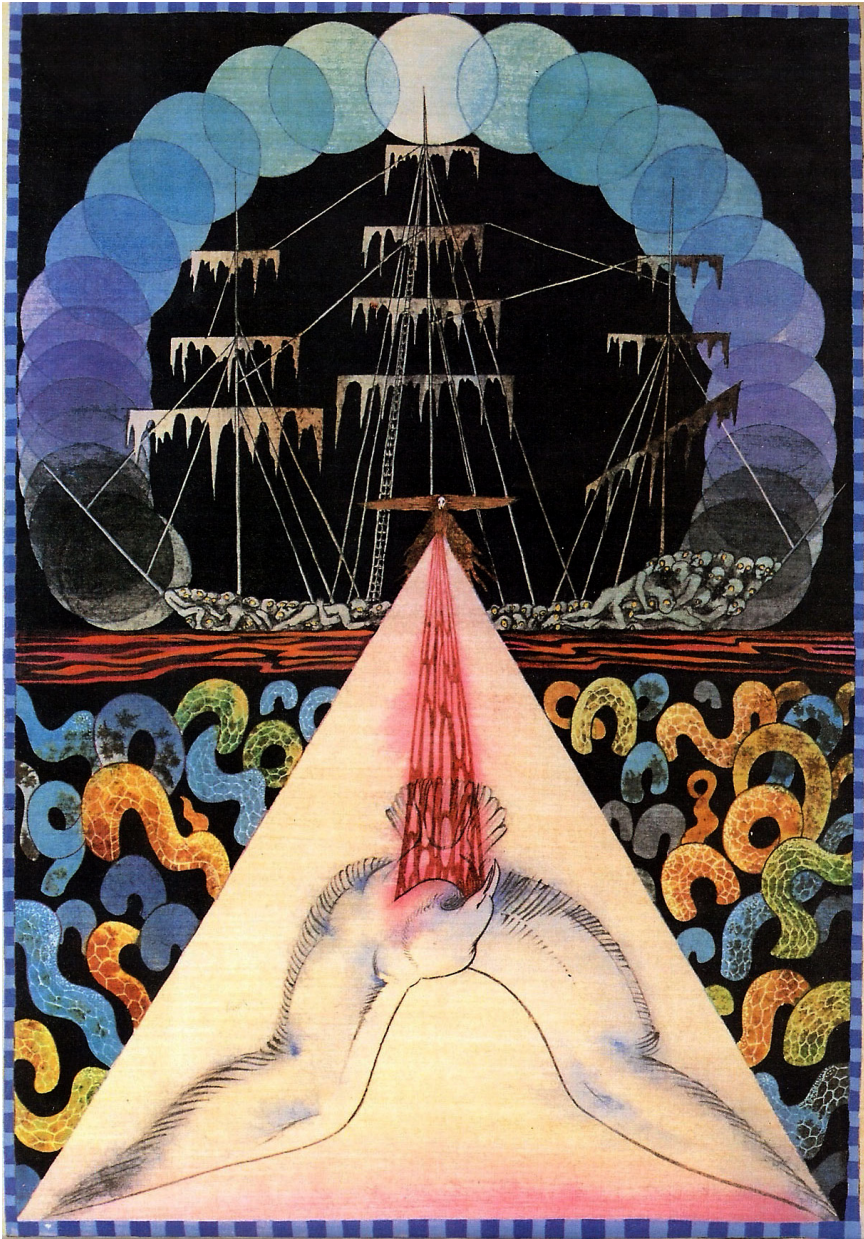


Figure 14. Pure white albatross in pose reminiscent of the Holy Spirit, colour illustration by Errol Le Cain for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, calligraphy by David Howells (London: Arcadia Press, 1972), between pp. 26 and 27. ©British Library Board.

the act as a 'crime' (gloss to 97–102), which requires vengeance (gloss to 119–22) and 'penance' (gloss to 393–97).⁵⁰

The Mariner's version of the lesson to be drawn from his experience is conveyed to the Wedding Guest at the conclusion to the poem:

He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.
He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all (612–17).

When one of his readers, Anna Barbauld, a fellow writer, told him that she felt the poem had no moral, the poet felt obliged to respond that he felt it had too much and too obvious moralising (*Table Talk* 1: 272–73). He claimed that the poem should have had no more moral than the tale in *The Arabian Nights* of the merchant whose casual casting aside the 'shell' of a date puts out the eye of the son of a genie who in return demands vengeance.⁵¹ The merchant's action is thoughtless but not one of deliberate cruelty, though it has an unfortunate consequence.

