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Brissot, Cooper and Imlay**

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Stuart Andrews

Fellow Pantisocrats: Brissot, Cooper and Imlay

We often dismiss 'Pantisocracy'—the class-less, property-less and self-governing community that Coleridge and Southey planned to establish on the banks of Susquehanna River—as a youthful and essentially West-country aberration. The scheme was originally conceived after the two poets first met in Oxford, where the Bristolian Southey had been reading Rousseau, Goethe and Godwin. Southey followed French republican fashion by attending a formal Oxford dinner with his hair unpowdered, and even considered joining the French Revolutionary army. He also talked of going to America to build a farm 'on ground uncultivated since the creation'.¹

If Southey provided the romantic transatlantic vision, it was Coleridge (winner of Cambridge University's Brown medal for Greek verse) who supplied the vocabulary—'aspheterism' for the sharing of property, and 'pantisocracy' for government by all members of the community. Within weeks of their Oxford meeting, Southey could write to his midshipman brother that pantisocracy and aspheterism are 'words well understood in the city of Bristol'.² And it was a Bristol contingent that was expected to make up half the small pantisocratic colony. By September 1794 Southey listed himself and Coleridge, their Bristol brides-to-be (Sarah and Edith Fricker), five other members of the Fricker family together with Southey's mother and two young brothers. To this Bristol dozen, Southey added a number of relatives (some by marriage) and an assortment of school and university friends, making a total of 24 in all.

The faintly ludicrous *Mayflower* echoes, the self-conscious resort to Greek terminology, and the collapse of the vision of a transatlantic commune into the bathos of gardening beside the Bristol Channel, have made it easy to ridicule pantisocracy. One can see why Charles Lamb cautioned Coleridge that 'you are not in Arcadia when you are in the West of England' (Lamb, 1: 58). Coleridge would himself later refer dismissively to their plan of 'trying the experiment of human

¹ *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. Edwin J. Marris, 3 vols (Cornell University Press 1975) 1: 196.

² *The Life and Correspondence of the Late Robert Southey*, ed. C. C. Southey 6 vols (London 1849–50) 1: 221.