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ROBERT SOUTHEY AND BRISTOL

by BASIL COTTLE
Robert Southey was born in this parish on 12 August 1774, over his father's draper's shop at No. 9 Wine St, and was baptized in the predecessor of this church, in the 17th-century font from St. Ewen's. His father came from a prosperous Wellington family, his mother Margaret Hill from substantial people in Bedminster. At 2, he was absurdly whisked away to live with his mother's half-sister Elizabeth Tyler, in Bath; she had some money and looks, but was an overbearing snob. He had to share her bed, and not stir till she rose at 9, 10, or even 11. He endured silence, loneliness, and obsessive cleanliness, but it was good discipline for life, and at least they often went to the theatre. He was home off and on, and loved going to his grandparents at Bedminster, where he could get dirty in the garden — the house was Georgian of 1740, with dairy and stables and laundry, an orchard and a vine. The smell of syringa or sweet pea or evening primrose always brought back Bedminster to him.

At 3, he went to a nasty dame's school kept by Ma'am Powell, who had no eyelashes. At 6, in a green suit, he was home again and sent to a nasty brutish school on St. Michael's Hill kept by an old Baptist minister called Foot. Thence to a school at Manor Farm, Corston, where the Flower family ran an utterly inefficient but not unhappy set-up; their son did most of the teaching, and was called Charley, but the food was awful, Mrs. Flower drank, and the Bristol children were withdrawn when 'the itch' broke out. Visiting it years later, and finding it closed, he wrote 'Silent and sad the scene; I heard no more/Mirth's honest cry, and childhood's cheerful roar'. Then a year in a school at 'The Fort' on St. Michael's Hill, kept happily but not very culturally by a Welshman called William Williams. Then 4 hours a day at a crammer in Redcliffe Parade kept by a man called Lewis who had left Bristol Grammar School, and who taught Southey that 'it was not more difficult to write in prose than in verse'. Southey still had to spend his holidays with Aunt Tyler, and when she moved
to Terril St, Bristol, he had to live with her permanently; then his 
Uncle Herbert Hill, chaplain at Oporto, volunteered to put him 
through Westminster and Oxford. He would be getting the best 
possible education.

The mature Southey was a conformist of great rectitude; the 
young Southey sounds like a graceless dropout. Enabled by a 
generous uncle to attend Westminster School, one of the Big 8, 
he got himself expelled for writing an article against flogging, in 
the school magazine. Admitted, despite this, to Balliol College, 
Oxford, he left after a couple of years without taking a degree.

He adopted vague revolutionary ideas — which are almost as 
harmful as precise ones — and was a declared French-
Revolutionary Jacobin at a time when France was the national 
enemy. His religious beliefs were equally vague; he toyed for a 
time with Unitarianism, but gives the impression of an agnostic, 
to whom — say — the reading of the Bible meant nothing.

So it might seem strange than in 1794 he gravitated to Bristol. 
The city was mercantile, prosperous, with a strong middle class, 
actively religious, and patriotic; the rumour had even been 
spread that it was philistine, since it had allowed young 
Chatterton and the poet Richard Savage to starve. But there was 
another side to its political and cultural life: there had been a 
body of support for the American colonists, and now there were 
 opposes of slavery — not just in the colonies, but in English 
factories and London milliners; the city had a great group of 
schools, and the oldest public library, and of course a famous 
theatre, and a decent newspaper, Felix Farley's Journal; Hannah 
More's successful play, Percy, had contained pacifist sentiments 
which even criticized the Crusades; the city's pulpits, of all 
denominations, were vocal and influential; and the religious life 
of the city was by no means all 'establishment' — Quakers, 
Unitarians and Methodists were wielding great importance. And 
over on the opposite corner from here, in a shop now devoted to 
photography, was a generous and enlightened young bookseller 
and publisher named Joseph Cottle.

Thus there assembled at Bristol in 1794 a group of young 
unemployed intellectuals fired by quaint revolutionary dreams. 
Two of them, Robert Southey and George Burnett, the son of a 
farmer from Huntspill in Somerset, had met at Balliol. The third, 
whom Southey had met at Bath, was a little older — Robert 
Lovell, the son of a rich Quaker; he had inherited no liking for 
commerce, and his marriage with the beautiful Mary Fricker of 
Redcliffe Hill, who had been on the stage, estranged him from 
his family. Yet, despite her calling, Mary was a respectable and 
talented girl, even though her father had unsuccessfully 
manufactured sugar-boiling pans; her sisters Sara and Edith were 
soon the wives of Coleridge and Southey — the one disastrously, 
the other blissfully — and another sister, Martha, was intended 
for Burnett.

