

“The best laid schemes sometimes turn out the worst”: Robert Southey’s success and failure¹



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In recent years there has been a renewal of interest in the poet, historian and polemicist Robert Southey (1774-1843), as is demonstrated by several publications, namely two biographies, Mark Storey’s *Robert Southey, A Life* (1997) and W. A. Speck’s *Robert Southey: Entire Man of Letters* (2006), a new five-volume edition of Southey’s *Poetical Works, 1793-1810* (2004), a volume of essays edited by Lynda Pratt entitled *Robert Southey and the Contexts of English Romanticism* (2006), Carol Bolton’s study *Writing the Empire: Robert Southey and Romantic Colonialism* (2007) and David M. Craig’s book *Robert Southey and Romantic Apostasy: Political Argument in Britain, 1780-1840* (2007). Furthermore, the first collected edition of Southey’s vast correspondence, co-directed by Lynda Pratt and Tim Fulford, is under way. After a long period of neglect, a concerted effort is being made to reassess Southey’s work, rehabilitate it, analyse the development of his political and social ideas and recognise his centrality to British literature and culture in the Romantic age.

Southey was a major figure on the literary scene of his day, though a controversial one for having moved from being an enthusiast of the French

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Revolution to a supporter of the Tories. In 1807 the government gave him a yearly pension of £160, later increased to £300 in 1835 by the prime minister Sir Robert Peel; he was appointed Poet Laureate in 1813 (though he would have preferred the position of Historiographer Royal), when Sir Walter Scott declined the post in his favour, a sign that by that time he had become well-known and respected;² and his most famous enemy, Lord Byron, who vilified him, was forced to admit that he was "the only existing entire man of letters" (quoted in Madden, 1972: 157).

However, the prestigious reputation Southey enjoyed during his lifetime did not long survive him. Overshadowed by his canonical friends Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, Southey became the least read of the three authors and was relegated to the margins of the history of English Romanticism as a lesser poet. Later generations of literary historians, critics and readers lost interest in his voluminous and diverse work, and the celebrity of the once popular and leading writer waned, to the point of his renown resting chiefly on a biography of Admiral Horatio Nelson (*The Life of Nelson*, 1813) and the classic children's tale *The Story of the Three Bears*.³ For a man who had a high, even exaggerated, sense of the importance of his work and who, all his life, was concerned about his own posterity and dreamed of conquering a prominent place in literary history, this posthumous obscurity is extremely ironical. Even his name has often been mispronounced. In the Preface to his study of Robert Southey's life, Mark Storey reminds us that, according to Byron's joke, Southey rhymed with 'mouthy';⁴ yet, most people call him "Suthey".

² On the death of Robert Southey, William Wordsworth succeeded him as Poet Laureate.

³ "The Story of the Three Bears" was included in the fourth volume of Southey's work *The Doctor* (1834-1847).

⁴ *Don Juan*, Canto I, stanza CCV.

Born in Bristol on 12 August 1774, Robert Southey was educated at Westminster School, London, and Balliol College, Oxford, but never obtained a degree. He published his first poems in the 1790s and soon established his reputation as a poet for several epic poems. In August 1817, in the Whig periodical *The Edinburgh Review*, the critic Francis Jeffrey (1773-1850) called him a «Lake Poet», a derogatory designation that also included William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and which was intended to attack a new group of poets whose practice opposed the rules and the decorum of neoclassicism. However, over the years, Southey's writings increasingly turned from poetry to prose and he devoted himself mainly to history and biography, believing that his historical works would guarantee him a firm reputation. Posterity, in fact, would regard him more for his prose style than for his poems.

Determined to live by his pen and having to support his and Coleridge's family by his writing, Southey became a prolific author and an industrious researcher,⁵ a man intensely dedicated to his work and his library.⁶ His copious output includes poems, histories, biographies, essays, travel books, letters, reviews, translations and editions, thus encompassing many of the most important genres of Romantic period culture. For nearly forty years he contributed extensively to periodicals such as the *Monthly Magazine*, the *Critical Review*, the *Annual Review*, the *Foreign Review* and, especially, the *Tory Quarterly Review* (founded in 1809 by John Murray as a rival to the *Edinburgh Review*), and that activity was not only financially rewarding but a means of making his ideas known to the British people and gaining public

⁵ In 1805 Southey adopted as his motto «In Labore Quies», «Rest in Labour» in his own translation. See Speck, 2006: 109.

