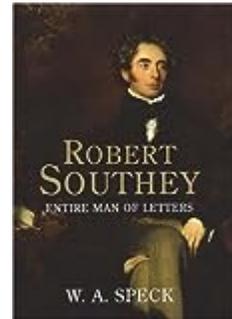




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Robert Southey: Pantisocrat, Poet, and Polemicist

An updated biography of Robert Southey has long been overdue. Arguably it takes a biographer to make sense of Southey's life—so idiosyncratic it sometimes seems. Southey was most famous as the “Jacobin poet” of the 1790s who became the conservative tribune of the 1810s. But that “apostasy” at least had a chronological logic. Less obviously he was both the Socinian who defended the established Church of England, and the anti-Catholic opponent of Emancipation who admiringly chronicled the cultures and peoples of Iberia. Active in politics his whole adult life, he opposed parliamentary reform. But he voted for the first time in 1835, at the age of sixty-one, courtesy of the 1832 Reform Act. Although one of the leading poets of his day, his most famous literary legacies currently are a biography of Horatio Nelson and the story of the “Three Bears.” When he was appointed poet laureate in 1813, this was hardly the anticipated outcome.

It was as a poet that Southey first came to public attention, and it is as a poet that he has drawn subsequent critical attention. The general object of W. A. Speck's study is to appreciate Southey on more expansive terms.

He was—as the sub-title underlines—an “entire man of letters,” active not only as a poet, but as an essayist, reviewer, biographer, historian, and novelist. Why study this man of letters? Robert Southey's primary interest to historians today is integrally related to the causes of his languishing reputation as a poet. Enthusiasm for Southey's poetry has waned precisely because that verse was so deeply engaged with the contemporary politics of his day. Most of Southey's epic poems were centrally constructed as political analogues for his own time. What this means is that although his poetry may have gone out of fashion, his life and all his writings are immeasurably valuable for the deep political engagement they reveal.

Born to a Bristol wine merchant in 1774, Southey entered Westminster School in 1788. There began the practices that would mark his entire adult life: publication and involvement in political controversy. Authorship of an article arguing the evils of flogging saw Southey expelled from the school, and barred from Christ Church, Oxford. Although he was eventually admitted at Balliol, the experience radicalized Southey and made him attentive to the injustices of the world in which he lived. By

1794 these sympathies, and an introduction to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, had synergized in the utopian scheme of pantisocracy. In order to fund it Southey produced his first published poems—*Botany Bay Eclogues* (1794) and *Joan of Arc* (1796) among them.

As Speck is careful to show, Southey's conservatism was never entirely absent, even in this radical phase. He and Coleridge differed on the issue of "free-love," and his attitude towards the Cambridge radical William Frend was tempered by a line in the latter's *Peace and Union* (1793) which Southey read as an attack on the institution of marriage. Southey's position regarding marriage is worthy of remark. In 1795, he and Coleridge (having dropped their pantisocratic scheme) became brothers-in-law by virtue of their marriages to the Fricker sisters, Edith and Sara. The cooling of their friendship had its origins in Coleridge's lackluster efforts in the cause of pantisocracy. Predictably, the situation was exacerbated by their differing views concerning the duties of husbands and wives. Coleridge separated from his wife in 1802, eventually leaving her in the care of Southey and her sister at Greta Hall at Keswick. Southey disapproved of Coleridge's behavior, but he may, in some senses, have envied his brother-in-law's freedom, for his own marriage to Edith Fricker did not provide the intellectual companionship he so clearly craved. A repeated theme of Southey's life was his deeply emotional friendships with intellectual women. His first dalliance in this respect was with Mary Wollstonecraft, with whom he became infatuated in 1797, during his stillborn legal studies at Gray's Inn. These were the days when his "Jacobin" reputation was at its highest, leading him to become the famous object of George Canning's satires in the *Anti-Jacobin*. From 1801, Mary Barker (who eventually came and lived near him at Keswick) functioned as his intellectual intimate—a role she performed up until about 1820. His final companion in this regard was the poet Catherine Bowles, who became his second wife. What Southey called their "intellectual union" dated from 1823 (p. 194). Speck reveals Southey in a conflicted relationship to marriage. And, as later comments on his political conversion reveal, this is possibly the key to understanding not only his conservative transformation, but the vigor with which he attacked those with whom he had previously agreed. Southey believed that it was his own "self-restraint" that saved him from radicalism and hedonism (p. 184). As his personal life seems to indicate, he struggled to some degree with this temptation his whole life. Not quite surprising, then, he reserved particular venom for those who had submitted to what

he had denied himself.

When did Southey's conversion occur? He was still a radical when he moved his family to Greta Hall in 1803. At this time he opposed Catholic Emancipation, hated William Pitt, and still supported parliamentary reform. But Pitt's departure from the political scene in 1806, and a growing realization of the necessity in confronting the Napoleonic threat, began his transit across the political spectrum. The poem *Madoc*, which appeared in 1805, was far more tolerant of war as a concept than earlier efforts like *Joan of Arc* and *The Battle of Blenheim* (1798). He approved of Henry Addington (with whom he agreed on Catholic Emancipation), approved further of the Grenvilles (with whom he did not), and was taken deeper into the loyalist camp by the uprising in Spain in 1808. He began to write articles for the ministerial *Quarterly Review*. But still his independent streak reigned, as he insisted on an editorial arrangement that did not oblige him to accept the ministerial positions on Ireland, the tax burden, and the Duke of York Affair. The shift in political sentiment had a direct bearing upon the verse he produced; *Roderick, Last of the Goths* (1814) was begun in 1808 as homage to the Spanish patriots fighting Napoleon. Further reviewing work for the *Edinburgh Annual Register* completed his progress toward Tory polemicist—a position that was confirmed by his appointment as poet laureate in 1813.

It is appropriate to filter Southey's life through his political development, and not only because this is historically illuminating for today's audience. Southey's political opinions, Speck makes clear, overwhelmingly informed the manner in which his poetry and prose were received by the early nineteenth-century reading public. Critical reaction to his poetical works was strongly guided by partisan concerns, and the literary skirmishes Southey fought after 1813 were effectively echoes of his perceived apostasy. In these events—as ever for Southey—ironies abounded. In 1817, in an attempt to embarrass him, his political enemies published his poem *Wat Tyler*. Southey had written it in his radical youth, but printers, fearing prosecution, declined to publish it. Now, fed by scandal, it became his best-selling poem. But as he had surrendered the copyright, he earned nothing from its sale. After 1822, he effectively ceased activity as a poet and concentrated on his historical writings. This, perhaps, best befitted the man who had actually preferred the position of historiographer royal to that of poet laureate.

Geography (and his connection to Coleridge) made

Southey a “Lake Poet,” but as Speck points out, he ought not to be viewed as part of that Romantic school. Southey is more properly classed as an epic poet, operating in a different genre. That said, Speck is not interested in rehabilitating Southey’s poetry about which he is unenthusiastic. In fact, he suggests that the subject of his biography was “more impressive as an accurate and critical

observer of English history and society than as an epic poet of past and remote cultures” (p. 123).

In *Robert Southey: Entire Man of Letters*, William Speck delivers what he promises—a thorough, balanced, and contextualized account of Southey’s life, from beginning to end. It reminds us of the complexities of political belief in a period of great transformative change.

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