Their father, Stephen Fricker, had (according to Southey's 
son) manufactured his sugarpans at Westbury. The American 
Revolution ruined this trade, he became an innkeeper and potter 
in Bristol, the manager of a coalwharf in Bath, and a bankrupt in 
1786, when he died. His widow and 6 children were left penniless, 
though he had been an honest and responsible man. She 
moved to Bristol and opened a school, assisted by Martha and 
Elizabeth. Mary, when nearly 90, was still keeping up her Latin 
and French by reading Horace and Madame de Staël; Sara 

wrote verses, and taught her daughter Italian; Edith Southey 
sounds the dull one, not involved in her husband's literary 
activity; but all were handsome and wellbred.

The revolution was to be taken out of the country; there is 
little doubt that PANTISOCRACY began in Southey's restless 
scheme of emigrating, and that the name and shape were given 
by Coleridge. These two had first met at Oxford on 11 June 1794, 
and Burnett says that the plan was sketched out in rooms at 
Worcester College. The party to emigrate would consist of 
Southey, Coleridge, Burnett, Lovell, two other men unconnected 
with Bristol, and wives existing or hypothetical; and Bristol was 
obviously the place to recruit wives. Later, the young men were to 
be limited to 12 only, then they gained a Bristol apothecary 
called Heath, then the number was 20, and by mid-October it had 
risen to 27, still predominantly Bristolian.

Now we know so much about Pantisocracy because Joseph 
Cottle tells us about it in his published memoirs. The lads came 
to his shop, used his books, wrote poems which he published and 
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Lovell who, towards the end of 1794, whispered to him the far 
music of the Susquehannah. I believe they had decided to settle 
by this American river because it sounded nice: there they would 
practise an unselfish economy, free from corruption, and 
applying sound principles 'in an unrestrained manner'; they 
would exclude 'all the little deteriorating passions'. Cottle was 
invited to join the party, but he was too aware of what he calls 
'the old and intractable leaven in human nature', and anyway he 
was too lame for such an adventure. They were going to take out
ploughs and so forth; money? — well, said Lovell pretty tactlessly, ‘We all contribute what we can, and I shall introduce all my dear friends to you, immediately on their arrival in Bristol’. 

On 17 October, Aunt Tyler threw Southey out of her house in College Green, and he tramped through a gale of rain to his mother’s boarding house in Bath. By January 1795 he had brought a greater genius, Coleridge, to Bristol, and himself settled there again in February, joining Coleridge and Burnett at their digs in College St. When Cottle met Southey he was struck by what we would now call his ‘personality’: the bland, bright-eyed face (he looked rather like the filmstar Victor Mature), the elegant and positive manner that made Wordsworth call him a ‘coxcomb’. Coleridge stood next in his regard, and Wordsworth (when he arrived later in 1795) third: an order which posterity would precisely reverse.

Of course, the more Cottle introduced them to admiring friends, and the more they got their feet under local tables, the further off lay the consummation of Pantisocracy. And little things began to grate on their feelings: Southey, for instance, was all for taking his servant Matthew; Coleridge was shocked — servant? ‘Matthew is my brother!’ They estimated that they would have to work for two hours a day, the rest being available for reading, writing, and talking; but Coleridge was already showing himself better at talking than writing, and a slow onset of good sense kept the party on the banks of the Avon rather than the Susquehannah. The epochmaking digs in College St were scandalously demolished in 1955; but already they weren’t all ‘pooling’ there, and the spectre of the ship receded for ever. Cottle’s guineas were enabling the group to practise as poets; though as I have said, only Southey brought him a return. And the first big publication was the handsome quarto Joan of Arc, for which Cottle gave him 50 guineas, 50 free copies, and at the same time 30 guineas for some short poems. A new font of type was ordered, intended for the handsomest book yet produced in Bristol, and Southey’s misgivings over his epic were soon assuaged by ‘fine wove paper and hot-pressing’; the young poet and his inexperienced young patron had begun their long partnership with a fine regard for standards.

Now let it be said at once that Southey’s big poems — epic in length but not in spirit — are now unreadable; they have a façade, but within there is nothing to energize them. They have huge subjects, and were claimed to be in ‘the Mohammedan taste’ or ‘the Celtic taste’ or ‘the Hindu taste’, Southey still being pretty easy in theological matters; they rhyme and scan correctly, because he was a natural who could spin empty verse endlessly, and heaps of things happen, including violence and cruelty and incredible fortitude — but it’s all just compiled, not created. He jumped on the Romantic bandwagon at the side of Wordsworth and Coleridge, but has no business there; he is a ‘Lake Poet’ simply because he went to live at Keswick. And yet, if only he had stuck to his modest but real talent! — he was observant, whimsical, tuneful, humane, widely-read though perhaps not deeply, and his short poems show the excellence of which he was capable, the systematic prose qualities which made him a steady and standard prose writer once the epic dreams were fading.

