

## Mark Cumming

Eric W. Nye. *John Kemble's Gibraltar Journal: The Spanish Expedition of the Cambridge Apostles, 1830–1831*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. xix + 425 pp. £100 [Palgrave]. \$140 [Amazon].

PROFESSOR ERIC NYE, WHO HAS DEVOTED HIS CAREER TO the study of the writer John Sterling, has placed us deeply in his debt with this remarkable new volume, which presents John Mitchell Kemble's Gibraltar Journal and other appended documents that cast light on the Cambridge Apostles and their Spanish expedition of 1830–31. Kemble's journal is an invaluable addition to the primary literature on this notable episode in which Spanish exiles in London, led by the charismatic general José María de Torrijos, found support for their uprising against Ferdinand VII among a few of the young and idealistic members of the Cambridge Apostles: Sterling, who garnered support for the revolution in England despite chronic bouts of illness; Alfred Tennyson and his friend Arthur Henry Hallam, who traveled as couriers to revolutionaries in the Pyrenees; and two others who sailed to Gibraltar in anticipation of General Torrijos's arrival there, the poet Richard Chenevix Trench and the philologist Kemble, who would later achieve distinction as a scholar of Old English and as an editor of *Beowulf*. Kemble's often riveting journal documents the range of religious, political, and intellectual motives that impelled the Apostles to support the cause of Spanish freedom, presents a detailed account of the rebellion by a perceptive observer who was close to General Torrijos, and narrates powerfully the disintegration of this "just and generous but unsuccessful expedition" (139).

Readers of Thomas Carlyle will be interested in his connection to this episode, which features prominently in Nye's

introduction to Kemble's journal and in Nye's third appendix, "The Events Surrounding the Seizure of the Schooner *Mary*." Nye argues that the understanding of the Spanish expedition has been unduly colored by Carlyle's compelling but self-serving depiction of it in *The Life of John Sterling* (1851). He maintains that Carlyle's biography is dismissive of concerns that were deeply important to Sterling, slighting his activist theology in the famous chapter on "Coleridge" and undervaluing his political ideals in the chapters devoted to the Spanish rebellion ("Spanish Exiles," "Torrijos," and "A Catastrophe"). According to Nye, "the plot of Carlyle's biography of Sterling follows the young intellectual's submission to the influence of a series of false gods, ending in Sterling's seemingly tragic inability fully to acknowledge the true one, Carlyle himself" (3). Depicting Torrijos as one of Sterling's "false gods," Carlyle presents the Spanish expedition as "a sort of school prank gone wrong" (4), a misleading view that must be corrected, Nye contends, by an examination of additional sources. "Carlyle's imagination is vivid and seductive," he writes: "Only by delving into sources he ignored can we begin to understand the polemical purposes of his biography of John Sterling or begin to understand the deep earnestness of the Cambridge Apostles' commitment in Spain" (345). In his effort to rehabilitate the Spanish expedition, its prospects of success, and its origins in a militant Coleridgean theology, Nye explicitly challenges Carlyle's *Life of John Sterling* (and implicitly rejects the similarly dismissive treatment that the "Spanish adventure" receives in Peter Allen's 1978 monograph, *The Cambridge Apostles: The Early Years*). A reading of Kemble's journal, now made widely available for the first time, lends some support to Nye's views concerning Carlyle's sketchy treatment of the "young Cantabs" in the south of Spain, while confirming Carlyle's account in other important respects to a degree that Nye does not anticipate.

The child of a distinguished theatrical family, Kemble appeared to be headed for a career in the Church of England when the Spanish expedition began, and Tennyson predicted in an adulatory sonnet that he would become "A latter Luther, and a soldier-priest" (12). But, as John's sister Fanny Kemble ruefully observed, the "romantic expedition" in Spain "canceled all his purposes and prospects of entering the

Church" (13). Kemble relinquished his ecclesiastical career for the high ideals of the Spanish rebellion and the prospect of an appointment in a new constitutional government to be instituted by General Torrijos. From July to September 1830, Kemble was in Gibraltar, awaiting the general's arrival and expressing frustration with the members of the local junta—"mere eunuchs," not men (56)—who frequently failed to invite him to their meetings. He dispensed funds to the revolutionaries but had no real power, serving more as a "letter carrier" than "the director of a great revolution" (35), and he felt the constraints imposed on him by his limited knowledge of Spanish. Kemble spent his time either on Gibraltar itself or on board ship in Gibraltar Bay, sometimes sanctioned by the local British authorities and sometimes harassed by them. He was constantly aware of the dangers he faced, since he and the other revolutionaries were already condemned to die if they were caught by the Spanish authorities. As Kemble's journal attests, however, the potentially fatal business of revolution was intermingled with the pleasant activities of more conventional tourism: billiards and sea-bathing and sailing, attending concerts, reading *Don Quixote*, writing poetry. The journal is remarkable for the way in which it combines, without the appearance of incongruity to Kemble, life-and-death details of the revolution and meditations on the intellectual concerns—linguistic, theological, and philosophical—that he had developed at Cambridge.

