SOUTHEY’S BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN WESLEY REVISITED

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“The prose of Southey,” wrote Ernest Bernbaum more than seven decades ago, “has always been praised for its clarity, correctness, and adaptability to its varied themes. Modern readers will find it most engagingly exemplified in his biographies, some of which are among the temporarily neglected treasures of our language. One of them is the Life of Wesley (1820...), wherein Southey, though belonging to a church most members of which looked with contempt upon Methodism, gave a magnificently fair characterization of one of the greatest English worthies. ‘It is,’ said Coleridge, his fellow Anglican, ‘the favourite of my library; the book I can read for the twentieth time when I can read nothing else.’”

Although Bernbaum might have proved himself correct in assessing Southey’s biography of John Wesley as a “neglected” treasure, the reference to “temporarily neglected” represented, even in 1930, a nod of artistic and intellectual courtesy toward the memory of the departed biographer, since, quite frankly, at the present moment, Southey’s biography resides dangerously closely to the borders of literary obscurity. Nevertheless, within the context of recognizing the tercentenary of Wesley’s birth (June 17, 1703), Southey’s biography ought to be brought to the surface for what might be labeled an appropriate moment (or airing) in which to revitalize the attentions of those few students and scholars who continue to maintain interests in the literature and cultural history of the 18th and 19th centuries.

First published almost three decades after the death of the Methodist patriarch, The Life of Wesley and the Rise and Progress of Methodism has always stood, for literary historians, in the shadow of Southey’s earlier biography of Lord Horatio Nelson (1813), most obviously because a naval hero who dies amidst the din of battle generates a larger number of tear-drops and stars than does an itinerant evangelical preacher who administered a religious organization throughout the four kingdoms of Britian, but who also expired quietly in his bed of old age. Recognizing and accepting that fact, one proceeds to a more important consideration, that of Southey’s motivations as a biographer. Given his fairly mainstream political and theological

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views during the period following his appointment as Poet Laureate in 1813, the question naturally arises as to why the biographer placed John Wesley on the same level of interest as his other subjects — the dukes of Marlborough and Wellington, various British admirals, the Puritans Cromwell and Bunyan, and the education theorist Andrew Bell. In other words, why did Southey write about John Wesley and Methodism? One answer might well be that through an in-depth and balanced, but not overly flattering, portrait of Wesley, Southey could lay bare the underlying fanaticism of the 18th-century Wesleyan Methodism and — while indirectly casting his readers' attentions to the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era — expose religious enthusiasm as a potential danger parallel to that of religious and political reform movements of his own day. Another answer may lie immediately in the introductory pages of Southey's biography — specifically the list of his sources and the prefatory statement:

"I have had no private sources of information in composing the present work," wrote Southey. "The materials are derived chiefly from the following books: ...." Then follows a listing of thirty-three items, beginning with 1792 biography of John Wesley by Henry Moore (1751-1844) and Dr. Thomas Coke (1747-1814) and ending with "Various Volumes" of the evangelical Church of England Gospel Magazine. Naturally, biographies and editions and tracts by opinionated Methodist clergymen and laymen — persons who either revered John Wesley or who disagreed with or misinterpreted his relations with the Church of England — would dominate any list prior to 1820. Such former or then current Wesleyan Methodists as Dr. John Whitehead (1740-1804), John Hampson the younger (1753-1819), Thomas Jackson (1783-1873), William Myles (1756-1828), Jonathan Crowther (1760-1824), William Grimshaw (1708-1763), Joseph Nightingale (1775-1824), John Gillies (1712-1796), John Nelson (1707-1774), Thomas Walsh (1730-1759), John William Fletcher (1745-1785), and Joseph Benson (1748-1821) do indeed appear. However, Southey managed to walk upon ground held by those in total opposition to John Wesley and who competed against him in the battle over the minds and hearts of 18th-century evangelicals: George Whitefield (1714-1770), Joseph Priestly (1733-1804), assorted Moravians and Church of England divines, and Augustus Montague Toplady (1740-1778). Southey also consulted various early (and not always accurate) editions of Wesley's letters and sermons, The Arminian Magazine, and the Minutes of Methodist Conferences. In the end, he had to sift through considerable primary and secondary material, most of it highly subjective and anecdotal, and apply it to the formation of his own portrait of John

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Wesley, drawn against his own beliefs and prejudices about the founder and leader of Methodism.