In school, some of you must have read and even enjoyed The Inchcape Rock, where the wicked Ralph the Rover moved the good Abbot’s warningbell off the reef and then ran into the thing himself: ‘The vessel strikes with a shivering shock./ Oh, horrors! It is the Inchcape Rock!’ — good ballad stuff, tough but reticent. And in your even younger days, you had cause to be grateful to him for having invented the story of the 3 Bears. But one of his two best poems I want to read aloud now, because it shows perhaps the best qualities of the young spirit which he possessed in this early Bristol period: it is called After Blenheim, and I expect I shall be introducing it to some of you, and recalling it to others. It is a pacifist poem (not a popular line in the middle of the Napoleonic War), but though it preaches it does so in a wry and gentle way, with a studied homelessness and the anger tempered with real humour; and it was written at Westbury-on-Trym:

It was a summer evening,
Old Kaspar’s work was done,
And he before his cottage door
Was sitting in the sun;
And by him sported on the green
His little grandchild Wilhelmine.

She saw her brother Peterkin
Roll something large and round
Which he beside the rivulet
In playing there had found:
He came to ask what he had found
That was so large and smooth and round.
Old Kaspar took it from the boy
Who stood expectant by;
And then the old man shook his head
And with a natural sigh
"'Tis some poor fellow's skull", said he,
"Who fell in the great victory.

I find them in the garden,
For there's many here about;
And often when I go to plough
The ploughshare turns them out.
For many thousand men", said he,
"Were slain in that great victory.

"Now tell us what 'twas all about",
Young Peterkin he cries;
And little Wilhelmine looks up
With wonder-waiting eyes;
"Now tell us all about the war,
And what they fought each other for"

"It was the English", Kaspar said,
"Who put the French to rout;
But what they fought each other for
I could not well make out.
But everybody said", quoth he,
"That 'twas a famous victory.

My father lived at Blenheim then,
Yon little stream hard by;
They burnt his dwelling to the ground,
And he was forced to fly:
So with his wife and child he fled,
Nor had he where to rest his head.

With fire and sword the country round
Was wasted far and wide,
And many a chiding mother then
And new-born baby died:
But things like that, you know, must be
At every famous victory.

They say it was a shocking sight
After the field was won:
For many thousand bodies here
Lay rotting in the sun:

But things like that, you know, must be
After a famous victory.

Great praise the Duke of Marlbro' won
And our good Prince Eugene":
"Why, 'twas a very wicked thing!"
Said little Wilhelmine;
"Nay... nay... my little girl", quoth he,
"It was a famous victory.

And everybody praised the Duke
Who this great fight did win".
"But what good came of it at last?"
Quoth little Peterkin:-
"Why, that I cannot tell", said he,
"But 'twas a famous victory".

And may young men and women always keep their ideals and
enthusiasms and impetus! — which is exactly what did not
happen to Robert Southey.

In those early, unclouded days Cottle helped Southey and
Coleridge in three ways of which he leaves us interesting record:
by introductions to people of influence or interest, by organizing
lecture courses for them, and by taking them on a memorable
trip to Tintern. The lecture courses were intended to raise money
for the expedition; Cottle sold tickets at his shop, and — though
his own writings show no political feelings — he was courageous
in standing by the two in their anti-Pitt, anti-slavery, pro-French
campaign. Possibly the lectures did not all have the same status;
they were given variously at the important Cornmarket in Wine
St, at the Assembly Coffee-House on the Quay, and at a room in
Castle Green, mostly at 8 in the evening. Cottle gives little space
to the content of Southey's course of 12 historical lectures, but
crams his account with flattering reports of the huge and discrim­
inating audience, and the self-possession, delivery, and reasoning
of the young lecturer. But now the brotherhood began to break
up: Coleridge and Lovell were ignoring each other, and
Coleridge called Lovell a villain for opposing his marriage 'Yith
Sara Fricker. Cottle patched up the quarrel, and in a few days
they were 'as sociable' as ever, but suddenly a rift between the
two leaders made mute for ever the tempting murmur of the
Susquehannah. It happened like this: the 4th lecture in Southey's
course was to be on the 'Rise, Progress and Decline of the
Roman Empire', and would be given on Tuesday 3 March;
Coleridge particularly asked to be allowed to give it, since he had
studied the subject, and Southey agreed. The room was crowded,
and they waited over half an hour for the speaker, who, at
Cottle’s guess, was probably smoking his pipe at 48 College St,
the whole engagement having slipped his memory.