Regardless of Barbauld's response to the poem and Coleridge's view of how it should have been written, the overt moralising of the final section fitted



Figure 15. Mariner wearing albatross in Christ-like pose, copper engraving by David Jones for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (Bristol: Douglas Cleverdon, 1929), between pp. 16 and 17. ©British Library Board.

well with the sensibilities that developed in the nineteenth century, which valued simplistic, sentimental responses to the world. The strong linkage between Victorian sentimentality and the overt moral of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is plain in the hugely popular hymn for children, Cecil Frances Alexander's 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', first published in 1848, with the lines in its refrain, 'All creatures great and small,/All things wise and wonderful,/The Lord God made them all'.⁵² While Coleridge's moralising might have appealed to some Victorian sensibilities, other readers have remarked on what seems a disproportionate consequence for the Mariner and his shipmates from the killing of one bird.⁵³ Indeed, in partial



And every bon for food or play
Came to the Mariner's sight!

Figure 16. Mariner in Christ-like pose, unnumbered aquatint by Alan Andrew Farrant for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (London: Stukeley Press, 1994). ©British Library Board.

recognition of that reaction, twentieth-century historicist readings of the poem tend to offer an explanation for it in terms of a reaction either to the slave trade or to the consequences of the French Revolution.⁵⁴ They point out that, like his friend Robert Southey, Coleridge himself had written on the slave trade⁵⁵ and he had been saddened by the descent of the radical politics of the revolutionaries into bloodshed and violence. One influential twentieth-century re-evaluation of the whole English Romantic movement goes so far as to argue that its adherents felt that a love of the natural world leads to a love of humanity and to revolutionary politics.⁵⁶

While critical readers offer sophisticated explanations for what happens in the poem, most readers, especially youthful ones, might have been most struck by the bad luck which follows the killing of the bird. This aspect of the consequences of shooting an

albatross does extend into the world outside the poem, though it is not especially prominent and does not become all that noticeable until the twentieth century.

It can be seen, for example, in the story Lowes reports hearing from an informant in 1920, which included both the shooting of an albatross, within a sequence of terrible privations for Norwegian seafarers, and a ship populated by a supernatural crew (257, 516–18n83). During the Cleveland Museum of Natural History expedition to the South Atlantic in 1925, there is a clear contrast between the superstitious reluctance of most of the seamen to kill an albatross because of the ‘disaster’ that would follow (especially bad weather) or even to eat albatross meat, and the ready willingness of the scientists to kill birds in order to obtain specimens (Simmons 37–40). In Barbara Hanrahan’s 1977 novel, *The Albatross Muff*, Moak, the protector of ten-year-old Stella, is said to have witchlike powers (8, 198) and she avers that killing an albatross on the voyage to England is unlucky (12, 16, 195). She is proved right by this event coinciding with Mr Backhouse’s sexual abuse of Stella, an episode which prefigures the nature of Stella’s later seduction by her future husband and her death following childbirth. Reports of this belief in the consequences of killing albatrosses find their way into museum display labels. In the Museum of Wellington (NZ): *City and Sea*, a muff made of



Figure 17. 'Warm Reception that ye First Albatross Met With', pen drawing [1854] by Edward Charles Moore in his sketchbook titled 'Scenes on Board the Frances Henty', National Library of Australia, Canberra (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an3720013>).

albatross breast feathers is displayed next to a label stating that 'Seafarers rarely killed albatrosses ... as it was held to bring misfortune' (viewed June 2006). The idea is present too in modern films. It is there in the dialogue in Werner Meyer's 1995 film of Deborah Savage's *Flight of the Albatross*, while in a more recent work, Joss Whedon's *Serenity* (2005), Captain Malcolm Reynolds of the spaceship *Serenity* observes that an 'albatross was a ship's good luck til some idiot killed it'.

What is particularly striking about all of the examples cited above are the links with Coleridge. Lowes reports how the writer Joseph Conrad, to whom Lowes had sent his informant's story for comment, declared that there could be no doubt that '[d]ear old Coleridge invented the Albatross of that tale' (qtd. by Lowes 518n83). In Simmons's popular account of the Cleveland Museum expedition, he prefixes his report of catching the first albatross by noting that one day an albatross followed their ship attracted by food thrown overboard, 'as in Coleridge's poem' (37). The museum label includes two lines from the poem above the focus of the exhibit, the muff, while the links between Hanrahan, Savage and Coleridge have been noted previously (n49). After the comment quoted above, Captain Reynolds acknowledges the link, going on to wryly observe that 'yes, [he's] read a poem'.

