Catalog of the Peal Exhibition: Robert Southey

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Robert Southey

An intimate of Coleridge and Wordsworth, and their neighbor at Keswick, Robert Southey (1774-1843) merits the title of “Lake Poet,” but being also prolix and prolific, he remains forever saddled with the Byronic rhyming epithet of “mouthey”; never collected, his writings would fill upwards of one hundred volumes. His longer poems, though little read today, earned the admiration of contemporaries as diverse as Scott, Shelley, and Macaulay. His prose, which evidences an unexpected simplicity and frankness, impressed even Byron as “perfect.”

Born in Bristol, Southey attended London’s Westminster School, where he roomed with Charles Watkin Williams Wynn, a lifelong friend and a future Member of Parliament. To the school paper, The Flagellant, Southey contributed an article against flogging, arguing that corporal punishment, as the work of Satan, had no place in a Christian institution. For expressing such views he was promptly expelled.

While a student at Balliol College, Oxford, he became a champion of the French Revolution. His republican sympathies manifested themselves in Joan of Arc, An Epic Poem, in which he cast his heroine as a defender of liberty. (Joseph Cottle published the piece, including part of Coleridge’s “The Destiny of Nations,” in 1796.) His college drama Wat Tyler (printed in 1817 without his permission) commemorated the English Peasants’ Revolt of 1381.

In June 1794 he met Coleridge, then on a visit to Oxford, and they became friends. Although Coleridge liked neither Oxford nor its inhabitants, he termed Southey “a Nightingale among Owls,” whose “soaring is even unto heaven.” They subsequently collaborated on the topical drama, The Fall of Robespierre (1794). Because both young men saw everywhere about them what Southey described as “the strong tyrannizing over the weak, man and beast,” they evolved their scheme of “Pantisocracy”—a utopian community to be founded on the banks of the Susquehanna in America, where property would be shared equally. They trusted that in time man’s innate goodness would assert itself and promote an era of virtue and happiness. But lack of money and internal
disagreements helped doom the inchoate project. Meanwhile, the pair married the sisters Fricker, Edith becoming Mrs. Southey and Sara Mrs. Coleridge. At his brother-in-law’s suggestion Southey settled in 1803 in the Lake Country, in Greta Hall on the outskirts of Keswick. An annual allowance for several years from Charles W.W. Wynn allowed Southey to pursue a career in letters with a measure of financial security. After 1807 a government pension replaced Wynn’s beneficence. Southey earned the remainder of his income by ceaseless literary toil.

He met Wordsworth in the 1790s, but they and their families did not grow close until after the Southeys moved to Keswick. Southey recognized early Wordsworth’s greatness as a poet; for his part, Wordsworth had reservations about his friend’s poetry, preferring his prose. In 1819 he dedicated Peter Bell to Southey.

During Coleridge and Wordsworth’s Lyrical Ballads period, Southey also wrote ballads and short narrative poems distinguished by their directness and simple language. “The Battle of Blenheim” (1798), on Marlborough’s victory over the French in 1704, sensitively portrays the futility of war; “God’s Judgment on a Wicked Bishop” (1799), a gothic piece, recounts the legendary devouring by rats of the tenth-century German prelate Hatto; “The Old Man’s Comforts” (1799) is perhaps better known through Lewis Carroll’s parody, “‘You are old, Father William,’ ” in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.

Southey then turned his pen to the composition of four long narrative poems (he disliked giving them “the degraded title of epics”), influenced by the Romantic penchant for the exotic and informed by his extensive reading of history and literature. Thalaba the Destroyer (1801) draws on Arabian legend and Mohammedan mythology for its tale of the overthrow of a powerful band of devil worshippers by the young hero. Madoc (1805) recounts the adventures of a twelfth-century Welsh prince who reputedly discovered America and defeated a Florida tribe, the Aztecas, which then emigrated to Mexico. The Curse of Kehama (1810), a Hindu story, illustrates the ultimate victory of righteousness over power. Roderick, The Last of the Goths (1814) has as its theme the liberation of Spain by the penitent and self-sacrificing titular figure; the subject had earlier been treated by Scott in his poem The Vision of Don Roderick (1811) and by Landor in the tragedy Count Julian (1812). Upon these works Southey and many of his friends fully expected him to mount to a prominent place among English men of
letters. Byron hit closer to the mark with his prediction that Southey's lengthy compositions would be read "when Homer and Vergil are forgotten—but not until then."

