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Romanticism on the Net

Robert Southey, Politics, and the Year 1817

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Abstract

This article examines Robert Southey's interactions with both politics and politicians in the year 1817. The publication of the sections of the *Collected Letters of Robert Southey* covering the period 1815-21 makes possible a much closer and more nuanced examination of how Southey responded to the controversy over the unauthorised appearance of his early radical play, *Wat Tyler*, and his subsequent condemnation in the House of Commons as a "renegado." The *Collected Letters* make clear that Southey's reaction to these events became entangled with his determination to gather support for his distinctive political programme, which he believed would save the country from revolution. However, Southey's interventions in the fraught political and cultural debates of 1817 only served to cement his reputation as a particularly reactionary conservative.

Biographical Note

Ian Packer is Reader in History at the University of Lincoln, UK. He is co-general editor of *The Collected Letters of Robert Southey: A Romantic Circles Electronic Edition*, and was co-editor of *Robert Southey, Later Poetical Works, 1811-1838*.

1. Southey was always an intensely political writer. His reputation (or notoriety) was sealed by his first major publication, the radical epic *Joan of Arc* (1796), which explicitly compared the Anglo-French conflict of the 1420s with that of the 1790s. His final epic, *Roderick, the Last of the Goths* (1814) similarly drew parallels between the Muslim invasion of Spain in 711 and the French invasion of 1808. But by the 1810s most of his output was shifting to prose, at the same time as his early radicalism was being replaced by his own, idiosyncratic, form of conservatism—a change of viewpoint that was symbolised by his appointment as Poet Laureate in 1813. However, Southey's transformation from a Jacobin poet into a pro-government social and political commentator, most famously in the *Quarterly Review*, was a drawn out and complex affair. The first complete edition of Southey's letters, the *Collected Letters of Robert Southey (CLRS)*, provides the opportunity to create a much fuller and more nuanced picture of the development of Southey's relationship with the political world. The *Collected Letters* also make clear why the year 1817 was so significant in developing Southey's reputation as a champion of conservatism and a supporter of the government, both in public and in private. Ironically, these processes were intimately entwined with the unauthorised publication of his early Jacobin play, *Wat Tyler* (1817). The resultant controversy ruined what was left of Southey's reputation amongst radicals and provided the occasion for some well-known criticism of the Poet Laureate by opposition writers, most notably Hazlitt, as well as a convoluted defence from Coleridge (*LPW* III: 441-460). But it also, after a number of twists and turns, provided Southey with new-found respect in government circles and confirmed his increasingly close alignment with conservative politics, even though his views remained far from conventionally conservative.
2. Southey's move away from radicalism was completed in the years 1811-12 (Craig 45-123; Speck 136-188). Above all, he came to fear that society was about to be engulfed in a destructive revolution and that the radical press was forcing this outcome on by fomenting disorder. But he also, very unusually for a critic of radicalism, believed strongly that for revolution to be avoided, the government must undertake a programme to alleviate poverty, for example by promoting emigration and greater educational provision. By 1816-17, Southey's fear of revolution was becoming increasingly intense and he was anxious to find a way to turn his ideas into practice beyond working them into his *Quarterly Review* articles. This proved, however, to be far from straightforward. Indeed, just at this moment, a ghost from Southey's

radical past made an unwelcome appearance. *Wat Tyler* had been written in 1794, at the high tide of Southey's reforming zeal, and sent to the suitably radical publishers, James Ridgway and Henry Symonds, who were then incarcerated in Newgate. But Southey heard nothing more of the matter after he visited the prison in January 1795. He was, therefore, astonished to receive a copy of the Whig newspaper, the *Morning Chronicle*, on February 14, 1817 (CLRS 2918).¹ This announced "A curious dramatic Poem, entitled *Wat Tyler*, by Mr. SOUTHEY, is just published"—though its author's name did not appear on the work. Southey at once recognised the play as his, though how it came to be published by the firm of Sherwood, Neely and Jones has remained the subject of much debate. His immediate reaction was to seek an injunction to suppress publication of the play, not because he wished to disown it, but because he was outraged at the thought of the publisher profiting from his work through what he felt was an underhand stratagem—Southey was determined to "make him a loser through his rascality" (CLRS 2918). Southey's legal action failed over a copyright dispute and, much to his chagrin, he never made a penny from the rumoured sales of 60,000 copies of *Wat Tyler*, as numerous radical publishers rushed to take advantage of the play's notoriety, and the opportunity to avoid paying royalties on a work whose ownership was in legal limbo (St Clair 316-318).

3. However, the publication of *Wat Tyler* did not remain a purely literary dispute. It made its appearance (possibly not fortuitously) in the midst of the campaign for constitutional reform that dominated the years 1816-17, and just as the government was preparing new legislation to suppress radical meetings and the opposition press, in the wake of the Spa Fields riots on December 2, 1816, an attack on the Prince Regent's coach on January 28, 1817, and continued rumours of revolutionary conspiracies (Belchem 37-50; Fulcher). The fact that the Court-appointed Poet Laureate had previously been a radical was scarcely news; but the appearance of one of his most revolutionary publications at this moment was too good an opportunity for opposition politicians to pass up. On February 24, 1817, Henry Brougham, in the House of Commons debates on the reports of the government's two committees of enquiry into revolutionary activity, had pointed out the inconsistency of the cabinet's desire to prosecute radical newspapers, when the Poet Laureate's inflammatory verse drama was left unmolested.² Southey was annoyed by these comments from an old adversary, but he kept his feelings to himself (CLRS 2930). But matters took a more serious turn when, on March 14, 1817, the opposition MP for Norwich, William Smith, produced a copy of the play in the House of