Only Meyer's film lacks the explicit or clearly implied link, though it is there in the book the film is based on.

This belief in the ill consequences for anyone killing an albatross appears to have been completely absent in the eighteenth-century accounts of killing these birds for scientific study and food. Indeed, Edward Armstrong, who published a special study of the folklore associated with birds in 1958, commented that the belief was not that widespread (214), while in the same year, Jameson, after investigating superstitions about the birds among sailors, concluded that Coleridge was the source of the belief (68–77), a view which was endorsed more recently by Tickell (374).

The most compelling evidence for Coleridge being the source of a belief that becomes more common in the twentieth century is in the behaviour aboard nineteenth-century ships, particularly those bringing settlers to the colonies. As noted in the epigraph to this essay, the significant moment of the sighting of the first albatross was followed by immediate attempts to catch or shoot it. Meredith commented on these practices among the passengers on her ship, with both white and dark albatrosses among the targets (24–28).⁵⁷ Guillemard, having noted the delight with which passengers welcome the first albatross, comments how the 'bright-eyed middy [midshipman]' who spots the bird becomes the focus of attention from 'an animated group of enquirers'. He describes to them 'its wonderful powers of flight, and his own pet method of setting about its capture by means of a long line and carefully-baited sail-hook' (iv). James Froude, writing in the latter part of the century, a year before Guillemard, observes how one might have wished Coleridge had seen a bird on the wing before he wrote his poem, since its graceful flight is not described (66), but recognises that among the passengers on his trip into southern seas, their 'chief anxiety was to shoot these creatures' (67).

Apart from being used for target practice (fig. 17) or for a kind of fishing, birds were regularly killed for a variety of purposes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵⁸ J.F. Green enumerates the various uses for their body parts:

Everyone knows the final uses the specimen may then be put to. Its webbed feet make capital tobacco-pouches ... The wing-bones make excellent pipe-stems; the breast ... a warm though somewhat conspicuous muff; and the beak, in the hands of a skilled artificer, a handsome paper-clip. (9)

As David Medway points out, birds would sometimes be killed at sea for the unlaidd eggs they might be carrying or simply consumed as a source of fresh meat.⁵⁹ Sometimes they would be stuffed and form part of a private or museum collection of birds. Another use of the birds was for their feathers as stuffing. James Backhouse, who visited Australia in the 1830s, observed in 1832 that nearly 1000 birds were said to have been killed for this purpose on Albatross Island off northwest Tasmania in the previous year (102).⁶⁰ George Augustus Robinson gives a vivid description of the gruesome scene on this island in the same year

when the albatross killing season was in full swing (663–67). But whatever the purpose the birds were killed to satisfy in the hundred or more years following the appearance of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, in no case does there seem to have been any constraint on this behaviour produced by a belief that bad luck would follow their death.

Indeed, it is relatively common to find writers commenting on how the practices fly in the face of the overt moral of the poem. This goes back to at least the middle years of the century. Louisa Meredith, quoting those very lines, remarks somewhat wistfully how she wished that these lines were ‘as familiar and impressive in the minds and thoughts of others as they are in [hers]’ (30). In 1860 E. Horton quotes two lines of light-hearted verse pointing out how the contemporary treatment of albatrosses shows how attitudes of sailors have changed since Coleridge’s day, while Froude quotes the same lines as Meredith, but moves out from them to a consideration of a human willingness to kill:

So says Coleridge. We admire and quote — but we hunt and shoot notwithstanding. We have a right to kill for our dinners; we have a right perhaps to kill for entertainment, if we please to use it; but why do we find killing so agreeable? (78)

Remarks on the lack of any dire consequences following the killing of an albatross, despite Coleridge, continue into the twentieth century, and while the nature of the threat to the birds from humans has changed, attitudes towards them have also changed. It is worth considering what relation Coleridge’s poem has to this change.

* * * * *

THE IMPULSE TOWARDS SEABIRD CONSERVATION

It will be clear by now that ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ had a powerful effect on the culture in which it circulated. As it became well-known, it affected the language, supplying phrases or lines to writing and conversation, and adding to the generally available stock of metaphors. It appears to have been the source of the belief that killing albatrosses brought bad luck, even if those expressing such a belief did not always recognise its origin. It may well have been, as Tickell argued, the source of the popular conception of the albatross. In this respect, the poem was able to build upon some of the views and beliefs surrounding the bird which were current before it existed and which continued after it. The notion that killing an albatross is to be avoided fits nicely, for instance, with the tradition that the birds were the reincarnated spirits of dead seamen.