During this period Southey put behind him the radicalism of his youth, and in 1813, after Scott declined the position, he became Poet Laureate, succeeding Henry James Pye. At Southey's death Wordsworth received the bays. Of Southey's official poems as laureate, the best known is A Vision of Judgement (1821), on the apotheosis of King George III, who died insane in 1820. The preface mounts a violent attack on "The Satanic School" of Byron, Shelley, and their imitators. Byron responded with a more famous parody, The Vision of Judgment (1822), in which he held Southey up to ridicule.

Southey's real poetic talent lay in shorter pieces. "My Days among the Dead Are Past" (1818, 1823) evokes the peace and love he found amidst his library of fourteen thousand volumes. In "The Cataract of Lodore" (1820, 1823), one of the outstanding onomatopoetic verses in the language, he described for his children the sounds of the plunging waterfall not far from Keswick.

Prose increasingly occupied his energies. For several decades from 1808 he contributed regularly to the Tory Quarterly Review. On such diverse topics as Catholic Emancipation, the Electoral Reform Bill, emigration, education, and the moral state of nations he expressed a conservative viewpoint. A representative summary of the policies he advocated in the journal appears in Sir Thomas More; or, Colloquies on the Progress and Principles of Society (1829) and in Essays, Moral and Political (1832).

He proved especially adept at biography. He expanded an article into the Life of Nelson (1813) which, although dependent upon inferior sources and flawed in certain facts, stands as one of the classic biographies in English. Southey sensed his subject's greatness and power as a man and as a leader, and presented these qualities in a clear, forceful study. Because of the work's emphasis on patriotism, the United States government once published a special edition of Southey's Nelson for distribution to American officers and seamen. Although a member of the Church of England, Southey produced an eminently fair characterization of the leader of Methodism in his Life of Wesley (1820). Coleridge, a fellow Anglican, praised it as "the favourite" of his library, the book he could read "for the twentieth time" when he could concentrate on nothing else. Southey's delightful Life of the poet William Cowper
(1835) contains an important sketch of eighteenth-century literary history.

Editing and translating also figure in Southey's bibliography. His edition of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, reprinting the text of Caxton's first edition, appeared in 1817. He prepared two anthologies of poetry, *Specimens of the Later English Poets* (1807), a collaboration with Grosvenor Bedford, and *Select Works of the British Poets, From Chaucer to Jonson* (1831). These he followed with editions of Bunyan (1830), Isaac Watt's *Horae Lyricae* (1834), and Cowper (1835-1837). Visits to Spain and Portugal sharpened his command of their languages and made him the ideal translator and editor of such works as *Amadis of Gaul* (1803), *Palmerin of England* (1807), and *Chronicle of the Cid* (1808).

His last long prose work, *The Doctor* (7 vols., 1834-1847), ostensibly gives a history of the country physician Daniel Dove of Doncaster and his horse Nobs; in fact a miscellany, it collects scholarly curiosities, Rabelaisian jocosities, and the first known telling in print of the nursery tale "The Three Bears," based, Southey claimed, on a story told him by his eccentric uncle William Tyler. This latter piece, along with "The Cataract of Lodore," links Southey with other Romantics like Blake, Wordsworth, and Lamb, through a mutual interest in childhood.

