Lunch with Lamb
by John Fisher

I want to say something about a man who was Coleridge’s life-long friend - his best friend - from schooldays to the grave - Charles Lamb, or Charlie as he was known to his familiars. Charles Lamb (1775-1834), author, critic, and poet has been called “the most lovable figure in English literature”. Above all he was a humorist. And most of his humour is found in his essays, which he wrote under a pen name in, The Essays of Elia. They are a delightful blend of autobiography, fancy, humour and sentiment.

But as far as our grandparents were concerned - they would have known him better probably for his book Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare, which he wrote in conjunction with his older sister, Mary Lamb - of whom more anon.

Walking and observing and thinking and filing it all away subconsciously - on the hoof - is to build up a storehouse of memories that can be pillaged at the drop of a hat when called upon to write a so-called “head piece” against a deadline. In this sense, Lamb was literally the Master of all he surveyed.
But here is Lamb writing to Coleridge on the subject

*Streets, streets, streets; markets, theatres, churches; Covent Gardens; shops sparkling with pretty faces of industrious milliners, neat sempstresses, ladies cheapening, gentlemen behind counters lying; authors in the streets, with spectacles; lamps lit at night; pastry-cooks’ and silver smiths’ shops; beautiful Quakers of Pentonville; noise of coaches; drowsy cry of mechanic watchmen at night, with bucks reeling home drunk; if you happen to wake at midnight, cries of ‘Fire!’ and ‘Stop thief!’ inns-of-court, with their learned air, and halls and butteries just like Cambridge colleges; old book-stalls, these are thy pleasures, O London with-the-many-sins.*

London was his home and it is where he produced his best work - not by chewing a pencil waiting for inspiration to come - or twirling a quill pen in the hopes of enticing a muse to settle on his shoulder - but in the hard and fast world of commercial writing for newspapers and magazines with their omni-present deadlines.

Charles Lamb supported his family by working full time as a clerk in an office. He didn’t like it much - in fact he didn’t like it at all - and once said of his job with The East India Company

“I always arrive late at the office, but I make up for it by leaving early."

Charles Lamb was born in London on 10th February, 1775 - a Friday. “Friday’s child is loving and giving”. His parents were genteel but impoverished and he was packed off, aged 7 and three quarters, to Christ's Hospital, a free boarding school for sons of poor but genteel parents - and not too far from his home near Middle Temple.

That’s where he met Coleridge, two years his senior and it was there that a lifelong friendship began. Leigh Hunt, the poet, philosopher and essayist also went there - it must have been a fascinating place to get an education.

Lamb left school in 1789 when he was 14 whilst Coleridge went on to Jesus College, Cambridge. In 1792 Lamb was hired as a clerk in the East India Company and worked there for the next 33 years. They left school at the same time but they sought out each other’s company all their adult lives.
Lamb’s literary career began in 1796, when Coleridge published four of Lamb’s sonnets in his own first volume, *Poems on Various Subjects*. Though Lamb was still far from famous, these years were among the happiest of his life. Lamb’s first collected works, published in 1819 is dedicated to Coleridge. It reads

‘*You first kindled in me, if not the power, yet the love of poetry, and beauty, and kindliness.*’

I consider Lamb’s greatest achievements to be the essays and he soon became the highest paid contributor to the London Magazine but still turned up for work each day at his office at East India House, he became a literary celebrity, being invited to dine with the Lord Mayor at the Guildhall.

The Essays of ‘Elia’ sounds classical but in fact was the surname of an Italian clerk in the office in which Lamb worked. I do commend his Elia Essays to you but with a suggestion. You might care to try one or two on-line at first, where you can scroll down - skip bits - cut to the chase sometimes perhaps. Lamb, like all freelancers lucky enough to be paid by the word, can go on a bit at times.

Lamb and Coleridge had a favourite haunt - in the City of course - to be precise at 17 Newgate Street and this is where they would hang out each time STC returned from Cambridge or elsewhere and he would take up residence.
The pub was called the **Salutation & Cat** - not too far from Christ’s Hospital and easy to reach by Lamb who would meet up with him there each evening after work.

> “That Sonnet, Coleridge, brings afresh to my mind the time, twas two Christmasses ago and in that nice little smoky room at the Salutation & Cat, which is even now continually presenting itself to my recollection, with all its associated train of pipes, tobacco, Egghot, welch Rabbits, metaphysics & Poetry”

And now I want to say a little of the Lamb family itself and why Charles never married.

They had always lived in straitened circumstances, mother and father both ill and Mary, ten years Charles’s senior and always something of a mother to him, had already shown signs of mental instability as she continued to provide for them all as a dressmaker.