One must never lose sight of Southey’s full title: *The Life of Wesley and the Rise and Progress of Methodism*. In his view, Southey could not separate the man, John Wesley, from the religious organization and the religious movement that he realized had, by the second decade of the 19th century, proven itself a significant influence upon the reformation of English religion and English society. For example, by 1820, when his biography emerged from the press, the number of Wesleyan Methodists in England stood at 179,902; add to that figure 8,088 in Wales, 3,227 in Scotland, and 23,800 in Ireland and the total reached 215,017. Little wonder, then, that he began his biography with the declaration that:

The sect, or Society, as they would call themselves, of Methodists, has existed for the greater part of a century: they have their seminaries and their hierarchy, their own regulations, their own manners, their own literature: in England they form a distinct people, an *imperium in imperio* ["a sovereignty within a sovereignty" — which happens to be the motto of the State of Ohio!]; they are extending widely in America; and in both countries they number their annual increases by thousands. The history of their founder is little known in his native land beyond the limits of those who are termed religious public; and on the Continent it is scarcely known at all. In some of his biographers the heart has been wanting to understand his worth, or the will to do it justice; others have not possessed freedom of strength of intellect to perceive wherein he was erroneous.  

When finished with his reading, as well as with his reflections upon the principal events in the religious history of the world, Southey concluded that, "The history of men who have been prime agents in those great moral and intellectual revolutions which from time to time take place among mankind, is not less important than that of statesmen and conquerors." If readers will accept that declaration, they will, in turn, understand Southey’s motivation and purposes for writing the biography of John Wesley.

Unfortunately, neither space nor the reader’s patience permits a complete analysis of Southey’s treatment of Wesley and Methodism; thus he or she needs only to consider one or two of the most obvious examples. As had the vast majority of Wesley’s contemporary critics, Southey assumed a firm grip upon the most obvious detraction to 18th-century Methodism — a ten-

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2 Southey, 1.
3 Southey, 2.
dency toward over-emotionalism which thus struck at the very core of that which the 18th century embraced (at least on the surface) as "the Age of Reason." In observing the issue of the Methodist leader's credulity, Southey determined that in the person of John Wesley, "there could not be a more dangerous counselor for persons with a certain tendency to derangement, for he seems to have delighted to believe extraordinary things which he ought to have doubted, and to have encouraged sallies of enthusiasm which he ought to have repressed." Simply, he accused Wesley of failing to reflect sufficiently upon the state of mind of those persons who approached him with their strange tales of religious dreams and experiences. The Methodist leader, according to the laureate biographer (proving to the world that he had read Shelley’s poem), became "the dupe of his own devout emotions, which in a certain mood, might as well have been excited by the music of an organ or the warbling of a skylark." Such a position, Southey maintained, carried over to Wesley’s preachers, both in Britain and in North America. Southey compared radical religious emotionalism among Methodists as "a rare fire of straw, soon kindled and soon spent, the disposition, whenever it manifested itself, was encouraged rather than checked; so strong is the tendency toward enthusiasm." If, for example, Thomas Coke, "with the advantages of education, rank in life, and the lessons which he derived from Mr. Wesley, when age and long experience had cooled him, could be so led away by sympathy to give his sanction to these proceedings [hysterical preaching and hysterical prayer], it might be expected that preachers who had grown up in a state of semi-civilization [that being Southey’s "tribute" to the state of Britain’s colonies in North America], and were in the first effervescence of their devotional feelings, would go beyond all bounds in their zeal." According to instructions received from their leaders at their Conference, the preachers, "used their utmost endeavors ... to throw men into convictions, into strong sorrow and fear, — to make them inconsolable, refusing to be comforted'; believing that the stronger was the conviction, the speedier was the deliverance." Nonetheless, Southey came to the realization that his subject, overall, possessed the personal strength, resolve, and intellect to catapult his religious organization above and beyond such apparent and often excessive displays of zealousness, thus allowing it to deposit itself safely (if not totally unified) into the next century. "Such was the life, and such the labours, of John Wesley," concluded Southey, "a man of great views, great energy, and great virtues. That he awakened a zealous spirit, not only in his own community, but in a Church which needed something to quicken it, is acknowl-