A single-minded devotion to literature prompted him to refuse a number of non-literary positions and honors, notably, an unsought seat in Parliament to which he was elected in 1826, a professorship of history at Durham University in 1832, and a proffered baronetcy in 1835. In 1820 he did, however, accept a Doctorate of Laws from Oxford, his alma mater. He realized his prodigious output in part by working on various projects simultaneously, turning rapidly from one to another whenever his energy flagged. Southey was also a frequent and excellent letter writer. A number of editions of his voluminous correspondence, none of them complete, have appeared since 1849.

Tragedy marked his domestic life. Several of his children died young, and after three years of lunacy, his wife Edith succumbed in 1837. In 1839 he married Caroline Bowles, a cousin of the poet, the Rev. William Lisle Bowles, whose sonnets had early influenced Southey. A minor author in her own right, Miss Bowles corresponded with Southey for some twenty years. Excessive mental activity affected Southey, and he grew feeble in mind and body. Wordsworth recalls him in his beloved library, aimlessly
lifting books from the shelves, “patting them with both hands affectionately like a child.” In 1843, at the age of sixty-nine, Robert Southey died of softening of the brain and was buried in Crosthwaite Churchyard, Keswick.


For this anthology, originally designed as a supplement to George Ellis's Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances (1805), Southey provided brief biographical-critical introductions to such writers as Nahum Tate, James Miller, James Thomson, and Sir William Blackstone, along with selections from their poetry. Contemporary criticism condemned the collection for the general inferiority of the poets represented. The Edinburgh Review complained that “in almost every instance,” Southey’s choices “from the real tribe of Parnassus, are specimens of their secondary, if not of their worst compositions.” In this century R.D. Havens has found a certain merit in “the epigrams, the incisive comments, the humor, and the curious anecdotes” Southey scattered throughout the work. The copy in the Peal Collection retains its original plum-colored cloth binding.

Peal 12,312.


This handsomely produced edition of Malory’s Morte Darthur, a reprinting of Caxton’s first edition (1485), boasts woodcuts and large readable type. Southey’s introduction and notes played a significant role in the nineteenth-century revival of interest in Malory, by introducing him to Burne-Jones, Morris, and Rossetti, who later interpreted the Arthurian legend in their own styles. The first edition on display is one of twenty-five copies printed on large paper in a fine binding.

The John B. Stetson copy. Peal 7,421-7,422.

61. ROBERT SOUTHEY. Select Works of the British Poets, from
This volume of over one thousand pages contains generous selections, including the complete *Faerie Queene* by Spenser. However, no poems by Shakespeare appear, nor, despite the title, do any by Ben Jonson. The final poet in the collection is Richard Lovelace. Southey provided little analysis of the poems. He sounded a moral note throughout, praising writers such as Samuel Daniel and Thomas Carew for their commendable personal qualities.

The Peal copy, in contemporary three-quarter calf, bears on the half title the editor’s inscription, “Bertha Southey. Keswick. 26 May 1831 / from her Father.” Laid in is a slip in Southey’s hand, with reading notes in Greek and Latin from Aulus Gellius.

The Bertha Southey—Alfred Trapnell copy. Peal 12,222.

This collaboration represented one of numerous attempts by Southey to gain employment and recompense for Coleridge. Illustrative of Southey’s extensive reading, *Omniana* prints selections from his antiquarian column in *The Athenaeum*, and contributions by Coleridge. The books bulge with a jumble of old wives’ tales, excerpts from the “Bibliotheca Fanatica,” and other learned and curious lore. On the opened pages (1: 204-5), for example, the reader discovers information on bookbinding, ornithology, and religious toleration. This copy, a first edition bound in full contemporary polished calf, has on the flyleaf the notation, “J.D. Coleridge Eton College, 1838—In exchange for a copy given to Dr. Deane.”


Despite the exotic themes he chose for his long narrative poems, Southey desired to write an “English epic” on a “Welsh or English
story" that would make him feel "like a cock on his own dunghill." One national subject he pondered and collaborated on with his wife treated of the merry outlawry of Robin Hood. This first edition, published posthumously, carries on the half title the inscription "From Mrs. Southey."

