THAT Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a great talker has long been recognized. To contemporaries like Charles Lamb, who could learn directly from his lips, this fact was cause for rejoicing; but to later critics, who have centered their attention on his writings, it has become one of the major tragedies of English literature. Echoing down the years comes the indictment drawn by William Hazlitt in 1825: “He lays down the pen to make sure of an auditor, and mortgages the admiration of posterity for the stare of an idler.”

The validity of this indictment rests on two assumptions: that records of his conversation are meager, and that Coleridge was essentially a writer. The first assumption, made by numerous contemporaries, is summarized in J. C. Shairp’s lament that “of all that matchless discourse, no trace remains but the few faint notices of those who heard it.” The second, made by the Wordsworths and other friends of Coleridge, was expressed again in 1926 by J. B. Priestley when he called him an author who “published in folio at the dinner-table.”

This book is a direct challenge to both assumptions. Included in the Introduction, text, and notes are contemporary descriptions and comments by more than one hundred persons. Ranging from a sentence to a section of many pages, these reports are more varied in point of view than those available concerning any other English conversationalist, and second in bulk only to Boswell’s records of the conversation of Samuel Johnson. Together with Coleridge’s Table Talk, they offer for the first time a detailed and well-rounded body of fact and opinion concerning Coleridge the talker.
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Careful study of this material in the light of the accepted facts of Coleridge’s life has led to the conclusion stated and amplified in the Introduction—that Coleridge the talker is the essential Coleridge, of whom Coleridge the writer of prose, Coleridge the poet, and Coleridge the lecturer are somewhat distorted reflections. Coleridge, we believe, should be placed in the same category with Dr. Johnson, as a man greater than his published works, who thought of literature not as an end in itself but as a means of disseminating ideas, and found oral discourse the only completely satisfactory medium for self-expression.

The value of collecting, in accessible form, whatever has been recorded by those who heard Coleridge talk, seems evident. True, the Table Talk gathered by his nephew supplies us with a fair sample of what Coleridge said, and the famous accounts by Carlyle and Hazlitt describe Coleridge’s manner of speaking. But the Table Talk discloses the cargo of Coleridge’s mind during a limited and intermittent period, and the brilliant pen portraits of Carlyle and Hazlitt have their restrictions in experience and are dangerously, if delightfully, subjective. Before an adequate knowledge of Coleridge as a talker is possible, it is necessary to go further, to bring together the reports of the many persons, different by temperament and by attitude toward their subject, and therefore different as reporters, who heard Coleridge talk under various circumstances and in all the stages of his up-and-down career.

If the hundred or more contemporaries of Coleridge, excerpts from whose letters, memoirs, journals, autobiographies, and other writings are gathered in this volume, do not constitute a complete roll call of those who heard Coleridge and set down either matter or impressions, they at all events furnish adequate material for an analysis of Coleridge the talker. Exclusion has sometimes seemed necessary; selection has often seemed wise. We have, for instance, excluded such fictional caricatures as those in Peacock’s novels; certain retellings, in but slightly altered versions, by Carlyle, De Quincey, and others; and descrip-
tions, as in several of Wordsworth's poems, which may as likely refer to Coleridge's writings as to his talk. We have restrained a desire to quote more than editorial matter, and a few passages showing Coleridge's way of talking, from the *Table Talk*. We have sifted and cut down a number of reports of what Coleridge said, notably those by the industrious J. P. Collier and Crabb Robinson, although we have usually transcribed in full all descriptions of Coleridge's oral mannerisms. Readers whose primary interest is in the content of his remarks will find many references to additional material in the notes. Much as has been omitted, there remains contextual material which, though not directly explanatory of Coleridge's talk, nevertheless merits retention on other grounds: its value as framework, its shedding of interesting light on Coleridge, or its treatment of conversation in general. Except possibly for Gilfillan, all of those quoted actually heard Coleridge.

The alphabetical arrangement of selections, though not wholly satisfactory, has seemed the only practicable method. Should the reader wish to study Coleridge's talk chronologically, he will find help in the headnotes and transitional phrases, and in the Introduction. Some persons, it will be noted, captured their impressions immediately, but others unfortunately delayed many years before recording what they heard. Considering Coleridge's talk as of three periods—the first up to his return from Germany in 1799, the second until his taking up residence with the Gillmans in 1816, and the third from that time until his death—his hearers may, though not with absolute accuracy, be grouped accordingly. It is significant that only a tenth of them knew him in the first period and only a fifth in the second. Little more than a third of the recorders had met Coleridge before 1816, and many of those write of him primarily as he impressed them at Highgate. With such a preponderance of comment concerning the Highgate period, the selections may give the unwary reader a distinctly false impression of Coleridge's entire career as a talker. Hence the necessity for presenting in the Introduction additional material, largely from
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Coleridge’s own letters, to give a more detailed description of the earlier years.

The brief headnotes to the selections supply biographical data on the lesser figures and, whenever possible, establish the connection between the writer and Coleridge: for example, how well and during what years the two were acquainted. In transcribing the texts, omissions have been indicated, abbreviations have been extended, punctuation has been improved where absolutely necessary, and spellings, particularly of such protean names as Gillman, Davy, and Wedgwood, have been regularized.

The Notes are unusually full. They contain more than a score of contemporary comments on Coleridge’s talk which we considered unsuitable for presentation as separate sections, extensive contemporary accounts of Coleridge as a lecturer, and considerable material from Coleridge’s letters and memoranda. Most of the pertinent statements by modern critics have also been relegated to the Notes, in order to preserve the point of view and tone of the Introduction.

The division of work on the present volume was dictated by special interests firmly established before collaboration was suggested. When the plan was proposed in the spring of 1936, one of us (Armour) had already compiled and annotated a large number of contemporary statements about Coleridge’s conversation, and the other (Howes) had published a preliminary study suggesting the basic significance of Coleridge’s talk in evaluating his life and works. Hence the former is primarily responsible for the annotated descriptions and the latter for the Introduction, though close partnership in the project for more than three years has blurred the distinction, to our mutual benefit.

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