In September 1830 Torrijos finally arrived, accompanied by Sterling's second cousin, Lieutenant Robert Boyd, who stayed with Torrijos after Trench and Kemble left Gibraltar and was executed with him in Málaga, Spain, in December 1831. Throughout the next months, Kemble was increasingly frustrated by the failure of the revolution to materialize and "sick at heart with doing nothing" (70). The difficulties of communication with revolutionaries in Spain itself and the failure of the Spaniards to act in their own interests produced a series of disappointments and drove Kemble to despair of the revolution's success. He nevertheless remained profoundly attached to Torrijos, whose equanimity was a source of comfort to him. "Torrijos is really an extraordinary man," he exclaimed on 7 December 1830: "His clear sightedness in all that relates to

the present situation, and prospects of his country is wonderful!" (100). By January 1831, however, Kemble had come to the view that the Spaniards did not want liberty enough to fight for it, and he realized that he would soon be separating himself from Torrijos and the revolution. On 23 January he observed bitterly: "now that the dream has perished, that the glory of songs & legends is fled for ever, there is a weariness upon my spirit which makes the very name of pleasure a mockery to me . . . . Spain is incapable of freedom; and as I now believe does not desire it" (117). At this time, Kemble's frustrations extended to Torrijos himself. On 26 January he offered the following reflection on the revolution's latest strategic failure: "my blood boils to think that we have frittered away means, & lives for so miserable an end. No evil befalls Torrijos that he does not deserve: with half an eye he ought to have seen that after his first failure no other attempt could be successful" (118).

Kemble's growing disenchantment with Torrijos coincided with another crucial event in his sojourn at Gibraltar, the beginning of his passionate sexual liaison with Francisca Infantes, which lasted from January to May 1831. (The details of this relationship are told in ciphered passages of the journal, which Nye has deciphered for the present edition.) Francisca was a teenager, newly married to a royalist purveyor of contraband goods. Kemble was stunned by the beauty of her naked body, her voracious sexuality, and her unremitting passion; he justified their relationship in its early stages by convincing himself that Francisca's unfeeling husband had driven her into his arms. In April, however, he discovered that she had also ended up in Robert Boyd's arms and that she was generally known in Gibraltar as a "common whore." He responded to this discovery by denouncing her publicly to Boyd and privately in his journal. But to his private denunciation he added the following revealing sentence: "Nevertheless to this bitch I owe two of the very happiest months of my life" (193). On 2 May he expressed outrage that the "little toad" Francisca had the nerve to suggest that they sleep together again, but he nevertheless slept with her at least twice after receiving that outrageous invitation. His last meeting with her ended at 5 o'clock on the morning of 9 May, when he left her to sail home to England, leaving Torrijos and Boyd and the revolution behind.

Kemble's time with Francisca taught him to recognize in himself a fundamental sensuality and selfishness that belied his earlier orientation towards duty, liberty, and glory. On 5 February 1831, for instance, he berated himself vehemently for missing a key moment in the revolution because he was "lost in Francisca's arms" (125). This sensuality, however, was only one part of a larger moral degeneration that perceived in himself. The disillusionment that Kemble had learned from his political activities in Gibraltar had undermined his confidence in humanity and in himself, had desensitized him to the taking of human life, and had distanced him from his lofty ideals. Kemble returned to England with a deeply altered view of his world and of himself. As he sailed into Portsmouth harbor, he observed that "Honesty, Moral or Political, Self Sacrifice, Principles to be maintained at all risks & hazards are now matters of ridicule to me: henceforth I am a courtier; a supple bending scoundrel with one aim only, to get on in the world." "The only folly in the world," he concluded, "is being scrupulous about the means to be employed in the attainment of your ends, and the worst madness is to have any ends but those of self advancement" (203).