It might be imagined, therefore, that the poem’s cultural influence, coupled with some of the pre-existing traditions and beliefs about the bird, might have had a real effect on people’s behaviour. Indeed, Brooke, speaking of petrels (which include albatrosses) in general, states that the myths and superstitions surrounding the birds somewhat restrained the way in which they were treated in the nineteenth century (156). He does not indicate whether he believes this was

true of albatrosses specifically and whether Coleridge had an important role in this, though he acknowledges his poem as one of the most famous works giving expression to these myths (4). Yet it is hard to be convinced that there were any real restraints based on superstitious beliefs operating in this period, given the prevalence of the attitudes and practices briefly outlined above. While there is no general agreement that the overall effect of the resulting at-sea mortality on albatross populations may have been 'trivial', as Brooke argues (156),⁶¹ the general attitude to these populations was one of unconcern as the birds were seen as part of a limitless abundance of wildlife. While some might have noted a diminution of numbers of birds,⁶² others, like the feather gatherers of Albatross Island, believed that they were 'inexhaustible like mutton birds' (Robinson 665). This view was shared by leading ornithologists. John Gould noted that hundreds of Wandering Albatrosses were killed annually at sea without their 'numbers being apparently in any degree lessened' (2: 429).

This lack of concern for the health of populations extended into the twentieth century as the birds faced a much greater danger in the southern oceans — that posed by the fishing industry, especially longlining for tuna.⁶³ Essentially this practice involves setting very long lines, up to 100 km in length, with thousands of hooks attached. The birds are attracted to the baited hooks as the line is being set. The serious effects on albatross populations by this fishery are well covered by Tickell (chapter 17) and Brooke (chapter 10), with Tickell outlining in some detail the international efforts to reduce the damage and make the threat to albatross populations more widely known. These efforts have involved non-government organisations, like the conservation groups behind BirdLife International's 'Save the Albatross' campaign, which has been supported by innovative strategies which catch the public imagination, like the Big Bird Race in 2004 and 2005 funded by the world's biggest bookmaker, Ladbrokes.com. This involved radio tagging Tasmanian-breeding Shy Albatrosses and following them by satellite as they made their regular flights across the Southern Ocean to South Africa. Governments too are active, with eleven countries having signed the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels which came into effect in 2004.

This impulse towards the conservation of seabirds in Western cultures is not new, even if it has achieved a higher profile in the late twentieth century as part of the increased ecological awareness signalled, for instance, by the rise of the Greens Movement in a number of countries. Historically the first legislation for the protection of seabirds in the Western World came from the naval administration of Newfoundland in the late eighteenth century with a proclamation offering protection to Great Auks (Gaskell 104). Here, as elsewhere in nineteenth-century legislation offering seabirds protection, the key factor driving the legislation was the usefulness of the birds for humans, such as the way their presence at sea perhaps gave warning in poor visibility of dangerous shoals nearby. Somewhat similarly the Great Auks provided fishers with the best indication of the location

of the Grand Banks, the valuable fishing grounds off southeast Newfoundland (Gaskell 111).⁶⁴ Albatrosses in the Southern Ocean played no such role, though in some cases they might be a source of information for an observant seafarer.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, their economic value was not great⁶⁶ and it was not until the twentieth century that they began to attract legislated protection as part of a more widespread recognition of the dangers posed to birdlife by unrestrained human activity.⁶⁷

It is not clear that Coleridge had any particular role in the development of this legislation, though he was increasingly seen in the late twentieth-century as a proto-conservationist. In literary criticism this is most clearly demonstrated by James McKusick who offers an assessment of the significance of ecological thought on Coleridge's intellectual development and the relevance of this way of thinking to his literary work. In a reading of the poem, McKusick finds it to be 'a parable of ecological transgression' (385) as the Mariner, whose condition as a man initially cut off from participation in the world of life around him is signified by the unmotivated aggression towards the bird, is gradually released from this state of alienation from the natural world, beginning with his blessing of the water snakes. The poem is thus one of 'environmental advocacy' (388).⁶⁸ In contemporary conservationist writing aimed at general audiences, Coleridge is regularly adduced in support of the need for the protection of albatrosses. In the Autumn 2004 issue of a popular Australian wildlife magazine, Greg Czechura devoted his regular column to this topic, beginning with a quotation of lines 63–70 from 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. A recent coffee-table book on the birds breeding in Australian territory by Aleks Terauds and Fiona Stewart is aimed at 'all lovers of nature, conservationists, students and researchers', according to the dust jacket, which reproduces lines 71–74, though the poem is not otherwise mentioned in the book itself except for the allusion in its title, *Albatross: Elusive Mariners of the Southern Ocean*. In the BirdLife International website, a reference to Coleridge is included in the section on albatrosses in history.