For the next two days, Cottle had arranged an excursion to the
River Wye, whence they would return in time for Southey’s next
lecture on Friday the 6th; he had invited the two poets and their
Fricker fiancées, and the morning of the 4th proved fine, with
even Coleridge punctual. They were aiming especially for
Piercefield Park, with its woods and cliffs, and Tintern Abbey,
which none of the party had seen; all five were excited at the rich
prospect in buildings and scenery, and they set off cheerfully for
the Old Passage at Aust, crossed by the ferry to Beachley, and so
reached Chepstow — all on foot except the lame Cottle, who had
a horse. First they visited the great castle, and then arrived at the
Beaufort Arms in time for a good lunch, which sounds a jolly
affair, with references to Homer. So far, so Pantisocratic, but
after lunch Southey, ‘whose regular habits scarcely rendered it a
virtue in him, never to fail in an engagement’, improved the
satisfied minutes of relaxation by regretting aloud that
audience had been let down. Coleridge said he thought it hardly
mattered; Southey remonstrated, and got his answer. Cottle tried
to conciliate, but in vain; the two sworn brothers — nay,
potential brothers-in-law — showed their fundamental lack of
concord and unselfishness, and fell to quarrelling. Such, he says,
was ‘the rope of sand to which they had confided their destinies’.
He left them to it, and went to the other end of the room,
amazed and grieved; but the argument only extended its range,
since the young Frickers sided with their beaux; it’s a wonder they
didn’t all get thrown out, but a general exhaustion ensued, and
Cottle made them all shake hands, and off they set for the Wynd
Cliff. After which, they managed to get lost; they kept coming to
forks in the path, and eventually plunged down a lane, a tunnel
of trees; the young moon couldn’t penetrate it, and everything
went black. They ‘floundered over stones, embedded, as they
appeared, in their everlasting sockets from the days of Noah’;
Cottle, fearful for his limbs, dismounted, and Coleridge the ex-
dragon mounted and led the way, Cottle helplessly tottering
behind without even a stick. They began to sympathize with the
Babes in the Wood. The path was so horrible that Southey
suggested the charitable title ‘Bowling-green Lane’. But
Coleridge carried out a recce, and since one path ended at a
quarry and another in a tangle of thorns, they took the third and
reached Tintern rejoicing.

They had to put up at a homely inn called the Tobacco Pipe,
and after supper they became sightseers again, visiting the Abbey
by torchlight and with a crescent moon to assist. It filled them
with all the delectable Gothic horrors then fashionable, the ivy
and the disturbed jackdaws coming in for particular praise. Even
when they returned to the inn, Cottle had not supped deep
enough of the wildly picturesque, and told them that there was
nearby a big iron foundry, best seen at night. Coleridge wouldn’t
budge again, being sufficiently exercised, and content by the inn
fire; the ladies were replete, too, but Southey and Cottle set out
at midnight and found the sight sublime, though they had to skirt
an ugly millpond in the gloom. They all got back to Bristol on the
5th, giving plenty of time for Southey to prepare his lecture on
the Roman Empire to make up for the one that Coleridge had
missed. Thus Cottle started the Tintern cult; and he was linked
with that most fruitful of all visits to Tintern, that of William
Wordsworth.

Southey had become a member of the Bristol Library in King
St, and borrowed between 22 October 1793 and 12 November
1795, reading voraciously the stuff of his epics and histories. But
his time in Bristol was coming to an end; soon an annuity from
his generous friend Wynn would start to be paid, and the inter-
vening time could be profitably wasted assisting his uncle, the
chaplain in Portugal. There was even a chance that he might take
orders, which seems to me disgraceful in view of his spiritual
state at the time. By August 1795 he had met Wordsworth at
what is now the ‘Georgian House’ in Great George St; they never
really ‘got on’, though there was some reciprocal admiration for
the more obvious qualities. Cottle also took him to see Hannah
More down at Cowslip Green; the 5 Misses More were all
charmed by his conversation and his manners — he was so ‘brim
full of literature’. But the final scene in Bristol was his marriage,
which had to be concealed from his family — especially the
generous uncle. Southey was by now officially living at Bath, but
was merely weekending there and spending the other 5 days at
Cottle’s so as to be near his Edith. When it became clear that he
had abandoned Pantisocracy for Portugal, Coleridge ‘cut’ him
dead in the street and finally blotted out the old friendship in a
5,000-word letter of considerable hysteria: from it we gather that
there had been other incidents besides that postprandial brawl at
Chepstow — including a disastrous strawberry party at Long
Ashton. But while it is right for us to commend youthful ideals and visions, and to regret their passing, it is also reasonable to point out that maturity may properly bring conformity and convention and a settled abode; and in Southey’s case his final settlement at Keswick, and his hard work with head and pen, enabled him to support not only his own family, but the deserted wife and children of Coleridge, and the widowed Mrs. Lovell. Stodgy he may have been, but he was splendidly industrious and generous; and I should add that conformity soon came, too, to those ardent young men Coleridge and Wordsworth — Coleridge at the end of his days was elaborately defending the Church of England, and Wordsworth, who in 1803 saw a newborn baby as ‘trailing clouds of glory’, was by 1821 describing an unbaptized child as ‘a growth from sinful Nature’s bed of weeds’. Whereas all the Fricker girls started and ended with ‘inanimate’ minds.

