

**A Romantic Late Summer Night in the Quantocks –  
Ralph Hoyte’s ‘Christabel Released’ live at Halsway Manor**

It was a late Summer evening in the foothills of the Quantocks at Halsway Manor, better known for folk music than folk poetry. We were all assembled for a performance of ‘Christabel Released’, a resolution by the poet Ralph Hoyte of one of Coleridge’s numerous abandoned masterpieces. Surely, there could be no better pensman to bring this epic to a satisfactory conclusion than Hoyte. With his billowing white shirt tied at the waist and black trousers, Hoyte looks every inch the poet.

The weather was kind and, as the sun set majestically over the horizon, we were treated to the first part of the recital. The scene is set tantalisingly; girl meets girl, or perhaps girl meets demonic snake. There is a strange kinship between them. It is left to the next three or more hours of recital (including an agreeable dinner) to reveal the full truth as envisaged by Hoyte.

This was a perambulatory performance, so we moved from the croquet lawn to the shelter of the house itself, then into the main ballroom, finishing up in the drawing room by candlelight. Though at 10.45pm we’d been listening for nigh on four hours, most of us managed to stay reasonably alert, apart from the odd snoozy snort, surely a testament to Hoyte’s spellbinding delivery and the finely wrought tension of the final Part.

The pace of the recitation was measured, more like a timeless Test match than today’s obsession with instant gratification, yet the meticulous build up rewarded the listener with a truly surprising, yet wholly appropriate finale. I wouldn’t want to spoil that for Coleridge enthusiasts; suffice to say, in the spirit of melodrama as well as epic poetry, it involves payback for long-forgotten sins and ancient family misdoings.

We were left to reflect on a hugely rewarding evening’s entertainment, celebrating the virtues of storytelling seemingly from another time. Just like Christabel herself, we were seduced; her, into a forbidden relationship. Us, into a Gothic world, a world which is becoming ever less familiar.

We found this event by chance, yet it was a highpoint to our Summer, a night of magic and mysterious intrigues in a peerless setting. One wonders how best to promote such events. This certainly deserved a larger audience, although perhaps those who attended should be grateful; the intimacy of the occasion was one of the event’s many enduring charms.

**Jeremy Payne, September 2014**

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