Peal 12,223.


The tenth volume (1838) is opened to Southey's A Vision of Judgement (1821), describing the reception of King George III into heaven. Bound in full gray calf with lavish gilt decoration and marbled edges.

Peal 6,580-6,589.

65. ROBERT SOUTHEY. A.L.s. to William Westall, 8 December 1820.

A painter and illustrator, Westall (1781-1850) published a series of Views of English and foreign landscapes, including The Lakes of Cumberland (1820) and The Lake and Vale of Keswick (1835). Southey does not doubt that Westall's drawings "have in them that which is common to poetry & painting." When he wants "letter-press" for a new collection of views, Southey will do "the best" he can, provided Westall "cannot persuade Wordsworth to write it, (who would be in all respects the best person)." Coleridge's son Derwent is at Cambridge, and everyone is "much obliged" to Westall for his "offer of an introduction which will certainly be very creditable to him, & may easily be useful also." Southey then devotes several lines to effecting a reconciliation between Westall and the architect John Nash (1752-1835), designer of London's Regent's Park, Regent Street, and Buckingham Palace, and the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. According to Southey, "there is not a kinder-hearted creature in the world," and he has "the truest regard" for Westall and for his "genius." Any offense Nash may have given was "entirely unintentional." Southey urges Westall to "forget it" and to "call upon him again." Both will feel better for
Southey writes that he has forwarded his addressee's "credentials" to New Lanark, Scotland, and hopes his friend will "find Mr. Owen there." In 1800 Robert Owen (1771-1858), the "Father of English Socialism," started at New Lanark a model industrial community, providing clean factory conditions, housing, education, and recreation for his employees and their families. His socialistic community at New Harmony, Indiana, however, proved a failure. Southey feels that New Lanark, "tho singular in its kind, has very little to do" with Owen's "system," and "in his system he forgets to provide the absolute Owen who is to regulate by his will & wisdom the Utopia of quadrangles." Nevertheless, Southey allows that Owen's "views" contain "a great deal that is practicable, & which will make its way into practise."

On the occasion of the death of his daughter Isabel, whom he terms "the pride" of his eyes and "the joy" of his heart, Southey writes to Edith May, Bertha, and Katherine, rather than speaks to them, because he can "better bear to do it, & because what is written will remain & may serve hereafter for consolation & admonishment—of which the happiest and best of us stand but too often in need." In his lengthy "paternal exhortations," he reminds his daughters that "this is but the first trial of many such which are in store" for them. "Who may be summoned next, is known only to the Allwise Disposer of all things." However, they "must all depart" when their time comes, "all to be reunited in a better state of existence," when they shall "part no more." Their "business here" is to "fit" themselves for that state by "correcting the faults" to which they are "prone," such as "impatience, peevishness, ill humour, anger & resentment." Instead, "a meek, submissive, obliging disposition is worth all other qualities." Southey intends to make a copy of this letter with his own hand for each of his daughters. He
knows "there will come a time" when they "may think of it with a solemn rather than melancholy pleasure, & feel grateful for this proof of love." He offers the letter with his "blessing" and signs himself their "afflicted & affectionate father."

Peal 11,721r.

68. ROBERT SOUTHEY. A.L.s. to unnamed correspondent, 20 January 1827.

Addressing a publisher, possibly John Murray, Southey expresses the hope of writing a paper for him "on a very curious subject—the ancient history of Ireland." Southey has had this "intention" for ten years, ever since he obtained the first volume of *Rerum Hibernicarum Scriptores*; he has just received the final books in the set. He also asks that his correspondent vote for the admission of "an old friend," John Kenyon, to the Athenaeum. Southey describes him as "one of the pleasantest and worthiest of men." Kenyon (1783-1856), the author of "Rhymed Plea for Tolerance" (1833) and *Poems* (1838), and the cousin of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, is perhaps best remembered for his munificent bequests to fellow poets, including the Brownings, Barry Cornwall, and Dr. Henry Southey.