Commons, during a debate on the third reading of the government's Seditious Meetings Bill. He read out a particularly revolutionary speech from *Wat Tyler* and compared it with the condemnation of the radical press in an anonymous article in the most recent issue of the *Quarterly Review*. The *Quarterly* article explicitly blamed radical publications for preparing the way for the "overt acts" of revolutionaries. Yet both items, Smith declared, were the work of one man, who had thus displayed "the settled, determined malignity of a renegado".³ Though the person in question was not named, the *Morning Chronicle*'s identification of Southey as the author of *Wat Tyler* meant the target of Smith's direct attack could not be mistaken. In case anybody was in doubt, Southey's old school-friend, Charles Watkin Williams Wynn, MP for Montgomeryshire, leapt to his feet as soon as Smith sat down and, whilst condemning the MP for Norwich's speech, helpfully confirmed for readers of the next day's newspapers that Southey had indeed written both *Wat Tyler* and the article in the *Quarterly Review*.

4. Wynn claimed that these writings had nothing to do with "the question before the House," i.e. how the government intended to combat radical agitation. But though Smith could not have known it, Southey's letters reveal that his article in the *Quarterly Review* was indeed linked to the government's strategy to defeat radicalism and thus the views of its author were highly relevant to the debate in which Smith had referred to Southey. In August 1816 Southey had been informed by another of his old school friends, Charles Grosvenor Bedford, a civil servant at the Treasury, of a discussion between Nicholas Vansittart, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and J. C. Herries, at that time the Auditor of the Civil List and a senior financial adviser to the government (Simmons 155-156). They had agreed that Southey's writings in the *Quarterly Review* showed he could be of real value in supporting the government; subsequently, Vansittart had obtained the permission of the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, to invite Southey to London to discuss how he might be of further help to the ministry.⁴ The originator of this scheme was Herries, a "near friend" of Bedford, who had already been helpful to Southey (*CLRS* 3167). Herries had aided the promotion of Tom Southey, the Poet Laureate's brother, to the rank of captain in the navy, and had provided franks for Southey's letters, and information for his work on the *Edinburgh Annual Register, 1808-11* (1810-13) and the *History of the Peninsular War* (1823-32) (*CLRS* 1896, 1959, 2278).

5. Southey was dumbfounded by the proposal that Bedford transmitted to him. It was not at all clear what it would be proposed he might do, though he guessed Herries's idea was probably to ask him to take on "the management of a journal"—a guess that he later learned was accurate (*CLRS* 2835, 2901). Whatever this project might have been, it would probably not have been subsidised from government funds, as Lord Liverpool was allergic to pouring more public money into newspapers and journals, regarding any publication that needed official support to be probably both poorly-conducted and unpopular, and thus of little use (Sack 20-28). Southey's uncertainty about how to react resulted in a rapid series of letters to Bedford (*CLRS* 2835-2837, 2838-2840). He was attracted by the prospect of an increased income and, possibly, influence (*CLRS* 2836). However, Southey felt he was not at home in the political world and that if he met government ministers this "would tend to abate their favourable opinion of my practical talents"; anyway, "Government would gain nothing by transferring me from the *Quarterly* to any thing else which they might be willing to launch" (*CLRS* 2836). He disliked the idea of tying himself to this kind of work or leaving Keswick and eventually concluded that becoming "a salaried writer" for the government would "lessen the worth of my services" because anything he might say would be dismissed on the grounds that he had been paid to propagate these opinions (*CLRS* 2836, 2840). Eventually, he asked Bedford to convey his apologies and decided not to go to London.

6. Thus, in the autumn before the *Wat Tyler* affair, Southey had already ruled out becoming a paid pro-government propagandist and his plans to save the country from revolution had headed off in other directions. His first idea was to write a short book on the contemporary political situation, entitled provisionally a "View of the Moral & Political state of England" (*CLRS* 2882). Southey proposed this work to John Murray, the publisher of the *Quarterly Review*, both on the grounds that he would need to reuse some of the material he had already contributed there and because he intended to first publish some of his arguments in the October 1816 issue of *Review*, which appeared on February 11, 1817, and from which William Smith quoted in the Commons (*CLRS* 2878). Murray was dismayed by the idea of a book by Southey, believing him to be one of the most popular contributors to the *Quarterly* and wishing to concentrate Southey's writings in that journal. He persuaded Southey not to continue with the proposed book and instead to put his thoughts into the *Quarterly*, arguing they would receive a much wider circulation there (*CLRS* 2916). Thus, the article whose arguments, including the need to

suppress the “seditious press,” William Smith had contrasted with the sentiments in *Wat Tyler*, had its origin as the first part of Southey’s planned book—a work that he had been stimulated to write by Herries’s plan to produce more effective pro-government material in the press. Though this was not public information, if it had been, Smith’s reference to Southey’s works would have appeared much less gratuitous and irrelevant to the debate on the Seditious Meetings Bill than Wynn claimed.