The wedding was a very funny one. On the morning of Saturday 14 November 1795 Southey and Edith Fricker were quietly married at St Mary Redcliffe, with Cottle and his sister Sarah as witnesses. Cottle paid for the ring and the marriage fees. The couple parted at the churchdoor; she went home for the night, he ‘slept as usual at Cottle’s’, and their parting was on the 15th, though it wasn’t until the 19th that he made for Falmouth and Portugal. Edith, with the wedding-ring suspended round her neck, and still calling herself Fricker, came to live with Cottle and his sisters as a parlour boarder; this can’t have been much fun — Coleridge had a phrase ‘as dull as the Miss Cottles’, and Southey said they had nice manners and made ‘even bigotry amiable’. The elder one used to urge him to read good books, because he speculated ‘beyond reason’ and attended no place of worship. Cottle’s parting gift to Southey was a stout holly walkingstick, which saved him from a would-be footpad in Spain and survived the trip.

This expansion in his horizons was of great benefit to him, but he longed for Britain and Bristol, or so his letters say. By 15 May 1796 he was back at Portsmouth, made straight for Bristol, collected Edith, and settled with her in lodgings, though his address was ‘care of’ Cottle. Now he had to think of a career in Law, but before that started he engaged with Cottle in a humanitarian job that is a credit to both of them: to edit all Chatterton’s works, the proceeds to go to his invalid sister and her daughter. It took a long time, but by 1802 Cottle had finally given her £504-7s; her daughter, who had known hitherto only poverty and distress, left £800.

1 Christ Church, City, Bristol: the office-block on the right covers the site of the poet’s birthplace.
Photograph by Dennis Cutter
2 Christ Church, City, Bristol: the St Ewen’s font, in which Southey was baptized.
*Photograph by Dennis Cutter*

3 Robert Southey: portrait by James Sharples in the Vestry of Christ Church, City, Bristol.
*Photograph by Dennis Cutter*
There was a partial reconciliation with Coleridge after some ugly feuding. The Fricker sisters must have been weary of their divided loyalties, and after Southey had sent a little note, and Coleridge an encouraging reply, they met amid mutual embraces, had a nice country walk together, and called on Cottle arm in arm; he wasn’t altogether fooled — ‘this sprightly scene was a preconcerted arrangement to heighten the stage-effect’! And early in 1797 Southey departed to study Law in London; even now, however, he continued to write saleable books for Cottle — his 220-page duodecimo *Poems*, sold out at once in its edition of one thousand five hundred; his *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Spain and Portugal*, out of print by November; and his preface on Northern themes added to the translation of the Icelandic *Edda* by Cottle’s brother Amos, a pioneer work and the first version of Icelandic verse in English verse. But his time at Gray’s Inn came to nothing, and by 14 June he was at Burton near Christchurch in Hampshire — Southampton had made him miserable, and he had longed for Bristol again, ‘the printer on .. . one side, Charles Danvers on the other, Cottle in front, the woods and rocks of Avon behind’. He also wrote a strangely intense letter to Cottle’s sister Mary, in which he says he wants to sit with her again at her fireside; his visions of heavenly joy always conjure up ‘A little dwelling, whose white lim’d walls/ Look comfort, and I think that it is yours’.

In the midst of his vain wanderings and abortive schemes, he wrote on 7 March 1798 to his brother Henry Herbert: ‘To live always in lodgings is very expensive and very uncomfortable; I want to feel at home, and to have a house for my friends’. We know now that the reason it was hard to find a house was that his mother was giving up her place in Bath, so she and her niece Margaret (Peggy Hill) had to be rehoused as well. On 15 June he wrote to John May from Bath, ‘We are broiling in this city of freestone . . . This evening we are to see a house in the neighbourhood in a very beautiful situation’ — if the neighbourhood was Bath, then this came to nothing, but by 21 June a house had been found. Writing to May again on 8 July, he says that they didn’t find anywhere until the Thursday evening preceding quarter-day (which was Midsummer Day, Sunday 24 June); and it was at Westbury-on-Trym. It was ‘a filthy, old, barn-looking house . . . in the pleasantest part of this country. There is a tolerable garden behind the house, in which excepting some half dozen rose bushes, every thing is calculated for use. The view over the garden is very beautiful, a fertile and woody vale,
bounded on each side by hills, and terminated by a range of hills two miles distant ... Ten minutes walk would convey me to one of the most beautiful glens I ever saw'.