⁶ According to Thomas De Quincey's description, Southey's library of over 14,000 volumes was chiefly composed of "English, Spanish, and Portuguese [books]; well selected, being the great cardinal classics of the three literatures." (De Quincey, 1980: 237). In fact, Southey's collection of Portuguese books and manuscripts was then probably unique in England. See: "Catalogue of the Spanish and Portuguese Portion of the Library of the Late Robert Southey, Esq. LL.D., Poet Laureate", *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro*, vol. 178, Janeiro-Março 1943: 91-155.

visibility. The scores of articles he wrote on topics of a literary, social and political nature prove him to be a writer always engaged in the great political debates and controversies of his time (the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, Parliamentary reform, Catholic emancipation, the Corn Laws, Free Trade, slavery, industrialisation, human rights, among others).

When Southey died in 1843, after some years of mental illness, he was considered an equal of his fellow poets Coleridge and Wordsworth. The latter even wrote the inscription of the monument that was erected to his memory in Crosthwaite Church, Keswick, where his funeral took place. But he had also become a renowned Hispanist and an expert on Portuguese history and literature, and in 1961 the Brazilian government paid for the restoration of his grave, as a tribute to Southey's *History of Brazil* (1810-1819).

At a time when Robert Southey's work and relationships with his contemporaries are being reappraised in order to restore him to his proper position among the major and more influential English writers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, academics and critics involved in this on-going process of rehabilitation have also been providing several explanations for such a great fall from favour. Namely, they stress that:

- Southey's trajectory from early political radicalism towards conservatism, much attacked by some of his contemporaries (Shelley, Lord Byron, Hazlitt, among others) who saw him as the supreme apostate (the revolutionary who betrayed his principles for money and respectability), seriously conditioned critical reception of his work;
- Southey's reputation was particularly destroyed by Lord Byron, who had no respect for his literary talents and held him up to ridicule in some of his famous poems (*English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, *Don Juan*, *The Vision of Judgement*);
- Southey's second marriage to the writer Caroline Bowles was also damaging to his later reputation, for it gave rise to family disputes between his wife and children concerning the division and publication

of his literary estate, which led to a number of rival and disorganized posthumous editions (thus affecting the way his works were received and not contributing to the preservation of Southey's name as a major writer of his time);⁷

- After Southey's death his works were increasingly subject to neglect, being considered of inferior quality and significance when compared to those of his fellow poets Wordsworth and Coleridge;
- Southey's poetry is so intimately related to contemporary politics, interests and trends that it inevitably lost its appeal as time elapsed;
- Southey wrote abundantly, perhaps too much, and the extent, diversity and dispersed nature of his literary production, which is not necessarily synonymous with inspiration and excellence, contributed to the eclipse of his name, or, as Mark Storey puts it, "to be so prolific can lead, paradoxically, to writing yourself out of the history books" (Storey, 1997: IX).

Southey's output is indeed voluminous and the present revived interest in his life and work aims at reintroducing him into the canon of English Romantic writers. But the significance of Southey's literary production far exceeds the domestic sphere. A considerable number of his writings reflect that attraction for the Other, the foreign, the exotic that characterised his age. Portugal, in particular, was one of Southey's lifelong interests and preoccupations, and his pioneering efforts to make known to the British reading public its history and literature and to construct a positive image of this country, England's old ally, also assures him a prominent position in the history of Anglo-Portuguese relations.

Southey visited Portugal for the first time in 1796 and again in 1800-1801 and wrote accounts of both journeys (*Letters Written During a Short*

⁷ See: Lynda Pratt, "Family Misfortunes? The posthumous editing of Robert Southey", in Pratt, 2006: 219-238.

Residence in Spain and Portugal. With some account of Spanish and Portuguese Poetry, 1797;⁸ *Journals of a Residence in Portugal 1800-1801 and a Visit to France 1838*, 1960⁹). Staying with his maternal uncle, the Reverend Herbert Hill (1749-1828), who was Chaplain to the British Factory in Lisbon from 1782 to 1807 and who possessed a rich collection of Spanish and Portuguese books in his well-stocked library which his nephew would inherit years later, proved to be a turning point in his literary career. His sentimental attachment to Portugal and his dedication to the study of the Portuguese historical past and literary heritage began right at this time. In a letter to the editor of *The New Monthly Magazine* dated 5 June 1814, Southey sums up his life in a way that clearly shows how strong his connection with Portugal was:

[...] it is sufficient to state that I was born at Bristol 1774, was of Westminster School, and of Balliol College Oxford; and that the occasion which directed my studies particularly to the literature and history of Portugal and Spain was that my maternal Uncle was for very many years Chaplain of the British Factory at Lisbon.¹⁰

⁸ Published in 1797, Southey's *Letters Written During a Short residence in Spain and Portugal. With some account of Spanish and Portuguese Poetry* proved so popular that the book went through a second edition in 1799 (*Letters Written During a Short Residence in Spain and Portugal*), and a third one in 1808 (*Letters Written During a Journey in Spain and a Short Residence in Portugal*), though not without important changes. As Southey's knowledge of matters Portuguese deepened, he became aware that his first impressions of the country and his evaluation of Portuguese literature had been hasty and rash. Accordingly, when he prepared the second and third editions, he corrected and amended the original *Letters*, omitted some parts, added new poems, anecdotes and details, eliminated some derogatory comments, substituted some harsh words for milder ones, thus reconstructing his vision of Portugal and making it more moderate and positive. He tried, too, to include in the second edition of *Letters* some views of Portugal which his uncle had sent him, but he had to abandon the idea on the grounds of cost.