Peal 11,720.

69. ROBERT SOUTHEY. A.L.s. to Mary Matilda Betham, [3 June 1809?].

Within a few days of burying his daughter Emma (who died on 21 May), Southey wrote to Miss Betham (1776-1852), an intimate of the Lambs and a painter of miniatures, whose sitters included the Southeys, the Coleridges, and George Dyer. Southey's wife Edith "has happily an infant at the breast,—a better comforter" than he would be; "still it will be long before she recovers from the stroke, which was as unexpected as it is severe." Nevertheless, the family anticipates Miss Betham's arrival at Keswick, and Southey offers directions and travel advice. He also entreats her to read Wordsworth's new pamphlet "upon the affairs of Spain," *On the Convention of Cintra*, in which he deprecates the lack of vigor shown by English policy in the Peninsular War against Napoleon. (Southey
wrote a three-volume History of the Peninsular War, 1823-1832.) Solden asserts that “only” Edmund Burke “equals it in eloquence, & he only by fits & flashes,—but there shines thro this the light of truth & of nature & of God,—a light of which nothing more than the dim & discoloured reflection ever shone upon Burke.” The letter’s signature has been cut away.

Peal 13,781.

70. ROBERT SOUTHEY. A.L.s. to Charles Watkin Williams Wynn, n.d.

Southey thanks his long-time friend and benefactor for a book catalog. Among the many titles that set him “longing,” he notes “only five” that he “ought to possess”: Linschoten’s Voyage in the original Dutch, Busnot’s Reign of Muley Ismael, Herbert’s Persian Monarchy, Hottinger’s Historia Orientalis, and Whitefield’s Account of Processions Seen at Lisbon. He would be “very glad” if Wynn could “procure” them. Southey is presently learning “the sweet language” of Dutch.

Peal 11,721p.

71. ROBERT SOUTHEY. A.L.s. to Henry Taylor, 2 February 1832.

To Taylor (1800-1886), the author of several verse dramas, Southey writes at length about certain volumes that contain all his “political papers, which could not with more fitness be arranged under some other head,—up to the rate of the last,” a piece on Dymond the Quaker. (Essays, Moral and Political, in two volumes, appeared in 1832.) His “wish and intention is that if these volumes sell,” they should be followed by his other papers “under the different heads of Historical, Ecclesiastical, Biographical, Critical & Miscellaneous,—in several divisions, but forming altogether,” according to his estimate, “ten more volumes.” He began with “the political stuff because it’s of the least personal interest.” Southey also thanks Taylor for “the extract from Lord Byron’s letters.” He holds that Byron knew “little” of Southey’s “temper” when he “thought to annoy” him “by abuse and when he dreamt of challenging” Southey.

Peal 10,998.
72. ROBERT SOUTHEY. Portion of A.L.s. to John J. Morgan, [6 April 1812?].

Southey tells his former schoolmate that he will "not be in town till the close of the year." If Coleridge has arrived at the Morgan household, Southey asks that he be urged "to write soon." The Morgans also counted the Lambs as friends.

Peal 13,087.

73. ROBERT SOUTHEY. A.N.s. to William Wordsworth, 30 October 18--.

With this note Southey introduces Captain William Bruce, "a kinsman to Bruce the traveller." The captain has himself "travelled widely, & led a life about as adventurous," including residence in the East for some thirty-five years. Southey knows that Wordsworth will find him "a most interesting person." James Bruce (1730-1794) wrote a narrative of his Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile (he found that of the Blue Nile), which Southey critiqued in the Annual Review.

Peal 11,721q.

