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Robert Southey: History, Politics, Religion
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)
by Stuart Andrews

THERE HAS BEEN A NOTABLE BOOMLET in academic studies of the life and work of Robert Southey over the past fifteen years. Southey himself was a popular, engaged, combative and divisive figure of significance in his day, but his reputation as a poet and an intellect waned dramatically over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although both his version of the Story of the Three Bears and his biography of Lord Nelson have continued to be read, nearly all of Southey's other works receded into obscurity while those of his contemporary Lake Poet friends became canonical and widely-anthologized. In this concise and highly readable book, Stuart Andrews contributes a useful new dimension to the ongoing rehabilitation of Southey's work as a central part of the literary and political landscape of the Romantic era. Although the subtitle indicates that the study will focus on history, politics and religion, readers should know that Andrews' main interest lies in explicating the evolving political context of Southey's concern with the nature of Catholicism in England and abroad. Andrews accomplishes this by making reference to the way Southey used his histories and reviews to advance his positions in the forum of public opinion. It is clear that the author has a broad familiarity with the religious controversies of the era, particularly as they related to the thorny issue of Ireland. Andrews has written a good overview that situates Southey among the particular niche of writers and polemicists with whom he sparred over the course of three decades up to the date of the passage of the Catholic Emancipation bill.

The author defines the main goal of his book as follows: in tracing "the consistency and growing coherence of Southey's campaign against the presumed political threat posed by Catholicism, this study illustrates the rhetorical richness of his polemical prose at a time when his main poetic achievement was behind him" (x). Noting that much of Southey's intellectual universe emanated from his living commitment to the Anglican religion, Andrews does hint at the evolution of the poet's personal creed and certain unorthodoxies or inconsistencies in his practice. The author argues that Southey's historical work is generally detailed and balanced with the notable exception of his writing on Catholicism which is, as he characterizes it, "propagandist, sometimes unhistorical, and always impassioned" because his "main goal was to defend the moral and social benefits of the Established Church" (xi). Many of Andrews' quotations are well-chosen to highlight the combative, even martial, spirit of much of Southey's review work.

The book is divided into ten chapters that are based roughly on chronological stages in the development of Southey's attitudes and argumentation about the serious threat that legitimizing Catholic participation

in institutional public life would represent. A secondary, but clearly related, thread of discussion links Southey's fear of a politically-active Catholic citizenry with the question of Ireland and the Irish since they were the focus of so many of his articles and reviews. In a few places, the author hints that these two preoccupations were also related to the status of the working class, although that particular topic is not developed to any degree. Andrews has not followed the trend of the new historicism by integrating references to Southey's personal life and circumstances as part of his interpretive framework. Instead, he concerns himself mainly with a straightforward, well-informed discussion of Southey's ideas as they appear in the poet's published work and printed correspondence. There are extended diversions into the roiling debates and dueling polemics that were ongoing among notables like John Sturges, John Milner, Charles Butler, Joseph Blanco White and other contemporaries; on a few occasions perhaps as many as fifteen to twenty pages pass by without any mention of Southey at all. Andrews does make intelligible some fairly arcane debates among scholars and theologians in the course of his discussion and thus renders more meaningful some of Southey's positions on the religious issues of the day. This is no small contribution indeed.

Stuart Andrews has done scholars a valuable service by rendering Southey's religious universe comprehensible in clear, accessible prose. His discussion is limited in temporal scope and does not delve into the much longer history of anti-Catholic attitudes in English thought and literature dating from Elizabethan Black Legend to the complex confluence of Enlightenment thought mixed with anti-French Revolution rhetoric. Andrews does close his book by attempting to link Southey and Coleridge with something he calls "Anglican Englishness" while sidestepping entirely the debate unleashed by Linda Colley's argument about the links between a militant Protestantism and British identity. Although Andrews as a cautious scholar takes care not to make falsely equivalent comparisons, he does note in both the preface and conclusion that "[t]he connection between religious affiliation and national identity is once again a topical issue. Not this time between Protestant and Catholic, but between Christian and Moslem. Again there is talk of an *imperium in imperio*" (199). He wonders whether "[o]ur fears may be as exaggerated as Southey's, but the analogy may help us to understand Southey" (xi). The Southey that emerges from these pages is, as always, a compelling and contradictory character. He is by turns thoughtful and pedantic, genuine and bombastic, searching and settled. This reviewer might stop short of describing Southey's world view, as Andrews does, as "compassionate conservatism" (xii) because of the strong association of that phrase with the administration of George W. Bush.