⁹ Although Southey planned to publish his Portuguese journal of 1800-1801, he never did, and for a long time it was thought to have been lost. Fortunately, Adolfo Cabral, at the time Senior Lecturer at the Faculdade de Letras, Lisbon, discovered it in Bristol, in the summer of 1949, together with another one, of Southey's trip to France in 1838, and published both in 1960, under the title *Journals of a residence in Portugal 1800-1801 and a Visit to France 1838*.

¹⁰ Quoted in Cabral, 1959: 371.

Sixteen years later, on 23 April 1830, he wrote in a letter to John Wood Warter (1806-1878), his soon-to-be son-in-law: "My voyage was to Portugal, and you know how much it has influenced the direction of my studies." (Southey, Vol. VI, 1850: 98).

By this time Southey had already published two of the three volumes of his *History of the Peninsular War* (1823-1832) and the equally monumental three-volume *History of Brazil* (1810-1819), for which the Portuguese queen D. Maria II made him a Cavaleiro da Ordem da Torre e Espada (Knight of the Order of the Tower and Sword).¹¹ Two impressive products of Southey's historical labours, the latter was originally conceived as just a part of his most ambitious literary plan, the writing of a History of Portugal.¹² Had it been completed, the work Southey hoped would greatly contribute to his posthumous reputation as a renowned English authority on Portugal would have comprised about twelve quarto volumes.¹³

Southey left Portugal in June 1801, never to return. His voluminous correspondence, however, bears testimony to his desire of revisiting this country, staying there for long periods of time and even settling there for the rest of his life. As he confessed in one of his many letters to relatives and friends where references to Portugal can be found, dated 1803: "there [Portugal] if possible I will willingly fix my final abode, and spend my life speaking Portuguese and writing English." (quoted in Speck, 2006: 96).

¹¹ On this decoration see Cabral, 1957: 10.

¹² "As an historian I shall come nearer my mark. For thorough research, indeed, and range of materials, I do not believe that the History of Portugal will ever have been surpassed": letter to Wynn, 26 May 1815, in Southey, Vol. IV, 1850: 111.

¹³ In a letter to his brother Thomas, 12 September 1804, he outlined the plan: "My whole historical labours will then consist of three separate works. 1. History of Portugal, — the European part, 3 vols. 2. Hist. of the Portuguese Empire in Asia, 2 or 3 vols. 3. Hist. of Brazil. 4. Hist. of the Jesuits in Japan. 5. Literary History of Spain and Portugal, 2. Vols. 6. Hist. of Monachism. In all, ten, eleven, or twelve quarto volumes": in Southey, Vol. II, 1850, 305-306.

He intended to go back to do some more research, he hoped to find a position in Portugal (the Lisbon consulship, an embassy secretaryship), he even contemplated the possibility of accompanying British troops dispatched to Portugal during the Napoleonic Wars, but his dreams of returning one day were never fulfilled; however, that did not prevent him from dedicating much of his time and energy to the study of Portuguese or Portugal-related subjects, to the point of feeling half-Portuguese, intellectually speaking: “[...] the long attention which I have given to their history and the whole of their literature has given me a sort of intellectual naturalization among them” (Leão, 1943: 46).

In fact, his two visits to Portugal played a crucial role in his future professional life, suggesting to him a whole programme of writings on Portuguese history and literature on which he embarked with enthusiasm. Southey considered himself the best qualified Englishman to write about Portuguese matters, and his historiographical works, as well as the vast number of his essays and reviews scattered throughout several contemporary periodicals, are proof enough that he took his mission seriously.