7. Southey certainly did not feel Smith’s comments were justified, whatever the origins of the *Quarterly Review* article referred to in the Commons. His eventual response was to write a pamphlet, *A Letter to William Smith, Esq., M. P.* (1817), published in late April 1817. The *Collected Letters of Robert Southey* provides a much fuller and more accurate picture of how this course of action came about; and allows a clearer understanding of the significance of the pamphlet, and reactions to it, in deepening Southey’s identification with conservative politics. But the content of the *Letter to William Smith*, and the decision to publish it, only make sense in the light of Southey’s on-going campaign to propagate his political programme. His main public platform was and remained his anonymous *Quarterly Review* articles.⁵ But while the prestige and wide circulation of the *Quarterly* provided Southey with an unrivalled place from which to proclaim his views, this privilege came at a price. As soon as he touched on any political issues, his work was vetted and, if necessary, censored by the journal’s editor, William Gifford (Cutmore 7-10). Gifford was a protégé and close ally of George Canning, the leading conservative politician, cabinet minister, and co-founder of the *Quarterly Review*. One of Gifford’s roles was to ensure that the *Quarterly*’s political articles did not contradict Canning’s views on key issues and he had pruned a number of Southey’s contributions to keep them in line. Southey had been annoyed by this process for some time, but he was infuriated by Gifford’s “impertinent mutilations” to his October 1816 article in the *Quarterly*, as this piece was meant to be his first response to what he interpreted as the government’s request for help (CLRS 2915). One of the reasons he had wished to write a book on contemporary politics in 1816 had been to escape this kind of editorial control. Once that project had been shelved he decided to pursue other routes to promote his views, and this determination became entwined with his response to the *Wat Tyler* imbroglio.

8. This link became immediately apparent when Southey attempted to circumvent Gifford and approach the government directly, by writing to Canning himself on March 19, 1817.⁶ This was not necessarily a ridiculously self-important or presumptuous course of action. The two men had a slight acquaintance through the *Quarterly Review*. Moreover, Canning had called on Southey in Keswick in September 1814, just as Canning was about to go out to Portugal as ambassador, and the two men had discussed affairs in Iberia, on which Southey was a well-known expert (*CLRS* 2478). Conveniently, Southey also had the excuse of thanking Canning for sending him a pamphlet of his major parliamentary speech of January 29, 1817.⁷ This provided an ideal opportunity for Southey to approach the government directly about his ideas. But this pamphlet had been published for at least a month before Southey chose to reply to Canning.⁸ Whereas, he wrote only five days after William Smith's speech on *Wat Tyler*, and one of his aims was to obtain action from the government to curb the radical press, which had gloated over and publicised the appearance of the play and Smith's assault on Southey, and which Smith had criticised Southey for attacking.

9. The first sections of Southey's letter contain some of his most dire warnings of the dangers that the government faced from the threat of revolution and the need to, above all, "stop the seditious press". He advised Canning (and through him, the cabinet) to take the opportunity of the government's suspension of *habeas corpus* on March 4, 1817 to "place the chief incendiary writers in safe custody," and to ensure that they could not continue to publish their newspapers whilst in gaol. But Southey then went further and urged the transportation of such offenders, declaiming "No means can be effectual for checking the intolerable license of the Press, but that of making transportation the punishment for its abuse" (*CLRS* 2947).

10. This advice went far beyond government policy in 1817. Southey's proposal to transport "seditious" writers showed how fixated he had become on the dangers posed by the radical press. For one who believed in the powerful influence of prose and verse on people's thoughts and actions it was perhaps understandable that he feared a constant diet of radical writings might produce a revolution. Since the assassination of Liverpool's predecessor as Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval, on May 11, 1812, Southey had been convinced that only a much more effective punishment of "seditious" journalists could prevent a catastrophic outbreak of political and social disorder (Craig 121-122). He had tried to include his transportation scheme

in a *Quarterly Review* article from 1812, only to see it removed by Gifford as likely to be contrary to the views of Canning and the cabinet.⁹ Since the summer of 1816 he had been advocating it urgently in letters to his friends Bedford, Wynn, and John Rickman, a leading civil servant, and even to William Wilberforce (with whom Southey had corresponded since 1813, but had never met) (*CLRS* 2813, 2851, 2837, 2899). But the idea had been culled once again from Southey's October 1816 *Quarterly Review* article that Smith had quoted from in the House of Commons.¹⁰ Southey may have felt that writing directly to Canning would at least make the government aware of his advice. It was, of course, deeply ironic that Southey felt the need to advocate further censorship in his letter because he was himself being censored in the *Quarterly Review*. It was also, though, helpful to Southey's public reputation in 1817, when his consistency was under public scrutiny, that he was not able to promote his views on this issue more openly. Southey had strongly supported the radicals who had been exiled to Australia in 1794, writing no fewer than three poems in their honour.¹¹ If he had publicly advocated transportation for radical journalists in 1817 it was very difficult to imagine how he could have justified his change of opinion—something to which friends like Wynn drew his attention (*CLRS* 2927).

11. However, Southey's letter contained another paragraph that had not been published until it appeared in the *Collected Letters of Robert Southey* (*CLRS* 2947). This paragraph puts the letter in a rather fuller context. After his fire-breathing initial comments, Southey informed Canning that Robert Owen of New Lanark was in London, attempting to solicit support for his plans to settle the unemployed on "waste land" provided by the government. Southey knew this because Owen had visited Southey in February on the way to London (*CLRS* 2914). The two had discussed Owen's schemes—just as they had in August 1816 when Owen had called unannounced on Southey while he was on holiday in the Lake District (*CLRS* 2832). Southey was appalled by Owen's irreligion, but captivated by his plans for social reform. In March 1817 he urged Canning and the cabinet to aid Owen in setting up "an experimental establishment" to try out his ideas. The utility of forms of communal production, especially on the land, had been another item that Gifford had cut out of Southey's last *Quarterly Review* article.¹² So, a letter that began with proposals that were too reactionary for the government to contemplate in 1817, ended with the advocacy of an experiment in Owenite socialism. This paradox neatly encapsulated the duality of Southey's thought in 1817. Southey's interest in Owenism also

indicated some of the surprising long-term continuities that underlay his politics. He may have abandoned pantisocracy in the 1790s, but he retained an abiding interest in communal experiments on the land, declaring Owen to be “neither more nor less than such a Pantisocrat as I was in the days of my youth” (*CLRS* 2832).