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6 Southey, 456.
7 Southey, 457.
8 Southey, 481.
edged the members of that Church itself; that he encouraged enthusiasm and extravagance, lent a ready ear to false and impossible relations, and spread superstition, as well as piety would hardly be denied by the candid and judicious among his own people. In its immediate effects the powerful principle of religion, which he and his preachers diffused, has reclaimed many from a course of sin, has supported man in poverty, sickness, and affliction, and has imparted to many a triumphant joy in death. What Wesley says of the miracles wrought at the tomb of the Abbe’ [François de] Paris [1690-1727] may fitly be applied here: ‘In many of these instances, I see great superstitions, as well as strong faith: but God makes allowance for the invincible ignorance, and blesses the faith, notwithstanding the superstition.’”

Southey then turned his attention to the larger issue (and perhaps the more important one) — the then current standing of the religious organization developed by John Wesley: “Concerning the general and remoter consequences of Methodism, opinion will differ. They who consider the wide-spread schism to which it has led, and who know that the welfare of the country is vitally connected with its Church Establishment, may think that the evil be only for a time. In every other sect there is an inherent spirit of hostility to the Church of England, too often and too naturally connected with diseased political opinions. So it was in the beginning, and so it will continue to be, as long as those sects endure. But Methodism is free from this. The extravagances which accompanied its growth are no longer encouraged, and will altogether be discountenanced, as their real nature is understood. This cannot be doubted. It is in the natural course of things that it should purify itself gradually from whatever is objectionable in its institutions. Nor is it beyond the bounds of reasonable hope, that, conforming itself to the original intention of its founders, it may again draw towards the Establishment from which it has seceded, and deserve to be recognized as an auxiliary institution, its ministers being analogous to the regulars, and its members to the tertiaries and various confraternities of the Romish Church. The obstacles to this are surely not insuperable, perhaps not so difficult as they may appear.”

Finally, Southey lashed the person of his subject securely to the religious movement that he had established and maintained: “And were this effected, John Wesley would then be ranked, not only among the most remarkable and influential men of his age, but among the great benefactors of his country and his kind.” Unfortunately, Southey, despite such beneficent accolades, never did extend to Wesley the full credit for his efforts to hold Methodism within the boundaries of the Church of England.

9 Southey, 544-545.
10 Southey, 545-546.
11 Southey, 546.
Reactions to Southey's *Life of Wesley* generally (and not surprisingly) has arranged itself into two distinct categories: (1) Those who admired the work (as Coleridge and Professor Bernbaum) did so, principally, on the basis of the literary quality of the biographer's prose; if they learned something about John Wesley and Methodism in the process, so much the better. (2) Those who cast negative glances upon it, most of them cloaked as professional Methodists, who viewed the work as repetitious and inaccurate. Southey, himself, reacted to the first edition by planning a second one, but he did not live to publish the project. A "corrected" edition appeared in two volumes in 1846, with the posthumous "Remarks" on Wesley's life by Alexander Knox the younger (1757-1831) and notes by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (who had died in 1834) — and edited by the biographer's son, Charles Cuthbert Southey, then curate of Cockermouth, Cumberland. Two years before publication, Southey had written (January 1, 1818) to his friend and patron, Charles Wynne, no doubt anticipating what would follow: "There is no party which I am desirous of pleasing, none which I am fearful of offending, nor am I aware of any possible circumstance which might tend to bias me one way or the other from the straight line of impartial truth. For the bigot I shall be far too philosophical, for the libertine far too pious. The ultra Churchman will think me little better than a Methodist, — and the Methodist will wonder what I am." 12