74. ROBERT SOUTHEY. A.L.s. to Allan Cunningham, 31 August 1828.

This friendly letter, directed to the author of traditional English and Scottish tales, begins "My dear Allan." Southey has an "Epistle" for Cunningham "that goes out in a more incorrect state than any thing" that he has "committed to the press for the last five and twenty years." It will, however, "answer" his friend's "purpose." In The Anniversary; or, Poetry and Prose for MDCCCXXIX, edited by Cunningham, appeared the verse "Epistle from Robert Southey, Esq., to Allan Cunningham." The volume also contained Southey's "Three Inscriptions for the Caledonian Canal" and Caroline Bowles's poem "The Churchyard."

Peal 7,808b.

75. ROBERT SOUTHEY. Holograph of "Ode to Beauty."
Four pages, undated and unsigned, from an autograph manuscript of Southey’s "Ode to Beauty." The draft, with numerous changes and corrections, opens,

Fairest Offspring of the Sky
Descend propitious to my ravish'd Eye!
While from the vermil-tinctur'd East
The dancing Hours in gorgeous Purple drest
Lead with Joy the youthful Spring.
Indulgent Zephyr waves her fragrant wing;
The Vales with dawning Verdure shine,
And pour their blended Sweets around Thy Shrine.

Peal 7,808c.

76. ROBERT SOUTHEY. A.L.s. to unnamed correspondent, 10 July 1829.

Southey apologizes "once more" for "the oversight" that he committed "in haste" the day before. He also repeats his request that his addressee and Mrs. Smith come for a visit that evening. They will "drink tea as soon after six" as the guests "may please to come." They will also find "some of that rare mountain dew," that is, Scotch whiskey, "which is worthy to set before Burns himself, if he were alive."

Peal 11,003b.

77. ROBERT SOUTHEY. A.L.s. to Edward Moxon, 9 May 1831.

After service with Messrs. Longman, Moxon (1801-1858) set up as a publisher in 1830, his first work being Album Verses by Charles Lamb, whose son-in-law he became in 1833. He published illustrated editions of Southey, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and other popular authors. Southey tweaks Moxon for his timidity about taking risks, telling him that he could in fact save "by paying ready money, both for the paper & printing." Southey also thanks him for copies of books by Walter Savage Landor and Julius Charles Hare, and promises to communicate Moxon's message "by the first opportunity to Mr. Wordsworth."

Peal 11,721k.
78. ROBERT SOUTHEY. A.L.s. to Edward Moxon, 12 May 1838.

While grateful to Moxon for a copy of the literary and artistic review The Athenaeum, Southey comments that he was “more surprised than pleased” at seeing one of his letters reprinted in its pages. He knows that Moxon will be “glad to hear” that his health is “materially improved” and that he shall “climb the mountains again.”

Peal 11,003c.

79. ROBERT SOUTHEY. A.L.s. to Mrs. Thomas Clarkson, 4 May 1836.

Southey’s correspondent was the wife of a leading abolitionist and a friend of Wordsworth. Mrs. Clarkson was intimate with Wordsworth’s sister Dorothy and with his sister-in-law, Sara Hutchinson, Coleridge’s great love. Southey informs her that his connection with the Quarterly Review “has long been broken off,” and that his “influence” at the periodical “never extended farther” than the bounds of his own articles. If she wants John Gibson Lockhart, its current editor, to receive a particular book, she should send it in the “ordinary” way, “simply from the author:—thru the publisher.” In other news, his daughters, “thank God, bear up well,” but at Rydal Mount, Wordsworth’s home, “the case ... is in some respects more distressing.” Wordsworth’s favorite daughter Dora, suffering from an inflammation of the spine, “is less able to go into her park,” a garden outside the house. The “loss” of Sara Hutchinson in June 1835 “was the severest that could have befallen” the Wordsworths and the Southeys. “There is no one left” who knew them all “so thoroughly,” and whom they all “loved so well.—But then separations are but for a while.” The condition of Southey’s wife Edith, insane since 1834, keeps him “fixed” at Keswick, his “proper station for this time.” He closes with the philosophical observation that “time passes rapidly while every minute is employed.—What a comfort it is to know that Death will restore to us all what Time has taken away!”

Peal 12,170.