12. Southey’s letter was not dispatched directly to the waste bin. The fact that a copy survives in Lord Liverpool’s papers may well indicate that it was circulated to a number of ministers and civil servants. But the reply that Southey eventually received, on April 4, 1817, was disappointing. Canning in effect informed the Poet Laureate that there was no point trying to bypass Canning’s protégé, Gifford, at the *Quarterly Review* and urging a political programme directly on the government. Canning let Southey down gently, though; he assured him that his ideas on social reform were being considered, but emphasised that great difficulties lay in the way of any action by the state. Even an increase in central government grants to parishes with especially high numbers of paupers would raise objections.¹³

13. Southey had to be satisfied with this polite rebuff. Some members of the government might have been prepared in 1816 to consider making use of his talents as a writer, but nobody in the cabinet was willing to think of him as an adviser on public policy. In fact, his letter revealed a startling lack of political acumen. Lord Liverpool’s government had suspended *habeas corpus* and had just introduced new legislation to tackle the wave of radical agitation—a Treason Act and a Seditious Meetings Act. They were scarcely likely to welcome the Poet Laureate’s advice that they had not gone far enough. Moreover, they were being assailed in the House of Commons and the press for not reducing government expenditure after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. The cabinet were worried that this issue was undermining their support and had set up a House of Commons select committee on February 7, 1817 to recommend further cuts in spending (Mitchell 104). A plea to invest government money in Owen’s schemes was thus in direct contradiction to one of the government’s central policies. Thus, while the early stages of the *Wat Tyler* affair illustrated Southey’s links to some conservative politicians, they also revealed that the distance between Southey and the ministry was growing wider. In just over six months Southey had both declined to be a propagandist for the government and seen his plan to save the country from revolution brushed aside. It seemed the cabinet could find little use for the Poet Laureate.

14. However, whatever the nature of Canning's response, Southey felt the need to make a public, as well as a private, riposte to William Smith's attack. Two days before he wrote to Canning, and as soon as he saw the report of Smith's speech in his daily newspaper, the *Courier*, he sent a short letter to Wynn, enclosing a letter addressed to William Smith, which Southey asked Wynn to insert in the newspaper (CLRS 2943, 2944). This letter is published for the first time in the *Collected Letters of Robert Southey*. Southey defended himself from Smith's "foul slander" by simply asserting that his early opinions and his more recent ones were both sincerely held; the change in his views was the result of his hostility to Napoleon, opposition to the French invasion of Spain, and continued thought about how best to improve the condition of the poor (and thus, by implication, was not motivated by hopes of pecuniary gain).
15. Southey also faced the on-going dispute about the publication of *Wat Tyler*. Once he learned that his version of the events surrounding the delivery of the manuscript to Ridgway and Symonds in 1794-5 and his copyright in the work would be challenged, he could not resist sending Wynn a second letter for submission to the *Courier* (CLRS 2946, 2948). In this missive he rehearsed his version of events around his attempt to publish the play in 1794-5 and defended his decision to seek an injunction against *Wat Tyler*'s appearance in 1817. A draft of this letter was published in Cuthbert Southey's *Life and Correspondence* of his father, but it is misdated two days too early, making it appear to be the first letter sent to the newspaper (LCRS 252-255). Furthermore, Cuthbert Southey gave no indication that this letter was not published in the *Courier*, though there is no trace of it in the back numbers of the newspaper, thus adding to the confusion about how to interpret these events (Wheatley 31).
16. The situation is clarified in the *Collected Letters of Robert Southey*. Neither of Southey's two letters to the *Courier* was published in the newspaper because Wynn was away from London, staying with relations at Norton Priory in Cheshire (CLRS 2958). He did not receive Southey's letters until a week later, by which time, Southey, increasingly agitated by their non-appearance, had sent the second letter to Bedford on March 23, 1817, asking him to submit it to the *Courier* (CLRS 2952). However, Southey soon changed his mind and decided the subjects of William Smith and *Wat Tyler* had ceased to be topical enough for letters to the newspapers. He remained determined, though, to make his side of the controversy known. Ironically, he was confirmed in this course of action by the reports he read in the newspapers of his counsels'

arguments on his behalf in their unsuccessful application for an injunction against the publication of *Wat Tyler*. Southey insisted he felt no sense of “*shame*” over the play and that it certainly contained no “*wickedness*” (CLRS 2951). But if letters to the newspapers on this subject were no longer likely to arouse interest, the only way that Southey could respond quickly was through a pamphlet.