He writes to Williams Wynn on the same day that he has been busy 'revolutionizing' the house, and in his letter to May he tells him something of the process of settling-in. He already knew how of the most beautiful glens I ever saw'.
Matthew of Westminster, which he painfully read in the chained library of Hereford Cathedral. In all such poems, he tries to be moral and didactic, but unfortunately he always grows flippant — and heavyhandedly flippant — about devils and imps and ghosts and witches and miracles and Roman Catholic superstitions, so that he falls short of sublimity or of true horror. Some of the Westbury ballads were written after he had read the Lyrical Ballads, and something of the art of Wordsworth and Coleridge may have affected poems like The Holly Tree, The Ebb-Tide, and the sonnet on Winter. In The Cross Roads, an old stonebreaker, three miles out of Bristol by the highroad, tells a young soldier that the post he’s leaning against to eat his bread-and-cheese lunch is the stake through the heart of a girl who hanged herself when a rich man betrayed her; Southey says the incident is true — it happened forty years ago, and a man who had been at the funeral told him all the facts. This poem could be by Wordsworth, and is moving; but too many of Southey’s yarns are derived, bookish, unfelt, thrown off as potboilers. Yet it must be emphasized in his defence that in these ballads he rediscovered — every bit as much as Coleridge did in Christabel — the old forgotten principle of equivalent substitution of two unstressed syllables for one.

By 4 February 1799 they were ‘knee deep in snow — but ours is clean snow’; but by 30 March he wished ‘that these March winds were over . . . at night every sound startles me’. This letter to Wynn contains material less poetical but perennially topical: ‘That a direct tax upon Income is the best possible mode of taxation has long appeared to me probable’. The year had been interrupted by a walking tour of a month with his friend Charles Danvers, in Herefordshire, starting on 12 August 1798; and in May 1799 he set out for London to keep a law term there. Edith had been mad for two years, Southey himself would be mad in two years’ time. He brought their son Cuthbert with him, and they stayed with Cottle at Carlton Villa, North St, Bedminster. One day they set out to revisit Martin Hall; they were told that it had been demolished, and certainly, says Cuthbert, ‘my father did not recognize the house again’. The present Southey House, with Martin Lodge at its north end, is a handsome 19th-century mansion on no doubt the same site; the deeds unfortunately perished in the Blitz, so one cannot be sure whether it was there by 1836 or whether its Regency style is an archaic creation of later than Southey’s visit. Had Southey’s failing mind forgotten even the site on which his big-roomed cottage stood? — though being on the high-road it should have been conspicuous. Southey House still has capacious cellars at the south end, with the incline for the beer barrels, which could be leftovers from the alehouse; and a commodious range of privies that could well have belonged to the same establishment. But it is a mansion now, and the garden is not ‘tolerable’ and full of vegetables, but a pleasance.

But, back in 1799, the wanderings started once more: Herefordshire, South Wales, Exeter, Falmouth and Portugal again. Exeter he found ‘bigoted and quite filthy’, and Cornwall was all rain, rogues, bad inns and horses and food, no pilchards or white ale or squab pie — Humphrey Davy’s birth there was the only good thing about Cornwall. He nearly settled near Neath, instead of in the Lakes; I am reminded of the recent report of the man of 65 who retired to Neath, and when asked why replied that ‘if I go to Neath the transition between life and death will be barely perceptible’. By 1803 he had finally settled at

Soutey set out alone on 28 June and made south. What he had in mind was Burton in Hampshire, where he had stayed before; he longed for the sea there — ‘I love to pickle myself in that grand brine-tub’ — and by 11 October they were awaiting what he again calls the ‘revolutionizing’ of their new dwelling. Yet he had not left Westbury easily; 38 years later he recalled that he had ‘never, before or since, produced so much poetry in the same space of time’; and nearer his parting from it, in 1802, he wrote to Danvers, ‘Bristol is still the place to which I must cling — very often do I remember Westbury and wish that the years which are past could return’.