In this way 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' has been recast as conservationist poem even though it had almost no effect on the actual treatment of albatrosses in the century or so following its publication. Its significance lies not so much in its environmental advocacy, even if that is a popular way of reading it today, as in its providing the conception of the bird and establishing its profile in the Western imagination, so that some of the *gravitas* coming from the poem's canonical status can be harnessed to the international movement for albatross protection. This is no small achievement for a poem which began its public life by disappointing those buyers more than two hundred years ago who thought they were getting a naval songbook.

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NOTES

- ¹ The citation from Meredith is from her *Notes and Sketches* p. 30.
- ² Unless otherwise stated, references to the poem (including line numbers) are to the 1834 version, the last printed in Coleridge's lifetime. This and other versions of the poem are cited from the edition by J.C.C. Mays.
- ³ See, for example, the account given in 1618 by the first European to round Cape Horn, the Dutch explorer, Willem Schouten, of his experience with what must have been these birds (22), or William Dampier's comment on 'Algatrosses' near the Cape of Good Hope (1: 531).
- ⁴ Johann Forster commented in 1772 on this confusion with frigatebirds, which he called the 'Man of war bird' (*Resolution Journal* 1: 178).
- ⁵ As examples of the kind of works which soon appeared, the published journal (1773) of Sydney Parkinson, the draftsman and artist who died before the *Endeavour* returned to England, related to the first voyage, while the second voyage gave rise to separate accounts by the father and son scientific team, Johann Reinhold Forster (1778) and George Forster (1777), and a report of the astronomical observations by William Wales and William Bayly (1777). Sometimes published accounts were delayed. Anders Sparman, the Swedish naturalist on the second voyage, did not publish his narrative until the early nineteenth century.
- ⁶ The watercolour, number 25 in the collection of drawings and paintings by Parkinson in the Natural History Museum, London, is of a chocolate brown bird which could be an immature bird in the Wandering Albatross group or perhaps an adult of two taxa in this group, Amsterdam Albatross and Antipodean Albatross, the latter less likely, given it was shot on location. A note on the verso identifies it as the bird caught on 23 December 1768 off Argentina. It is treated as a Wandering Albatross in the catalogues prepared by Averil Lysaght (277) and Alwyne Wheeler (43). In his journal entry for 1 March 1769, Banks indicates that this chocolate brown bird was the first albatross he killed.
- ⁷ The plate in Cook's account of his second voyage (*A Voyage* 1: 36–37), depicting the *Resolution* and *Adventure* near the Antarctic pack ice on 12 January 1773, is a good example. It shows men in three small boats gathering floating ice to replenish the shipboard water supplies as a man, probably Johann Forster, shoots at birds from a fourth boat. Forster wrote in his journal (2: 213–14) that he collected a Light-mantled Sooty Albatross here, but this engraving by B.T. Pouncy of a drawing by the ship's artist, William Hodges, gives only a stylised representation of the bird.
- ⁸ Parkinson's unfinished paintings and drawings of albatrosses seen on the first voyage are a good example. The colour paintings based on the albatrosses of the second voyage, which George Forster made or had others prepare on his behalf, were the basis for the three engraved plates in his father's 'Mémoire'. Most of his bird paintings