17. However hasty and contingent Southey’s decision was, it had important consequences. Southey had published extensively on controversial contemporary political events in both the *Edinburgh Annual Register* and the *Quarterly Review*. He had also written two recent pamphlets.¹⁴ But he had always done so anonymously; he had never engaged in a controversy about his political views under his own name. Anybody seeking a public declaration of Southey’s political views had to look to his poetry. His radical opinions from the 1790s, most famously expressed in *Joan of Arc* (1796), were well known, and readers interested in such matters would have been aware that Southey’s views must have modified, or he would hardly have been appointed Poet Laureate in 1813. His recent poetry, however, only provided general information about his opinions in the 1810s. Southey’s first laureate ode, *Carmen Triumphale* (1814) had revealed the Laureate was a passionate supporter of the war against Napoleon Bonaparte and a critic of anti-war opinions in Whig journals, like the *Edinburgh Review*. A careful reading of the *Poet’s Pilgrimage to Waterloo* (1816) and the *Lay of the Laureate* (1816) showed Southey to be a staunch defender of the Church of England and its role in education, and an advocate for the beneficent role of Britain’s empire. All three of these works had been extensively attacked and ridiculed in the opposition press (LPW III: 8-9, 228-231, 380-384). But Southey had not responded publicly to his critics; nor had he openly addressed the change in his views since the 1790s. By doing just those things through *A Letter to William Smith, Esq., M.P.*, he entered both a literary controversy and the central political argument of 1817, on how the government should respond to demands for political reform.

18. Southey clearly felt that a public response was necessary if he was to defend his reputation. But why he felt that the *Wat Tyler* controversy necessitated such a departure from his usual practice is complex. Southey insisted he had been “*wantonly & grossly injured*” (CLRS 2970), but he had been consistently assailed as a turncoat ever since he became Poet Laureate. Opposition newspapers in 1813, such as the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Examiner*, had been full of gleeful

contrasts between Southey's early radicalism and his new Court appointment and therefore Smith's assault merely built on charges that had already been made (*LPW* III: xvi-xvii). Southey said in one letter that he must respond because "This affair ... had ... made my wife seriously ill" (*CLRS* 2970), but Southey's prolongation of the controversy would hardly have been likely to help her recover her health. Southey may have felt this controversy was different because he had been attacked in the House of Commons, rather than in an ephemeral newspaper. But he was also at the end of his emotional tether in 1817. He had been devastated by the loss of his only son, Herbert, at the age of nine in April 1816, and was just about to travel to London and then on to the continent in company with his friends, Edward Nash and Humphrey Senhouse, in an attempt to recuperate (Speck 166-167, 172-173). He was also surrounded by distractions, especially the news that Greta Hall, the house he had rented since 1803, might well be sold and he had to decide whether to raise the money to buy the property (*CLRS* 2962). He might have felt like taking out his sense of anger and despair on William Smith.

19. Battling through all these troubles, Southey completed a draft of his pamphlet in just over a week (March 28-April 5, 1817), and sent it to Bedford before onward transmission to Murray for publication (*CLRS* 2966). He was anxious to receive advice on whether he had avoided any possibility of a charge of libel, or a challenge to a duel, but also perhaps to receive reassurance that he had struck the right note. Southey explicitly asked for the advice not only of Bedford, but also of John Rickman, Southey's brother Henry Herbert Southey, a society doctor, and the lawyer and historian Sharon Turner. Wynn (an MP, but also a lawyer) offered his thoughts, too, and Southey discussed the matter with his neighbours in the Lake District, William Wordsworth and Humphrey Senhouse (*CLRS* 2971). Crucially, Southey told Bedford that if the balance of opinion amongst his confidantes was against publication, he was prepared to go no further (*CLRS* 2971). This was not merely a polite form of words. When Southey consulted his friends about publishing a pamphlet in response to Henry Brougham's attack on him during the Westmorland election of 1818, Southey was eventually dissuaded from proceeding by Rickman's strongly expressed advice (*CLRS* 3179). But on this occasion, while Turner may well have advised Southey to say nothing, the others varied between desiring a reasoned and a vituperative response (*CLRS* 2971). The result was that Southey decided to publish his pamphlet, though he did amend it in the light of some of the warnings he received. Wynn was

anxious that Southey should not be seen to be treating Smith “arrogantly” and successfully pressed for at least one gratuitous insult to be removed (*CLRS* 2970). He also persuaded Southey to refer to what Smith was “*said* to have asserted” in the Commons, just in case the reports were untrue, thus exposing Southey to a libel action. The resultant changes helped delay the pamphlet’s appearance until late April 1817.

20. The *Letter* was also delayed because it steadily grew in length as its purpose changed and developed. Writing a pamphlet, rather than a letter to the newspapers, allowed Southey to expand his argument beyond a simple rebuttal of Smith’s attack; in fact, he wrote so much that some of his material was transferred to his next *Quarterly Review* article (*CLRS* 2966).¹⁵ The *Letter* provided Southey with the opportunity to produce a personal political manifesto and to urge the government in public to adopt the kind of policies he had suggested in private in his letter to Canning. It became not just a piece of controversial writing, but a declaration to the world of his political views, and another way of circumventing Gifford’s censorship in the *Quarterly Review*. Thus, only the first sections of the *Letter* dealt with *Wat Tyler* and the *Quarterly Review* (*Letter* 1-8). As Southey was a contributor to the *Quarterly*, he could not break the code of anonymity that bound its writers, so he did not admit to writing the article referred to by Smith, and concentrated instead on his play. Southey accused the publishers of “baseness and malignity” by publishing it without his permission or knowledge. For the play itself, he admitted it was “full of errors,” but that these were due merely to his “youth and ignorance.” He defended his decision to try and suppress *Wat Tyler* on the grounds that its publication was “dangerous at this time,” i.e. when there was a threat of revolution. But he insisted, contrary to the opinion put forward by his lawyers, that he did not feel “either shame, or contrition” in writing the play.