Came the evening, exhausted and deranged from overwork, she killed their mother with a carving knife. Lamb at 22 took full legal responsibility for her for life, to avoid her permanent confinement. Thereafter she was most often lucid, warm, understanding, and much admired, especially by their literary friends and she herself developed skills as a writer. But this lifelong guardianship prevented Lamb from ever marrying.

He did propose one final time, to a famous Drury Lane actress, one Fanny Kelly - and thereby hangs a tale.

Mary and Charles were in the stalls of Covent Garden watching a performance of *Modern Antiques, or the Merry Mourners* on 16 February 1816 during one of Fanny’s performances when a fan, - nowadays we would call him a stalker - fired a pistol at her during an aria. The shot missed but the ricochet span off a piece of scenery and landed in the lap of a startled Mary Lamb. Lamb went home and wrote a sonnet to Miss Kelly, wrapping it in a proposal of marriage and - for all I know - a formal handing over of the bullet. What a happy circumstance that would have been had she fallen into his arms and said ‘yes’. Alas, Fanny turned him down - but she remained his good friend for the rest of his life.

Mary and Charles now lived at Inner Temple Lane and both became known for their capacity for friendship and for their mid-life Thursday gatherings of writers, lawyers, actors, and the odd but interesting "characters" for whom Lamb had a weakness.
When he retired from the East India Company he was awarded a pension of £400 a year. He occupied his new leisure for several years at the British Museum, compiling more dramatic excerpts. Coleridge now lived in Highgate - a fair step from the City. They met frequently but not as often as either would have liked. Lamb wrote to him:

*I see nobody, and sit, and read or walk, alone, and hear nothing. I am quite lost to conversation from disuse...*’ - ‘But it is better to give than to receive; and I was a very patient hearer and docile scholar in our winter evening meetings at Mr. May's; was I not, Col.? What I have owed to thee, my heart can ne'er forget.’

But by 1833 the frequency and duration of Mary's attacks had increased so that she needed almost constant care, so they moved to Edmonton to be near Mary's nurse. Charles ended his literary career the same year with Last Essays of Elia. In July, one year later, the death of Coleridge made that loneliness acute. He wrote:

"I feel how great a part he was of me. When I heard of his death, it was without grief. It seemed to me that he long had been on the confines of the next world, — that he had a hunger for eternity. I grieved then that I could not grieve. But since, I feel how great a part he was of me. His great and dear spirit haunts me. I cannot think a thought, I cannot make a criticism on men or books, without an ineffectual turning and reference to him’.

Five weeks after he wrote that to a friend, on Dec. 27, 1834, Lamb himself was dead. He was simply out walking one day, tripped and fell. He died a few days later of something called erysipelas.

His sister Mary lived on until 1847 and they are buried together at Edmonton.

Lamb's essays were taught in schools until World War II, and in the 1980s there began a renewed appreciation for Lamb's prose - though not for his poetry. Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare has never been out of print and The Charles Lamb Society of London flourishes.

Coleridge fell out with Wordsworth of course - as he did several other people - and Lamb, who remained a good and loyal friend to both of these great men was instrumental in
patching things up between them. Throughout the rift, the Lambs - but especially Mary - kept Grasmere informed of the goings-on in the south.

He had tried many times to give up smoking - now Mary had put her foot down and tried to persuade him to go cold turkey on alcohol as well.

**P.S. Mary has left a little space for me to fill up with nonsense, as the Geographers used to cram monsters in the voids of their maps & call it Terra Incognita.**

*She has told you how she has taken to water, like a hungry otter. I too, limp after her in lame imitation, but it goes against me a little at first.*

*I have been aquavorous now for full four days, and it seems a moon.*

*I am full of cramps & rheumatisms, and cold internally so that fire won’t warm me, yet I bear all for virtues sake. Must I then leave you, Gin, Rum, Brandy, Aqua Vita? - pleasant jolly fellows - Damn Temperance and them that first invented it.*

*Coleridge has powdered his head, and looks like Bacchus, Bacchus ever sleek and young. He is going to turn sober, but his Clock has not struck yet, meantime he pours down goblet after goblet, the 2nd to see where the 1st is gone, the 3rd to see no harm happens to the second, a fourth to say there’s another coming, and a 5th to say he’s not sure he’s the last.*

And that’s where I’ll leave them - in that snug but smoky back room at the Salutation and Cat.

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**LAMB’S GRAVESTONE.**

A plaque inside the church inscribed with the following words by Wordsworth

*At the centre of his being lodged*  
*A soul by resignation sanctified.*  
*O, he was good, if e'er a good man lived.*