He came back to Westbury-on-Trym only once, and the circumstances were melancholy. It was in 1836, 37 years later; Edith had been mad for two years, Southey himself would be mad in two years’ time. He brought their son Cuthbert with him, and they stayed with Cottle at Carlton Villa, North St, Bedminster. One day they set out to revisit Martin Hall; they were told that it had been demolished, and certainly, says Cuthbert, ‘my father did not recognize the house again’. The present Southey House, with Martin Lodge at its north end, is a handsome 19th-century mansion on no doubt the same site; the deeds unfortunately perished in the Blitz, so one cannot be sure whether it was there by 1836 or whether its Regency style is an archaic creation of later than Southey’s visit. Had Southey’s failing mind forgotten even the site on which his big-roomed cottage stood? — though being on the high-road it should have been conspicuous. Southey House still has capacious cellars at the south end, with the incline for the beer barrels, which could be leftovers from the alehouse; and a commodious range of privies that could well have belonged to the same establishment. But it is a mansion now, and the garden is not ‘tolerable’ and full of vegetables, but a pleasance.
Greta Hall near Keswick, his home for the remaining forty years of his life. Here with prodigious industry he built up his reputation as an historian (especially of the Iberian Peninsula and Brazil), a biographer (especially of Nelson and Wesley), a reviewer (and a very reactionary reviewer, too, in the *Quarterly*, killing off every young Liberal in a way that would have made his old cronies wince), and unfortunately as an epic poet; the fame of all this swept him in 1813 to the highest point of his career — he became Poet Laureate. Admittedly, the credit of the Laureateship had sunk pretty low in the previous hundred years, but it had been offered to Scott before Southey accepted it, and the next two Laureates were Wordsworth and Tennyson. At Greta Hall, too, he built up his collection of 14,000 books, many of them bound by his daughters in gay pieces of their old frocks; but as the children grew up and Edith grew infirm, a silence and withdrawal and gloom fell on the house, the daughters docilely ministering to him, sharpening his pens, filling his inkbottle, putting out the books he wanted, poking the fire. His detractors said that he scribbled away both hand and head, and by 1832 he could attribute a cholera epidemic to what he considered the wicked passing of the Reform Bill. But he emerges from his endeavours as one of the great professional writers, his work as resourceful poems in English is his description for his children of conscientious as it was various; in fact, one of the most

correspondence continued until Southey was past writing even a

trend. They comment and advise on each other’s poems; Cottle urges him to regularize his religious views, and read his Bible; he urges Cottle to compile a book of Anecdotes of Bristol from his own memory and from that of his mother and other old citizens. He writes in 1808: ‘if you had not published Joan of Arc, the poem never would have existed, nor should I in all probability ever have obtained that reputation which is the capital on which I subsist, nor that power which enables me to support it. But this is not all. Do you suppose, Cottle, that I have forgotten those true and most essential acts of friendship which you showed me when I stood most in need of them? Your house was my house when I had no other; the very money with which I bought my marriage-ring, and paid my marriage fees, was supplied by you; it was with your sisters that I left my Edith, during my six months’ absence — and for the six months after my return it was from you that I received week by week the little on which we lived... Sure am I that there never was a more generous, nor a kinder heart than yours, and you will believe me when I add that there does not live that man upon earth, whom I remember with more gratitude, and more affection. My heart throbs, and my eyes burn with these recollections. Good night, my dear old friend and benefactor’.

This is very fine and moving, though Southey behind Cottle’s back often made pardonable fun of his attempts at poetry; and even his praise of Cottle may have done some real harm. For when Cottle was toying with the idea of writing his memoirs of Coleridge — to reveal the opium addiction, the neglect of his family, his borrowing and sponging and laziness and lies, Southey did nothing to stop him until it was too late: ‘A man with your feelings and principles, my dear Cottle, never does wrong’ — that is a very silly thing to say to anyone, and it is arguable that Southey must bear some responsibility for the tasteless — even deplorable — *Recollections* which Cottle brought out in 1837.

If Cottle dies, Southey can never face visiting Bristol again; and why doesn’t he write more often? Yet Southey’s various tours, like his continental holiday of 1825, did not take in Bristol, until in 1831 he came via London, Chichester, Tichfield, Southampton, Buckland, Dorchester, Exeter, Crediton, Taunton, and Clifton, where he stayed with his friend John May from 17 January, made nostalgic excursions to his father’s old shop and his grandfather Hill’s house, and dined on Friday the 21st with Cottle, ‘the simplest and kindest hearted of men’ (now 61, by the way; Southey was 57). He kept urging Cottle to write those anecdotes of Bristol, which can stand side by side with

Retreating and beating and meeting and sheeting,
Delaying and straying and playing and praying,
Advancing and prancing and glancing and dancing,
Recoiling, turmoiling, and toiling and boiling,
And gleaming and streaming and steaming and beaming,
And rushing and flushing and gushing and gushing,
And flapping and rapping and clapping and slapping,
And curling and whirling and purling and twirling,
And thumping and plumping and bumping and jumping,
And dashing and flashing and splashing and clashing,
And so never ending, but always descending,
And this way the water comes down at Lodore.
Southey's poems on Bristol library shelves, until the Corporation orders 'statues of us to be the Gog and Magog of their Guildhall'.