21. The key point for Southey, though, was to address Smith’s argument that Southey “imputed evil motives to men merely for holding now the same doctrines which I myself formerly professed” and that his criticism of such men was motivated by “malignity” (*Letter* 9). Southey’s response was to expound and interpret the development of his political views in some detail. His first point was an enlargement of one of his arguments in his first unpublished letter to the *Courier*: that his youthful views were sincerely held—the result of admiration for Roman republican writers and the French revolution, and disquiet at social inequality (*Letter* 13). But he drew a

distinction between some of the revolutionary sentiments expressed by characters in *Wat Tyler*, especially in the passage quoted by Smith in the House of Commons, and his own views, which, though they had been “visionary,” were not characterised by “intemperance or violence”—something he claimed his other works of the 1790s demonstrated (*Letter* 18-19). He also made clear that he had never been an atheist and was “connected with no clubs, no society, no party,” i.e. he had not been a member of any body such as the London Corresponding Society, which had been accused of planning revolutionary outbreaks (*Letter* 19, 20-21). In fact Southey characterised his early views as an attempt to create “the political system of Christianity,” especially through the pantisocratic scheme he had formed with Coleridge of founding a settlement in America (*Letter* 20). Essentially, Southey argued that he had never been a revolutionary—just a misguided idealist.

22. Southey expanded this argument to make it clearer in some of the sections he added in to the proof revisions to his *Letter*.¹⁶ He insisted that the radicals of 1817 did not hold views that he would recognise as equivalent to his opinions in the 1790s; “At no time of my life have I held any opinions like the Buonapartists and Revolutionists of the present day” (*Letter* 26). Above all, he did not admire the military tyranny of Napoleonic France and he did not “appeal to the malignant feelings of mankind” or engage in “calumny and sedition” (*Letter* 27). Because these were the key elements of radicalism in the 1810s, Southey asserted that if any radicals of the 1790s remained radicals in 1817, they must have changed “their feelings and their principles” (*Letter* 25-26)—they were inconsistent, not him. Instead, Southey emphasised the similarities between his views in the 1790s and 1817, insisting that while he no longer believed in “republican forms of government” he had continued to “love liberty” and “detest tyranny” (*Letter* 24). Most importantly, the aim that continued to underlie his outlook was to find how best “the improvement of mankind” might be effected; Southey had just changed his mind about how that might be done—the means had changed, but the end remained the same (*Letter* 27). Again, it was he who was consistent, not his radical critics. Therefore, of course, he was not a “renegado,” but a man of principle, who retained the underlying outlook of his youth; if he criticised the radicals of 1817, he was not attacking the principles he had held in the 1790s, but views he had never held—Bonaparte-worship and devotion to violent revolution. This line of reasoning allowed Southey to conclude his pamphlet with a lengthy description of his proposals for “the improvement of mankind.” This demonstrated that he had retained the reforming

enthusiasm of his youth. But it also allowed Southey to speak freely and vigorously about his plans in a way he could not in his *Quarterly Review* articles—indeed part of this section was culled from sentences deleted by the editor, William Gifford, from Southey’s controversial October 1816 piece (*CLRS* 2977).

23. Southey was aware that this last section of the *Letter* was in danger of “making W^m S. the post upon whom I hang my opinions, instead of the man who was tied to the post for whipping,” but he continued to expand it in the proof revisions (*CLRS* 2966). Southey insisted that as society was being rapidly transformed, “extremes of inequality are become intolerable” and civil insurrection by the populace was a real danger (*Letter* 31). The government must, above all, prevent the universal disaster that revolution would entail and, crucially, Southey insisted the first thing necessary was to “curb the seditious press” (*Letter* 32). He did not, though, mention his scheme for making transportation the punishment for seditious writing, possibly aware that enough “obloquy” would follow his call for censorship without inflaming opposition any further. However, Southey also urged the government to engage in “the immediate relief of the Poor” by giving them “waste land” to cultivate, repeating the plea he had made to Canning that Robert Owen’s ideas might be implemented (*Letter* 32-34). Southey also advocated “the education of the lower classes” under the guidance of the Church of England and “a liberal expenditure in public works” to provide employment (*Letter* 34-41). Though Southey did not explicitly make the point, his list certainly implied that his desire to prosecute radical writers was actually part of a scheme to make sure that the conditions of ordinary people were improved, rather than simply reactionary hostility to reform. He, rather than William Smith, was the true “Friend of the People.”

24. The pamphlet was an ingenious argument, though not an entirely convincing one—it depended, for instance, on a very partial definition of what radicalism was in 1817 in order to try and show that Southey was not denouncing men for views that he had held in the 1790s. It was, though, certainly an eloquent summary of Southey’s particular form of conservatism—hostile to political reform, but supportive of some types of social reform. The *Letter* functioned not just as a reply to William Smith but as a manifesto for the kind of policies that Southey felt were needed to prevent revolution and alleviate poverty. However, the *Letter* appeared at a time of heightened political tension and argument over the freedom of the press and the government’s

response to what it claimed was a threat of revolution (Fulcher). While political debate was focused on the suspension of *habeas corpus* and the prosecution of suspected revolutionaries and radical journalists, such as William Hone and Thomas Wooler, Southey's complex views on repression combined with reform, his pamphlet, and Southey himself, were bound to be viewed through the prism of existing political arguments.

