

Robert Southey: A Life, Mark Storey
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In a recent article 'Romantic Poetry: Why and Wherefore' Stuart Curran observed that the 'average student' reads selections, and makes generalisations about the literary culture of the age, from less than twenty of the approximately five thousand volumes of original verse published in Britain between 1789 and 1824. Mark Storey's *Robert Southey: A Life* offers a much needed reassessment of the author of some seventeen of those remaining four thousand nine hundred and eighty unread books of poetry, as well as of several more volumes of prose.

Robert Southey was born in Bristol in 1774 and died in Keswick in 1843. Poet Laureate from 1813 until his death, he was the third, and from a late twentieth century critical perspective, the least well-known of the trio of poets identified by their contemporaries in the early 1800s as the 'Lake School' - a triumvirate that also included his brother-in-law Coleridge and his eventual successor as Laureate, Wordsworth. Indeed, although this biography explores his relationships with several of his contemporaries, including Landor, Lamb, Caroline Bowles, Shelley and Byron, it is Southey's interaction with his two immediate peers, especially with Coleridge, that will probably be of most interest to readers of the Bulletin. Professor Storey documents the twists and turns of Southey's friendship with Coleridge, rapidly downgraded by the latter to 'acquaintance': the youthful optimism of their first meeting in June 1794; the formation and disintegration of Pantisocracy; their frequent estrangements and reconciliations; Southey's resentment of the influence of the Wordsworths and uncomprehending despair at Coleridge's opium addiction; and his gradual assumption of responsibility for Coleridge's abandoned family. It is a story that, written for once from Southey's perspective, traces the gradual shift in *his* feelings, from the ecstatic praise found in his earliest surviving comments about his new friend ('He is of most uncommon merit - of the strongest genius, the clearest judgment, the best heart'), through frustration ('he does nothing which he ought to do, & everything which he ought not'), to his ambiguous response to the news of Coleridge's death ('It will not intrude much upon my waking thoughts, but I expect to feel it for some time to come in my dreams').

Yet fascinating, and somewhat tragic, though the intricacies of the personal relationship between Coleridge and Southey are, their interconnection ultimately has much wider, explicitly literary implications: implications that are crucial for a biographer who, like Professor Storey, is rightly concerned with reestablishing Southey's centrality to what is normally described as the 'Romantic' age. As the preface to this volume explains, Southey's current critical reputation is easily summarised: 'The writer who in his lifetime was on a par with Wordsworth and Coleridge ... is now less well known than the unknown writer he himself did not acknowledge - John Clare'.

In fact, the situation is perhaps even more complicated than we might at first believe. Certainly Southey has suffered from scholarly neglect, witnessed by the lack of complete modern editions of his correspondence, poetry and prose and by the archives full of unread, frequently fascinating, manuscripts, but, unfortunately perhaps for both himself and for those who seek to recover his reputation, it is not just the case of him having been allowed to languish in peaceful obscurity. Rather, Southey has attracted a peculiar combination of partial neglect and critical animus. Our knowledge of him, limited though it may be, tends to be almost exclusively negative: as the unsympathetic moralist who forced Coleridge into a reputedly loveless, and ultimately disastrous, marriage; as the hypocritical critic and plagiarist of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798); as

the politically incorrect reactionary who, conveniently forgetting his own revolutionary youth, denounced the radicalism of a younger generation, even taking a bizarre satisfaction in what he saw as the moral appropriateness of Shelley's early death; or as the chauvinistic Laureate who attempted to dissuade his young admirer Charlotte Brontë from a literary career, reminding her instead of the need for a mere woman to remain firmly within the domestic sphere.

In the context of this particular critical demonology, the list of negatives is potentially endless, making Wordsworth's concern for his own posterity - 'I begin to fear that I should be forgotten if it were not for my enemies' - strikingly apposite when applied to Southey. Moreover, as Kenneth Curry pointed out as long ago as 1966, the irony of this situation emerges even more distinctly when we realise that Southey's 'enemies' include not merely those political and literary opponents (for example Byron and Shelley) with whom he contended fiercely during his own lifetime, but also those very writers with whom he was most closely associated - Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Certainly for critics of the first generation of British Romantic poets, traditional critical hostility to Southey is firmly embedded in a reading of what Coleridge and Wordsworth had to say about him. Although the *Biographia Literaria* paid fulsome, if slightly tongue in cheek, tribute to one whose poetry proved 'the versatility of his talents' and 'displayed a 'purity of mind ... which even in its levities never wrote a line, which it need regret on any moral account', Coleridge's defence of his brother-in-law, and himself, against the injustices of 'quack' criticism sounded a rather hollow note: 'When future critics shall weigh out his guerdon of praise and censure, it will be Southey *the poet* only, that will supply them with the scanty materials for the latter' (my italics).

Whilst this rather double edged praise was purely for public consumption, it is ironic that it was Coleridge's *private* remarks about Southey's lack of 'Genius' that have provided later critics with very ample materials with which to attack his work. Coleridge's problematic engagement with his brother-in-law, erstwhile collaborator, and fellow would-be Pantisocrat's poetry began relatively early on in their relationship. Although he reassured Southey that he was '*delighted* to feel you superior to me in Genius as in Virtue', from September 1794 he began to construct an increasingly severe 'minute critique' of his new friend's work: early sonnets were both praised ('I like your Sonnets exceedingly') and dissected ('Discord for Discord's sake is rather too licentious'), and experiments with newer forms, such as the monodrama were consigned to the generic scrap heap ('I *detest* Monodramas') by one who simultaneously disclaimed the role of literary arbiter ('I never wished to establish my Judgement on the throne of Critical Despotism').

