
W.A. Speck. *Robert Southey: Entire Man of Letters*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 305p.

BRIAN C. COONEY
GONZAGA UNIVERSITY

Poor Robert Southey. Perhaps nothing is more indicative of his decline in stature than the periodic debates that take place on NASSR, the Romanticism listserv, over how to pronounce his name. What would likely be all the more galling to him, the only real evidence one way or the other is a mocking rhyme by Southey's mortal enemy, Lord Byron. Yet it is hard to imagine a figure from the era more deserving of reconsideration and recovery. Though he tends to be remembered almost exclusively for his friends and enemies, he was, as W.A. Speck argues in the subtitle of his new biography of the poet, an "entire man of letters." His Laureateship notwithstanding, Southey's contributions to history, biography, and criticism were enormous, something Speck does an unusually strong job of highlighting.

Indeed, the great strength of Speck's biography, a strength that makes it vital reading for any student of Southey (which is really to say any student of Romanticism), is the detailed research that allows us not only to see the events of the poet's career, but also the development of the poet's mind. Much of Speck's focus is complicating the traditional view of Southey as a political apostate, and he does an excellent job of bringing to life a Southey who was not quite so radical in his Pantisocracy days and perhaps not so conservative in his later Tory years. In short, Speck rescues Southey from Byron's taunt that he was an "Ultra Julian."

Impressively researched from archival material and drawing especially heavily on Southey's autobiographical writing and letters, *Robert Southey* is particularly successful in depicting the poet's complex relations with his fellow "Lake Poets," Coleridge and Wordsworth. Speck reveals Southey's early attraction to the philosophy of William Godwin, a flirtation he would share with Wordsworth; his plans for a utopian community prior even to his Pantisocrat discussions with Coleridge; and, of course, his faith in the French Revolution, with the stunning detail that, upon hearing of Robespierre's execution, he lamented that he would "rather have heard of the death of [his] own father" (46). Additionally, Southey somewhat idiosyncratically ranked himself, Wordsworth, and Walter Savage Landor as the great poets of the day. For all that, Southey was never aesthetically a fellow traveler with Wordsworth or Coleridge, whose *Lyrical Ballads* he simply did not grasp. Like a number of reviewers, he praised "Tintern Abbey" but attacked the subject matter of many of the remaining poems—this despite that many of his own poems were on similar topics.

Perhaps, ultimately, Southey's generous appraisal of himself and his critique of poetry that appeared superficially similar to his own was a product of a justifiable insecurity about his talent. Speck details how much work and research went into Southey's lengthy epics, and the weight (literal and figurative) of those works were often the butt of the most scathing assaults on the poet. For all his fire when drawn into controversies, Southey seems more temperamentally inclined to retire to his study and read about other times or distant battles. Indeed, the position of Poet Laureate was not his first choice of sinecures, and he would have preferred a historian position.

If there is any weakness to Speck's book, it is the lack of thorough readings of Southey's poetry. For example, when looking at Southey's *Roderick the last of the Goths*, Speck calls one passage "one of the most remarkable in the whole of Southey's massive poetic output" (161). In support of this statement, however, the author gives one brief quotation from the 1909 edition of Southey's poems. He follows this by asking "what inspired Southey to sympathise so sensitively with a woman who passionately loved a married man?"—a question he answers by falling back on a biographical point from the poet's past. Neither the biographical criticism nor the outdated reference help explain what make the passage remarkable, and Speck rarely does more to illuminate the passages (often extensive passages) he cites. Nonetheless, the book is a valuable read for any Romanticist, and it begins what ought to be a larger project of reconsidering Southey as a central figure of the period. ✱