- finished up in the Natural History Museum (details in Lysaght), but some copies are in the State Library of New South Wales (Iredale), and a third group, including those used for the 'Mémoire' engravings, are in the Forschungsbibliothek Gotha (Steiner and Baege). Only the paintings held in Germany have been published in full.
- 9 Buffon's illustration of a Wandering Albatross (9: plate 255) shows the bird perched on a rock, standing upright with a disproportionately large head. Apart from the albatross-like hooked bill, the bird looks more like a large gull than anything else.
 - 10 John L. Lowes gives a full analysis of the Mariner's relationship to the mythical Wandering Jew. The taste for older ballads had been given great impetus by the publication of works like Percy's *Reliques* in 1765. The poet's deliberate imitation of the 'style [and] ... spirit of the elder poets' is acknowledged in the Advertisement for the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (reproduced by R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones 8).
 - 11 The actual time is not stated but Coleridge may have been thinking of the late fifteenth century, since the *Lyrical Ballads* Advertisement spoke of his belief in 1798 that the language of his poem was as intelligible as the older ballads had been for 'these three last centuries' (Brett and Jones 8).
 - 12 Mays covers the textual history of the poem in full in vol. 2, part 1 (504–39).
 - 13 The most exhaustive examination is that by Lowes.
 - 14 Wordsworth told his friend, Alexander Dyce, that the idea of "shooting an albatross" was mine; for I had been reading Shelvocke's *Voyages*, which probably Coleridge never saw'. Dyce reported the poet's comment in a letter to H.N. Coleridge. The information based on this letter is preserved in the edition of Coleridge's poems by Derwent and Sara Coleridge (383–84) and Wordsworth repeated the claim in the notes he dictated to Isabella Fenwick in 1843 which were later published by Christopher Wordsworth (1: 107). Lowes (485–86) thinks it unlikely that Coleridge had not seen Shelvocke's book.
 - 15 Thomas De Quincey wrote that Coleridge denied any borrowing when questioned in 1810 and that Wordsworth could not understand that response from his friend (291).
 - 16 Noted by Robert Woof and Stephen Hebron (18) who cite an 1826 catalogue of the museum's holdings.
 - 17 W.L.N. Tickell, for instance, considered that Smith overstated his case (373). W.R.P. Bourne, on the other hand, thought that Coleridge, inspired by Wales, possibly met Johann Forster and read his 1785 'Mémoire' in the Christ's Hospital library.
 - 18 This aspect of Coleridge's intellectual life has been well covered by Ian Wylie and in the collection of essays edited by Nicholas Roe.
 - 19 In the first published version of the poem in 1798 Coleridge had the bird being fed 'biscuit-worms' (67), that is, maggots. The wording was changed to 'the food it ne'er had eat' in the 1817 revision. Lowes (207) suggests that one of the reasons for the change was that the original wording suggested the bird was rather small, more like a European wren in size.
 - 20 Brown and Bourne have both written on the question of the bird's identity.
 - 21 Cook noted in his journal (3.1: 16) that a Common Noddy settled on the rigging and was caught in the south Atlantic on 8th Oct. 1776 and William Anderson recorded that a tern was caught in the same way later on that voyage (3.2: 819). Besides, William Jameson (33) points out that it would be physically impossible for an albatross to perch in the way Coleridge described, since the birds lack a hind toe.
 - 22 Mays (1.1: 377n) remarks on Hawthorne's puzzlement.

- ²³ Patten Wilson is an example of an artist avoiding the problem. For examples of the varying size of the bird, compare the illustration of a huge bird by William Strang (frontispiece) with that of a very much smaller one by Patrick Procktor (reproduced by Woof and Hebron 113), for instance.
- ²⁴ See the illustrations by J. Noel Paton in 1863 (plate 8) or by Gerald Metcalfe in 1907 (180), for examples.
- ²⁵ Mart Kempers shows the bird in this way in his illustrations to a Dutch translation of the poem (28).
- ²⁶ In Appendix C of their edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones reproduce a selection of contemporary reviews of the collection.
- ²⁷ The note is reproduced by Brett and Jones (276–77).
- ²⁸ A good example is the edition of the poem in the Collins' School Classics series in 1873.
- ²⁹ The poem was begun in 1842 but not completed until 1859 with the addition of the final verse. Frances Scarfe (35) notes the influence from Coleridge whose work on the imagination Baudelaire also knew.
- ³⁰ See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'Albatross' sense 2b. The earliest example the dictionary offers is 1936 but the usage is likely to be older than that.
- ³¹ For example, see the poem by R.P. Lister in which a seaman, who had experienced a series of ludicrous disasters at sea, bitterly regrets not having shot an albatross following his ship. Hunt Emerson's comic book version of the poem is an excellent example of an irreverent, witty treatment of the canonical text.
- ³² In the upper level of New South Wales high schools, for instance, the poem is currently (2007) set as part of the common content for the Standard and Advanced English Courses in the Higher School Certificate syllabus (http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus_hsc/—accessed 10th August 2007).
- ³³ Apart from Baudelaire and Melville, poems on the bird were written by Annie Corder, John Masefield, Frank Waters, Roy Campbell and Arnold Wall, for example. These are conveniently gathered together by Tickell in chapter 18 of his book. In more recent times the albatross has played a significant role in a novel by Barbara Hanrahan and in young adult fiction by Deborah Savage.
- ³⁴ Curiously this comment was omitted in the published narrative of the voyage (*Voyage* 1: 38).
- ³⁵ Murphy declared that these birds were shearwaters, a form of much smaller seabird in a family, Procellariidae, within the same order as the albatrosses ('Foreword' 10–11).
- ³⁶ Gould, for instance, described the Wandering Albatross as a 'noble' bird (2: 427), while Baudelaire's poem depends on the contrast between elegance of the bird in flight and its ungainliness when captured and brought aboard ship. This leads to the elaboration of the equivalence between the bird and the poet, a creature of the clouds, rejoicing in the tempest, but an object of scorn on earth, impeded by his wings of imagination.
- ³⁷ See, for example, Green (14), Murphy (*Oceanic Birds* 1: 500) and Matthews (40–41), all of whom travelled on sailing vessels and were impressed with the skill of the birds in satisfying their apparent interest in the masts and spars. Murphy notes, however, that the birds have been known to collide with these parts of a ship in stormy weather.
- ³⁸ It is probably coincidental that the notion of wandering is attached to this bird and to the Mariner. Linnaeus had given the bird the specific name *exulans* 'wandering' in 1758 in reference to the wanderings of Diomedes after his return from Troy, while Coleridge had thought of his sailor as 'the everlasting wandering Jew' (*Table Talk* 1: 273, 31 March 1832). It is the Mariner, not the bird, whose constant wandering is