As Coleridge developed his own critical vocabulary, his conviction that Southey's poetry did not bear the imprint of genius increased, culminating in the assertion that neither Southey, nor Walter Scott, were 'poets' at all. Wordsworth, who did not become personally well acquainted with Southey until the early 1800s, expressed similar views. Indeed his valedictory, sent to Isabella Fenwick in October 1844, only eighteen months after Southey's death, with its portrayal of the latter's ceaseless labour and diligence, mechanical approach to composition, and of the lack of human interest generated by his poetry, acts as a paradigm for most subsequent evaluations of his achievement:

'Observe the difference in execution in the Poems of Coleridge and Southey, how masterly is the workmanship of the former, compared with the latter; the one persevered in labour unremittingly, the other could lay down his work at pleasure and turn to anything else. But what was the result? Southey's Poems, notwithstanding the care and forethought with

which most of them were planned after the material had been diligently collected, are read once but how rarely are they recurred to! how seldom quoted, and how few passages, notwithstanding the great merit of the works in many respects, are gotten by heart.'

Yet what we need to realise is that Wordsworth and Coleridge's condemnations of their contemporary's work are not as disinterested and objective as they would have readers imagine. Southey acts as a kind of whipping boy in the promotion of their own cultural aesthetics. Both invite the reader to join a collusive union - in the condemnation of so called inferior literature (the product of 'talent' rather than 'genius') - and in so doing solicit an implicit subscription to the belief in the superiority of their (and the reader's) critical values and, of course, of their own work.

Yet, in spite of their efforts to foster a cosy relationship with their audiences, neither Coleridge nor Wordsworth are as assured as they seem. Their comments about Southey's productivity reflect personal unease over their own inability to achieve personal literary goals (to finish 'The Recluse', or to write the *Opus Maximum*). Similarly their shared concern for his future reputation ('would ... [his] poetry survive much beyond the day when ... [he] lived and wrote', 'his wreath will look unseemly') betrays a lingering concern for their own posterity. Wordsworth and Coleridge's criticism of Southey demonstrates an anxiety, also disclosed in the 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads', *Biographia Literaria* and *The Prelude* of being misread by hostile audiences or, worst of all, not being read at all. What emerges from their comments is then a Southey constructed not as fellow 'Lake Poet' but as necessary cultural antithesis to Wordsworthian or Coleridgean genius, a writer transformed into the man of talent, the very epitome of the lesser artist.

Problematic and distorted as Wordsworth and Coleridge's interpretations of Southey are, even more disconcerting is the tendency of writers on the Romantic period to accept these judgments at face value. The sense of perspective which would reject a reading of Wordsworth's poetry entirely through what Coleridge had to say about it, or indeed vice versa, seems to be suspended in the case of Southey. Moreover, in a period such as our own which has resurrected several marginalised figures of the late eighteenth century, for example William Godwin and John Thelwall, Southey's relative, continued neglect has been striking. The crucial point is, however, that unlike many of his contemporaries, Southey cannot just be dismissed as a mere influence. His very proximity to his two canonical peers, his differences from them, and the external evidence provided by contemporary reviews insisting on his importance (he was as the *Anti-Jacobin* pointed out as early as 1797 'one of the chief champions and apostles' of a new 'sect of poets') confronts critics working within the framework provided by the canon with the limitations of their method. It exposes the problematics of an ideology that enshrines and inscribes the works of both Wordsworth and Coleridge as archetypes and models of literary production in the late eighteenth century, and that insists that all cultural value in the period resides in authors who approximate, though of course do not quite match up to, their ideals, or, indeed, what critics interpret as their ideals. Reconsidering Southey's reputation, and restoring him to a central position in the debates and practices of his time, sheds new light on the cultural achievements of a period which did not actually call itself a 'Romantic' one.

Mark Storey's biography is therefore a long overdue and much welcome attempt to put Southey back into the picture. It makes admirable use of his two thousand plus unpublished letters, whilst having to concede that the prospects for complete editions of his correspondence, poetry or prose are, to put it mildly, bleak. Southey's complex interaction with his turbulent times is comprehensively documented and Professor Storey has extremely interesting things to

say about his relationships with some of his lesser-known contemporaries, especially Landor and Caroline Bowles.

The only weakness of this book - though it is of course debatable as to whether this is the function of a biography - is its comparative neglect of Southey the poet. Though acknowledging that the longer poems, especially *Madoc* and *The Curse of Kehama*, took their famously methodical author several years to write, Professor Storey takes the old myth that Southey never blotted a line, and consequently published all that he wrote, a little too much at face value. In fact, surviving manuscripts, particularly in the case of *Madoc*, reveal a frequent, and indefatigable, reviser. Not engaging with this process of revision means overlooking crucial stages in Southey's development as a writer and underestimating his poetic ambitions. Moreover, paying closer attention to Southey's aims as a poet can bring other, potentially greater rewards. His frequently flawed, confused, experiments with the long poem (particularly the epic, though Southey himself was wary of using this 'degraded title') offer tantalising connections with the wider cultural and political debates of his times - crucial, but forgotten, arguments on definitions of literature, the poet, patriotism and, ultimately, 'Britishness' that drew in figures from all sides of the literary and political spectrum. It has recently been observed that the major difficulty with Southey's poetry (or indeed with the work of any other non-canonical writer of this period) is that we have forgotten how to read it. If we were to relearn, a more complex, diverse literary and political culture might well open up to us.

This minor caveat apart, Professor Storey has produced a very interesting, extremely detailed and comprehensive biography which is essential reading for anyone interested in Southey, Coleridge, Wordsworth and their contemporaries. Hopefully, it will also mark the beginning of a revival of interest in this most complex, and wrongly neglected, of writers.

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