25. The reaction in the public journals was, therefore, predictable. Whigs and radicals were derisive. The *Edinburgh Review* believed Southey's defence against William Smith had made him "laughable" and the *Monthly Review* thought that the pamphlet was "ludicrous" because of its "inordinate vanity."¹⁷ The *Critical Review* asserted that Southey had not answered William Smith's charge at all.¹⁸ What these critics generally did not do was to discuss Southey's ideas for social reform; on the few occasions these ideas were mentioned, they were ridiculed, notably in the *Edinburgh Review*.¹⁹ To radical journals like the Unitarians' *Monthly Repository*, all that stood out, or really mattered, in the policies proposed in the *Letter* was Southey's continued advocacy of press censorship, which they regarded as putting Southey in the same category as Ferdinand VII, the absolutist King of Spain, who had revoked his country's constitution, imprisoned his critics, and restored the Inquisition.²⁰ To the opposition *Liverpool Mercury* the pamphlet was merely proof that Southey "wants to find out and imprison his opponents, rather than confute them."²¹
26. Conservative publications, in contrast, were supportive, the *Morning Post* declaring Southey's response to be "a most spirited Letter."²² The pro-government press seized on Southey's attack on the "illiberal, unjust and unmanly" way he had been criticised by an opposition MP, William Smith, as a means of denouncing the whole "mean-spirited party" to which Smith belonged and its attempts to "fan the flame of public discontent."²³ A few pro-government outlets had their doubts, the *British Critic* stating Southey "would have been a more powerful champion of the cause which he upholds, had he given it a more discriminating assistance."²⁴ However, not one of the conservative newspapers or journals discussed Southey's plans for reform. To these publications the key item in Southey's *Letter* was its usefulness as an attack on the government's radical critics. The result was that Southey emerged from the controversy over his *Letter*, not as he might have wished, as a man of complex and considered views on how to

tackle poverty, whose views had been unjustly lampooned, but as a determined partisan of the government and a supporter of its plans to suppress radical publications.

27. Most of these reactions in print passed Southey by, though, as he left for the continent on May 9 and did not return to England until August 7. Southey gained a rather different perspective on how his work was received when he arrived in London on April 24, 1817, for a brief stay on his way to the continent. This was only the day before the *Letter* was published (CLRS 2979). Because he spent his two weeks in London entirely in the company of his friends, this led him to believe that he had scored a great victory. His publisher Murray told him “it is spoken of in the highest terms by all whom he sees” (CLRS 2981). Southey told his wife that “Every body has read it” and “It has had all the effect you could possibly have wished” (CLRS 2983). A few days later he declared “never was a triumph so compleat” (CLRS 2985) and he was joyfully retelling the story of a letter he had been shown by Mrs. Thrale Piozzi, who had declared ““Oh I am so glad to see him [Southey] trample down his Enemies!”” (CLRS 2986). Southey was able to bathe in “congratulations from all my friends & acquaintances” (CLRS 2987) and the only negative criticism he reported seeing was the first of Hazlitt’s essays in the *Examiner*, which he dismissed for its “scurrility.” To Southey, the *Letter* was an enormous success, a matter confirmed by its relatively good sales—the first printing of 2,000 copies sold out in a week and the pamphlet eventually ran to four editions. When he returned from the continent, he ordered a specially bound copy from Murray, to sit on his bookshelves alongside similarly luxurious editions of his poems (CLRS 3021).

28. The *Letter* thus confirmed Southey in his belief that he was a successful public controversialist and that he had vindicated his political beliefs and his public reputation. Without this confirmation, it is much less likely that he would have been happy to continue to put his political views in his poems, most notably in *A Vision of Judgement* (1821), and to go on and publish longer works in prose that tackled political controversies from his unique, but pro-conservative, point of view, such as his *Book of the Church* (1824), *Sir Thomas More: or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society* (1829), and the *Essays, Moral and Political* (1832), which reprinted some of his *Quarterly Review* contributions, but under his own name and with some of the editorial deletions restored.

29. But, just as importantly, Southey's pamphlet reasserted his usefulness to conservative politicians at a time when his failure to agree to Herries's proposal to come to London in September 1816 and the rebuff he had received over his letter to Canning might have indicated he was of little value to the government. This new respect for Southey was based precisely on his ability to contribute to contemporary controversies, rather than his longer-term ideas for preventing revolution, and soon became apparent. Southey met Wilberforce for the first time when Wilberforce's friend, Robert Inglis, arranged a dinner in London to which they were both invited, on April 27, 1817. Another guest was the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, who was an old friend of Inglis's father (*CLRS* 2902). Sidmouth provided Southey with "a very handsome compliment" on his *Letter* (*Letters* 2981). Southey was also in high enough regard with Canning for the cabinet minister to accept a dinner invitation to meet Southey on May 7 (though ultimately parliamentary business kept Canning away) (*CLRS* 2989). Finally, and most interestingly, Robert Peel, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, was able to use the *Wat Tyler* controversy to brush off an interjection by William Smith in a debate in the Commons on the Report of the Finance Committee on May 5. Peel declared he was "not a little surprised, upon a question of consistency, to hear a gentleman speak, who a few days ago had most unjustifiably brought a charge of the same kind against a private individual, founded merely upon an anonymous publication."²⁵ Peel could hardly have put Smith down in this way if he did not believe that Southey had made a convincing public rebuttal of the criticism from this opposition MP. In other words, Southey's writings had proved he could be of use to the government as a defender of its policies against radicalism. There could be no greater contrast with Peel's only recorded encounter with Southey up to this point, in the Low Countries in 1815, when Peel had declined even to get out of his carriage to meet Southey, let alone dine with the poet and his companions (*CLRS* 2657).
30. The *Wat Tyler* imbroglio, and Southey's response, was thus, in the end, decisive in drawing him much closer to the government, both in the public's view and in the cabinet's opinion of him. After 1817, and the publication of the *Letter to William Smith*, nobody could be in any doubt on which side Southey stood in the political warfare of his times. But it was also notable that when he next visited London in May-June 1820 he dined with Canning and Lord Liverpool—the latter taking care to compliment Southey on his newly published *Life of Wesley* (1820) and the good it would do in defending the Church of England against its critics (*CLRS* 3507). The way