driven by guilt.

- ³⁹ The two species were Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans* and Royal Albatross *Diomedea epomophora*, as recognised, for example, by Marchant and Higgins in 1990. Tickell in 2000 and Brooke in 2004 followed taxonomic changes proposed in the later 1990s and recognised a larger number of species within the great albatrosses. In some recent treatments (e.g., by Onley and Scofield in 2007), the name 'Wandering Albatross' itself has been applied to a group of related species of great albatross rather than being confined to an individual species.
- ⁴⁰ Louisa Meredith noted how 'the great white albatross (*Diomedea exulans*) fully realized all [her] ideas of its grandeur and solemnity' and that she 'never saw it without thinking of Coleridge's wild and wondrous tale' (26).
- ⁴¹ This paleness is sometimes strongly emphasised, as, for example, in Gustave Doré's depictions of the white bird in flight against a dark background (115, for example). E.H. Wehnert shows the bird as having pale wings with dark tips (10).
- ⁴² See, for example, the illustration by Paul Woodroffe (plate 2 between pages 10 and 11).
- ⁴³ This idea is conveyed in illustrations by Duncan Grant in 1945 (colour plate opposite p. 9) and Errol Le Cain in 1972 (colour plate between pages 26 and 27).
- ⁴⁴ David Jones uses this iconography in his illustrated edition of the poem (copper engraving between pages 16 and 17). He is explicit about the equivalence of the Mariner to Christ in his lengthy essay on the poem (*Introduction* 30), describing the albatross as 'a sacrificial victim' (10).
- ⁴⁵ This Christlike aspect of the Mariner is in one of the unnumbered aquatints Alan Andrew Farrant produced in an illustrated edition. In his preface the artist indicates that the bird represents the soul whose essence is 'the poet's or artist's gift of perception'.
- ⁴⁶ This is the general tenor in Deborah Savage's *Flight of the Albatross* (1989), a work of fiction for young adults, where the bird comes to represent the main character, Sarah Steinway, as well as the Maori boy she is attracted to, Pita (who calls himself Mako), and the mysterious Maori woman, Aunt Hattie, who gives shelter to the Wandering Albatross Sarah rescues.
- ⁴⁷ This is one of the meanings given to the bird in Barbara Hanrahan's novel, *The Albatross Muff* (1977). The bird's breast is soft and white (12); it's killed at the same time the protagonist, Stella Edenbrough, is sexually abused aboard a ship sailing from Australia to England; when romanticised or objectified (turned into a muff), it becomes pale and uninteresting (59), but in a context of female friendship/love it becomes a magnificent bird again (61). The colloquial pun on *muff* is alluded to by rhyme in the phrase her seducer and then husband uses to refer to Stella's pubic hair, 'that Billy-goats-gruff of frizz' (178). The novel also gives the albatross some of its more traditional meanings.
- ⁴⁸ In 1951 Matthews noted how more than twenty years previously one of his ship mates had indicated his belief in this tradition. Others on the ship scoffed at it (41).
- ⁴⁹ Savage uses a quotation from Coleridge's poem as an epigraph to the novel (ix). While Hanrahan does not refer to the poem explicitly, some of her readers have certainly seen the connection. Carol Merli, for instance, calls Stella's friend Edith, who narrates parts of the novel, 'a Mariner figure, who writes "to soothe the past"'. Matthews refers directly to Coleridge in connection with his comments (39–40).
- ⁵⁰ The notion of the act being a crime may have come from Wordsworth. In the notes he dictated to Isabella Fenwick in 1843, which are reproduced in Christopher Wordsworth's *Memoirs* of his uncle, the poet's version of the genesis of Coleridge's poem has him suggesting the 'crime' of the killing of an albatross which demands vengeance by the

‘tutelary spirits’ of the region (1: 107–108).