As Nye argues, the publication of Kemble's Gibraltar Journal offers a new incentive to re-examine the Spanish expedition of the Cambridge Apostles and Carlyle's recounting of it. Nye is quite correct in his assertion that Carlyle's treatment of the "young Cantabs" in the south of Spain is clearly rendered inadequate by the testimony of Kemble, whose name does not appear in Carlyle's account. "As for the young Cantabs," writes Carlyle, "they . . . had wandered a little over the south border of romantic Spain; had perhaps seen Seville, Cadiz, with picturesque views, since not with belligerent ones; and their money being done, had now returned home" (*Works* 11: 86). While Kemble's time in Gibraltar was not without its elements of conventional tourism, neither the details nor the spirit of this passage accord well with the content of Kemble's journal. Carlyle's summary account misses the "deep earnestness" (Nye's phrase again) that would drive a young man with health and favorable prospects to face death on foreign soil in a cause not immediately his own. In its depiction of General Torrijos, however, Kemble's journal seems to offer some confirmation of Carlyle's views. Carlyle writes of Torrijos:

[He] had hitherto accomplished as good as nothing, except disappointment to his impatient followers, and sorrow and regret to himself. Poor Torrijos, on arriving at Gibraltar with his wild band, and coming into contact with the rough fact, had found painfully how much his imagination had deceived him. The fact lay round him haggard and ironbound; flatly refusing to be handled according to his scheme of it. No Spanish soldiery nor citizenry showed the least disposition to join him; on the contrary the official Spaniards of that coast seemed to have the watchfulest eye on all his movements, nay, it was conjectured they had spies in Gibraltar who gathered his very intentions and betrayed them. This small project of attack, and then that other, proved futile, or was abandoned before the attempt. Torrijos had to lie painfully within the lines of Gibraltar,—his poor followers reduced to extremity of impatience and distress. (*Works* 11: 86)

In his introduction Nye argues, *contra* Carlyle, that “Torrijos was no Don Quixote” (4), but there are darkly quixotic overtones to Kemble’s depiction of a self-deceived Torrijos, a high-minded general who failed to understand the reality of his situation or to see the true character of his allies; indeed, Kemble was, if anything, harder on Torrijos than Carlyle would prove to be. On 6 February Kemble made the painful reflection that “Torrijos has lost hearts here,” and then added in cipher: “I have even lost the confidence I had in his prudence, when I see him daily deceiving himself, and willfully doing so. Misfortunes such as ours have been cannot teach him to see through the treachery or the cowardice of his correspondents, who bubble him of his money, and then laugh at him” (127). On 11 February, he asked: “Is it not marvellous that nothing can open Torrijos’ eyes to the cowardice or treachery of his correspondents: that nothing can teach him how few men are brave & just and generous as he is?” (128–29).

The inevitability of the revolution’s failure is another issue on which Carlyle and Kemble seem to agree. Nye insists in his introduction that “the revolutionaries were much closer to success in Spain than Carlyle realized” (4), but Kemble himself increasingly viewed the failure of the revolution as inevitable, deeply rooted in the political culture and social

divisions of Spain; for him, the revolution's demise was less the result of miscommunications, tragic as these were, and more the product of the character of its participants. Both Carlyle's biography and Kemble's journal tell of a revolution that was bound to fail, but they tell their stories differently. Carlyle's account of the insurrection, which Nye describes as "novelistic" (343) and reminiscent of Dickens (345), vividly narrates the revolution's failure from the outside, from the omniscient point of view of a writer with a deeply ingrained aversion to political activism; for him, the Spanish revolution's failure is from the very beginning a *fait accompli*. Kemble's account, however, is novelistic in quite a different way. It offers the powerful first-person narrative of a young man who initially shares the glorious ideals of the revolution and is forced to witness the erosion of those ideals, within him and around him, when they come into contact with the obdurate reality of his situation. It is the immediate power of this narrative that will make this journal an object of eager literary study, in the context of early nineteenth-century life-writing, beyond its obvious value as a source for historians.

Eric Nye's new volume will be a document of central importance in our understanding of the Cambridge Apostles, that remarkable group of college friends that figured so largely in the culture of their time. Kemble's journal offers an intriguing insight into the minds of young men who, at a time when so many other of their religiously motivated contemporaries were embroiled in controversies over liturgies and vestments, directed their energies towards a political rebellion that placed them in danger of immediate death. In its rich account of Kemble's day-to-day thoughts, the journal reflects the remarkable constellation of interests that make the Cambridge Apostles such a rewarding topic of study: Christian theology and English philology, military strategy and Kantian philosophy and Spanish poetry. The journal documents the practical difficulties of logistics and communications that encumber an unsuccessful revolution and traces Kemble's mental progress through moments of dispiritment and disenchantment, when he begins to suspect that the insurrection will come to naught. In addition to its meticulously edited transcript of the journal itself, Nye's edition offers valuable appendices that include

extensive supplementary collections of letters (including Kemble's letters from Gibraltar to his sister) and excerpts from the biography of Torrijos written by his widow. This edition's strong factual and documentary foundation ensures that it will make a lasting and substantial contribution to the field of early nineteenth-century studies.

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