

## Robert Southey (1774-1843)

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Robert Southey was born in Bristol, a city in the west of England, in 1774. That makes him slightly younger than Wordsworth and Coleridge, his most famous contemporaries. He later became a friend of both Wordsworth and Coleridge, and these three poets were referred to together as the 'Lake School', as they all lived in the Lake District for at least part of their lives.

To really understand Southey we need to keep in mind Lord Byron's description of him as 'the only existing entire man of letters'. By 'entire man of letters', Byron meant that Southey was not just a poet, but that he successfully attempted many kinds of writing. Southey did write a lot of poetry, but he also wrote a very interesting novel, several historical books, several biographies, and books about Spain, Portugal, and England. In addition to this, he wrote many book reviews, and did a lot of editing work. He was, in short, a very busy man, and he wrote more, and more variously, than any of his contemporaries.

But poetry was Southey's first love, and as a young man he devoted most of his energy to poetry. In the 1790s he became famous as the leading radical poet of the time. By 'radical', I mean that he was very critical of the British government and of the war they were pursuing against France. His first major poem was *Joan of Arc*, an epic poem in ten books which he began writing in 1793, and published in 1796. The poem is about an earlier war between Britain and France, and it takes the French side, and is extremely critical of the British. The British are constantly referred to as 'tyrants'. Publishing the poem was a very provocative thing to do — it's like a Japanese poet writing a poem supporting the Americans during the Second World War. In the late 1790s Southey wrote many more poems expressing radical opinions, but around 1800 his political ideas began to change, and he slowly became much more conservative and patriotic. Because of this change of views Southey was attacked and laughed at by many younger writers.

Southey's poetic imagination is very interesting. He was a very domestic, family-loving man, and many of his poems celebrate the pleasures of home: of eating, sitting by the fire, playing with children, and so on. But he was also fascinated by strange, old, often rather frightening stories, and he liked to turn these into poems, often responding to them with great imaginative energy. In 'God's Judgement on a Bishop' of 1799, for example, he tells an old story about how a German bishop in the year 914 had a lot of poor people burnt to death during a period of food shortage. The Bishop said that the poor people were like rats who ate too much. According to the story, God then punished the Bishop by sending an army of rats to eat him. Southey's poem ends with the rats breaking into the Bishop's house:

And in at the windows and in at the door,  
And through the walls by thousands they pour,  
And down from the ceiling and up thro' the floor,  
From the right and the left, from behind and before,  
From within and without, from above and below  
And all at once to the Bishop they go.

They have whetted their teeth against the stones,  
And now they pick the Bishop's bones;  
They gnawed the flesh from every limb,  
For they were sent to do judgment on him!

Finally, Southey had a real fascination with the exotic: with distant countries and places. Of his long poems, for example, *Thalaba the Destroyer* is set in Saudi Arabia, *Madoc* is set in Mexico, and *The Curse of Kehama* is set in India. Southey is in fact the most international British poet of his generation.

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