was open that would eventually lead to Southey's election to the Commons as a pro-government candidate (without his knowledge) in 1826 and the offer of a Baronetcy (which he declined) in 1835 (Speck 201-202, 229). In 1828, Peel even had Southey's portrait painted to hang in his private gallery, between the likenesses of two conservative Prime Ministers, William Pitt and Lord Liverpool (Curry, Portraits). None of this meant that Southey was a slavish devotee of those in power, and in the decades after 1817 his ideas were taken more seriously and proved of significance to the development of important trends in conservative thought, particularly Ultra Toryism and Disraelian Conservatism (Eastwood). But the *Wat Tyler* affair had revealed the limits to any interest in his policies for combating poverty in 1817, while confirming to politicians and the press that on the great issues of political debate in that year he was firmly and very publicly in the pro-government camp.

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Romanticism on the Net #68-69 (Spring Fall 2017). Special issue on Robert Southey. Guest-edited by Tim Fulford (De Montfort University) and Matthew Sangster (University of Glasgow)

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¹ *Morning Chronicle*, February 12, 1817, p. 3.

² HC Deb. February 24, 1817, vol. 35, col. 626.

³ HC Deb. March 14, 1817, vol. 35, cols. 1090-1092: Smith compared *Wat Tyler* (1817), Act 2, lines 103-112 with the sentiments expressed in *Quarterly Review*, vol. 16, no. 31, October 1816, p. 227, published February 11, 1817.

⁴ This discussion was stimulated in particular by Herries's reading of Southey's article on "The Poor." *Quarterly Review*, vol. 15, no. 29, April 1816, pp. 187-235, published August 11, 1816.

⁵ See in particular, Speck. "Robert Southey's Contribution to the *Quarterly Review*." The most accurate list of Southey's contributions to the journal remains Curry and Dedmon. "Southey's Contributions to *The Quarterly Review*."

⁶ This letter is in the newly-catalogued Canning papers, British Library, Add MS 89143/1/1/143/5 (CLRS 2947). It has previously only been known from a partial copy in the papers of Lord Liverpool, British Library, Add MS 38367, fos 8-10, which has led to the natural belief that Southey wrote directly to Liverpool, e.g. Wu, *William Hazlitt*, pp. 204-205.

⁷ *Speech of the Right Honourable George Canning, in the House of Commons, on Wednesday, 29 January, 1817, on the Motion for an address to His Royal Highness the Prince Regent, on his most gracious speech from the throne: accurately taken in short-hand: and containing all the passages which were omitted in the daily papers* (1817). Canning's speech denounced the threat from revolutionaries, parliamentary reform, and the opposition's calls for reductions in public expenditure.

⁸ *Morning Chronicle*, February 19, 1817, p. 1.

⁹ Compare "The Poor." *Quarterly Review*, vol. 8, no. 16, December 1812, p. 350, with *Essays, Moral and Political*, vol. 1, p. 140.

¹⁰ Southey smuggled in an oblique hint to his views at *Quarterly Review*, vol. 16, no. 31, October 1816, p. 268, but Gifford deleted the call for transportation of seditious writers from the article's finale—compare *ibid.* p. 278, with *Essays, Moral and Political*, vol. 1, p. 422.

¹¹ “To the Exiled Patriots.” Coleridge, Samuel T. *A Moral and Political Lecture, Delivered at Bristol*. Bristol, 1795, pp. 15-17; “Sonnet. To Joseph Gerald, 1794,” *Morning Post*, March 20, 1798, p. 2; “Epitaph. On Joseph Gerald,” *Morning Post*, February 9, 1799, p. 3.

¹² Compare *Quarterly Review*, vol. 16, no. 31, October 1816, p. 271, with *Essays, Moral and Political*, vol. 1, pp. 411-412.

¹³ Canning to Southey, April 4, 1817, The Morgan Library and Museum, MA 9235.

¹⁴ *The Origin, Nature and Object, of the New System of Education* (1812); *An Exposure of the Misrepresentations and Calumnies in Mr Marsh's Review of Sir George Barlow's Administration at Madras. By the Relatives of Sir George Barlow* (1813).

¹⁵ This article was “Rise and Progress of Popular Disaffection.” *Quarterly Review*, vol. 16, no. 32, January 1817, pp. 511-552, published May 20, 1817. Southey finished this article during his brief stay in London, before leaving for the continent.

¹⁶ Southey's later additions can be identified by comparing the draft sent to Grosvenor Bedford on April 5, 1817 (CLRS 2966), with the published text of *A Letter to William Smith, Esq., M.P.* (1817).

¹⁷ *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 28, no. 55, March 1817, p. 163; *Monthly Review*, vol. 83, June 1817, p. 224.

¹⁸ *Critical Review*, vol. 5, no. 4, April 1817, pp. 394-395.

¹⁹ *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 28, no. 55, March 1817, pp. 170-174.

²⁰ *Monthly Repository*, vol. 12, no. 137, May 1817, p. 302.

²¹ *Liverpool Mercury*, May 2, 1817, p. 351.

²² *Morning Post*, April 28, 1817, p. 2.

²³ *Royal Cornwall Gazette, Falmouth Packet & Plymouth Journal*, May 3, 1817, p. 4.

²⁴ *British Critic*, vol. 7, no. 5, May 1817, p. 444.

²⁵ HC Deb. 5 May 1817, vol. 36, col. 157.