- ⁵¹ In Richard Burton’s translation the merchant throws away date *stones* which strike the genie’s son in the chest, killing him. Three old men save the merchant by telling stories which amuse and placate the genie so that he pardons his son’s killer.
- ⁵² The popularity in Victorian times of the first collection to include this hymn, Alexander’s *Hymns for Little Children*, is shown by the fact that by 1884 it had appeared in its sixty-second edition. The hymn was soon included in the standard Anglican hymnal, *The English Hymnal*.
- ⁵³ Lowes gives a useful account and response to that sort of reading (chapter 16, particularly 273–78).
- ⁵⁴ Raimonda Modiano gives a valuable account of this kind of critical reading of the poem.
- ⁵⁵ Leslie Stephen points out that Coleridge won the Browne medal for a Greek ode (on the slave trade) in 1792 during his first year at Jesus College, Cambridge. Southey’s unpublished poem, written by October 1798, deals with the guilt felt by a man who has flogged a female slave to death (Mays 1.1: 367).
- ⁵⁶ Jonathan Bate makes this argument (31–32).
- ⁵⁷ The dark albatrosses could have been one or both of the giant-petrels since the sailors referred to them as ‘nellies’, one of the names for those birds, though Meredith’s tentatively ascribes a scientific name to them, ‘*Diomedea fuliginosa?*’ (27), which is applicable to both species of sooty albatross recognised today.
- ⁵⁸ David Medway gives a thorough account of the nature and effects of killing albatrosses at sea around this time, concluding that the Wandering Albatross may have been the species most affected. His article includes a number of illuminating sketches and photographs documenting nineteenth-century practices.
- ⁵⁹ Banks and Cook were by no means alone in remarking on the deliciousness of roast albatross. In 1912, J.T. McKinnon considered that if ‘Coleridge [had] ever made a meal of roast albatross, English literature would have been the poorer by the loss of a great poem’. Matthews dedicated his 1951 book on the Wandering Albatross to ‘bird lovers, especially those who love them piping hot, well browned and with plenty of bread sauce’.
- ⁶⁰ Backhouse called these birds Wandering Albatrosses, but they would be Shy Albatrosses *Thalassarche cauta*, which still breed on this island.
- ⁶¹ Medway considers that a ‘considerable number’ of birds must have been killed at sea and that Wandering Albatross numbers in particular must have been substantially reduced (198). Tickell believes there is a ‘persuasive case’ for there having been a ‘substantial seabird mortality’ from these causes during the nineteenth century (359).
- ⁶² George Bennett observed in 1860 that at sea the Wandering Albatross ‘is not ... seen so commonly at the present day as the smaller ... species’ (70).
- ⁶³ Brooke gives a brief and clear description of this method of fishing (156).
- ⁶⁴ Jeremy Gaskell gives a valuable overview of the development of legislation protecting seabirds in North America and the United Kingdom up to the late nineteenth century (165–88).
- ⁶⁵ In the course of Cook’s second voyage, for instance, Johann Forster concluded from the increased number of large albatrosses around the ship when it was sailing towards New Zealand from the southwest in March 1773 that they were approaching land and especially warmer latitudes (Resolution *Journal* 2: 236–37).
- ⁶⁶ The sealers Robinson accompanied on his visit to Albatross Island in 1832 told him that

they sold 'the feathers for ninepence per pound and 1/- to the merchants in Launceston' (665), but that when Tasmania was first settled by Europeans they were offered twenty shillings a pound. By the end of the century the number of albatrosses nesting on this island had been greatly reduced (Terauds and Stewart 63).

⁶⁷ For instance, in the New Zealand region (including the subantarctic islands), which could be described as the albatross capital of the world with around the half the known species breeding there, the birds were not given complete protection until 1922 (Scofield and Sagar 4).

⁶⁸ Antje Klesse, in the course of a detailed study of the way the poem has been illustrated and read, comments on how it now has a particular resonance with ecological thinking (22, 199).

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