His knowledge of the Portuguese and Spanish languages and culture made him an expert on the Iberian Peninsula, and consequently he often wrote about Spain and Portugal, both on past and contemporary events. He contributed a number of articles on Iberian literature to the *Quarterly Review*, which reached wide audiences, thus strengthening his position as the leading transmitter of the literature of Portugal and Spain to England. His 1809 review of *Extractos em Portuguez e em Inglez; com as palavras Portuguezas propriamente accentuadas, para facilitar o Estudo d'aquella Lingoa* (London, 1808)¹⁴ is of particular importance, since it surprisingly offers a general sketch of the history of Portuguese literature, from its medieval origins until his day. Johann Wilhelm Christian Müller (1752-1814) translated it into Portuguese

¹⁴ *Quarterly Review*, vol. I, 2, May 1809: 268-292.

soon afterwards (*Memoria sobre a literatura portugueza. Traduzida do inglez. Com notas ilustradoras do texto*), a clear sign that Southey's views were held in high regard. Another interesting piece is his review of John Adamson's *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Luis de Camoens* (1820),¹⁵ because he had the opportunity to write about the famous Portuguese poet, much admired by Southey for his sonnets but not so much for his epic *The Lusiad*.

In addition to reviewing, Southey also devoted time to editing and translating. His achievements in these two domains again show him to be a lover of Portuguese and Spanish literature. He translated many short poems by authors from Portugal and Spain, which are scattered in his letters, reviews and other types of writing, and, most importantly, he translated *Amadis of Gaul* (4 volumes, 1803), *Palmerin of England* (4 volumes, 1807) — two chivalry romances whose Portuguese authorship Southey supported enthusiastically — and *Chronicle of the Cid* (1808), although, in the second case, it is not an original work but rather a revision and correction of Anthony Munday's translation, dated 1588.

Besides his already mentioned writings, Southey conceived other literary plans on things Portuguese which he was unable to bring to fruition, namely: a second travel book about Portugal, a volume of poems on Spanish and Portuguese history, another one on his travels around Portugal and Spain, a translation of Fernão Lopes's chronicles, much admired by him, a book of his translations of Camões's sonnets, a history of Portuguese literature, in which he hoped "to be one day adopted", as he confessed to Charles Bedford in a letter dated 5 May 1807 (Southey, Vol. III, 1850: 89), an account of all the books which had been written on Portugal and of their respective authors,¹⁶ and tragedies on Portuguese historical characters such as King Sebastian, D. Pedro and D. Inês de Castro. All these literary projects he failed to accomplish

¹⁵ *Quarterly Review*, vol. XXVII, 53, April 1822: 1-39.

¹⁶ See letter to Mary Barker, dated 26 January 1805, in Warter, Vol. I, 1856: 313.

testify to the fact that Portugal remained, throughout his life, a constant source of inspiration, even though Southey's Portuguese and Spanish works were poorly paid.

Always anxious about his posthumous fame and convinced of the importance and worth of his undertakings, Southey wished to be remembered as a major Portuguese and Spanish scholar and an unrivalled authoritative historian of Portugal. Accordingly, he laboured arduously to achieve that goal, becoming, by his own definition, "a Portuguese student among the mountains" (Southey, Vol. II, 1850: 281).¹⁷ It is only fair to his memory, then, that his role as the first English Lusophile is put centre stage. Ironically, however, such a great and absorbing effort may well have been another factor that contributed to the decrease of his celebrity in Britain, as a critic writing for *The Quarterly Review* in 1856 pointed out:

What he [Southey] considered the principal advantages of his Peninsular residence, the acquaintance with the language, literature, and localities of Spain and Portugal, was, we are persuaded, an unpropitious event, which has been detrimental to his fame. His attention became directed to those countries in an especial degree, and he was led to make them the subject of the voluminous works upon which he relied for the larger part of his reputation with posterity [...] The best-laid schemes sometimes turn out the worst; and the journey to Lisbon was, we believe, in its permanent consequences, the most unfortunate step in Southey's life.¹⁸

For the anonymous contributor to the influential *Quarterly Review*, Southey's decision to make the Iberian Peninsula a chief subject of his research and written work was obviously a wrong choice, a wasted effort, for it compromised his chances of success. Had he consecrated all his talents and energies to the study of British themes, he would have conquered enduring fame; instead, his expertise on the cultures and peoples of Iberia, of which he was so proud and self-confident, cost him the interest of later generations of readers.

¹⁷ Letter to his friend Grosvenor Charles Bedford, 23 April 1804.

¹⁸ *Quarterly Review*, Vol. XCVIII, March 1856: 477-478.

Southey was well aware of the whims of literary history; he knew, as he wrote in a letter to John Rickman, one of his closest friends, that "In literature, as in the playthings of schoolboys and the frippery of women, there are the ins and outs of fashion." (Southey, Vol. II, 1850: 121-122). After his death the recognition he enjoyed during his lifetime faded, and for much of the twentieth century his poems and prose works, most of them no longer read, went effectively out of fashion, only to attract critical attention again in the past decade. Such changing fortunes, such a combination of success and failure, make Robert Southey a particularly eloquent example of one of the issues addressed by this conference of the Portuguese Anglo-American Studies Association: the rise and fall of reputations.

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