The rest of the story is melancholy. By 1834 Edith was mad, perhaps weighed down by the deaths of her favourite children, perhaps worried by the hand-to-mouth economy of a journalist's wife, perhaps suffering from the delayed shock of those early years of financial hardship and rootlessness. The letters to Cottle continued; he was living in a pleasant villa, now destroyed, in Bedminster, and to him Southey wrote that one day he might be able to make the journey: 'If you are not then in a better place than Bedminster' (this is his inept way of saying 'Heaven'), 'I am selfish enough to wish that you may stay there till we meet ... I would give a great deal to pass a week with you in this world'.

The promise was fulfilled from the 3rd to the 12th of November 1836; Southey and his son Cuthbert came down in the Birmingham coach to Carlton Villa. Cottle's proposed Recollections were read and discussed, Southey objecting 'alone to a few trifles' — though we know that he had many misgivings about them, and was sickened when the final draft was published. 'Old Holly' the stick was produced again, and Southey and his son went for walks on which poor Cottle could not join them. He visited the old manor-house of Bedminster, where his grandmother had lived and where he had spent so many happy hours; the new tenants let him 'renew his acquaintance with the old trees' which he had once climbed. They went to Bedminster Church on the Sunday ('the Cottles are dissenters'); the deaconess placed him in the churchwardens' pew, and he remembered its atmosphere, despite repairing and re-seating, from 55 years before. He accepted no invitations save to breakfast since he needed his evenings for work; he was well and in good spirits, but looking forward to returning home, since he wasn't sleeping well and was missing his after-dinner nap, now his soundest sleep. In the parlour, the tea-parties were presided over by sister Mary Cottle, who addressed Southey as 'Doctor' — but he begged her to call him 'Mr Southey' or 'Robert', as she had done long ago. They talked of Byron, Cowper, and the British Association; the Laureate's characteristic attitude was to lie back in his chair, keep his elbows on the arms, and stroke the insides of his eyebrows with his forefingers, his eyes shut save when he was speaking. One day, he called on the Bishop — after all, he had by now written The Book of the Church — and saw much of Landor, who was then living at Penrose Cottage, Clifton. On 12 November he left Bristol for ever.

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His last letter to Cottle, written on 16 November 1837, reported the death of Edith. By 1838 his own mind was failing, and he spent his last four years in vacancy, not opening his beloved books but sometimes patting them affectionately, as a child might — the awful sequel to his greatest poem:

My days among the Dead are past;
Around me I behold,
Where 'er these casual eyes are cast,
The mighty minds of old;
My never-failing friends are they,
With whom I converse day by day.
With them I take delight in weal,
And seek relief in woe;
And while I understand and feel
How much to them I owe,
My cheeks have often been bedew'd
With tears of thoughtful gratitude.

My thoughts are with the Dead; with them
I live in long-past years,
Their virtues love, their faults condemn,
Partake their hopes and fears,
And from their lessons seek and find
Instruction with an humble mind.

My hopes are with the dead; anon
My place with them will be,
And I with them shall travel on
Through all Futurity;
Yet leaving here a name, I trust,
That will not perish in the dust.

He died on 21 March 1843, mercifully unaware of the family quarrels occasioned by his second marriage. Cottle at once assumed that Bristol would honour her Laureate son with some tangible memorial, and when no-one inaugurated any project he determined to do so himself. His aim was a 'handsome monument' in the Cathedral.

The Dean declined to subscribe, but gave permission and proposed to waive the usual £35 fees. Cottle then wrote to the Bishop and dozens of noblemen and gentlemen, enclosing with each letter a copy of the Recollections and a manuscript copy of the letter of Southey's that declared how Southey's heart thrrobbed and eyes burned at remembering him. These vain and tactless enclosures were his authority for writing.

The Bishop sent £5, the Primate nothing. Prime Minister Peel
felt that the project was local; nor did he promise to mention it to
the Queen when he had the chance. Lord Jeffrey, who was
officially on bad terms with Southey, sent a generous £10;
Longmans the publishers, nothing; Harford of Blaise Castle, £5;
Landor, £10; Sir C.A. Elton of Clevedon Court, £5; ‘our member’
Mr. Berkeley, no notice, but ‘our other member’ Mr. Miles, £5;
Southey’s old benefactor Wynn, and a few others, made
promises; the Duke of Wellington ignored it. The biggest donation
was from the intended sculptor! — £20 from E.H. Baily, another
Bristolian. Baily submitted drawings for a bas-relief bust;
Wordsworth wanted a bronze bust set on St. Vincent’s Rocks —
but didn’t subscribe, anyway. For the bas-relief, along with
emblematic figures of Poetry and History, 500 guineas was
needed; but after various committees and meetings, and appeals
both scornful and frantic from Cottle, only £146 was raised. So in
1845 the disappointed Baily executed the heroic white bust,
merely, that still looks blandly at us in the north choir aisle of the
Cathedral.

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