Although Coleridge knew something of and paid occasional critical and theological attention to John Wesley — as well as to the Armenian-Calvinist controversy — the so-called notes inserted into the 1846 edition principally allowed the reader an opportunity to observe the poet and literary critic extolling the artistic virtues of his friend and brother-in-law while, at the same time, engaging in metaphysical and religious musings. On both a general and personal level outside of those "Notes," Coleridge (repeating the statement cited at the outset of this discussion) embraced Southey's biography of Wesley as "The best work on the subject. The favourite of my library, among many favourites: the book I can read for the twentieth time, when I can read nothing else at all." 13

Therefore, even though Southey's *Life of Wesley* stood as one of Coleridge's most heavily annotated books, the notes published in the 1846 edition generally fail to extend much beyond that level, as evidenced, initially, by this example:

To this work, and the Life of R[ichard]. Baxter, I used to resort whenever sickness and languor made me feel the want of an old

friend whose company I could never be tired. How many and many an hour of self-oblivion do I owe to this Life of Wesley! and how often have I argued with it, questioned, remonstrated, been peevish, and asked pardon — then again listened, and cried, Right! Excellent! and in yet heavier hours intreated it, as it were, to continue talking to me, — for that I heard and listened, and was soothed, though I could make no reply! Ah! that Robert Southey had fulfilled his intention of writing a History of the Monastic Orders, — or would become the biographer at least of Loyola, Xavier, Dominic and the other remarkable Founders.  

In other instance, Coleridge addressed and attempted to justify one of the major shortcomings that contemporary readers uncovered within the work: “The manner in which this most delightful of all books of biography has been received by the Wesleyan Methodists, demonstrated the justice of the main fault which judicious men charge against the work, viz.: partiality towards the sect and its founder; a venial fault, indeed, the liability to which is almost a desirable qualification in a biographer.”

The Methodist preacher Richard Watson (1781-1833) raised a loud voice against Southey’s biography of John Wesley in his The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, to Which Are Subjoined Observations on Southey’s Life of Wesley: Being a Defense of the Characters, Labours, and Opinions of the Founder of Methodism, against the Misrepresentations of That Publication. Watson had initially published the Observations separately in 1820 and then attached that tract to the 1835 edition of his own biography of the Methodist patriarch. Watson received the impression that Southey had falsely accused Wesley of ambition, as did Alexander Knox, who eventually persuaded Southey to look again at his subject. “Mr. Alexander Knox has convinced me,” wrote Southey to the theological commentator and historian James Nichols on August 17, 1835, “that I was mistaken in supposing ambition entered largely into Mr. Wesley’s actuating impulses. Upon the subject he wrote a long and most admirable paper, and gave me permission to affix it to my own work, whenever it might be reprinted. This I shall do, and make such alterations in the book as are required in consequence. The Wesleyan leaders never committed a greater mistake when they treated me as an enemy.” That may be true, but other than inserting extracts from Knox’s “Remarks on the Life and Character of John Wesley,” neither Southey nor subsequent editors really changed the text sufficiently to calm Methodist
critics.

Actually, a number of the problems uncovered within Southey’s biography of Wesley arose from the usual shortcomings inherent in the scholarly methodology of the times. Serious research, when conducted at all (or at all seriously), tended to be primarily archival, which meant that biographers whose subjects had departed their mortal states relatively recently rarely bothered to contact, personally or through correspondence, individuals still alive who might well have had actual contact with them. John Wesley died on March 2, 1791. Southey, as we know, had been working on the biography since 1817, perhaps even before. Had he wished to expend the effort, he could have interviewed or corresponded with a number of persons who had known Wesley or who had heard him preach. Instead, he chose the more convenient (and, probably, during the early decades of the 19th-century, the more practical) means of gathering a number of published sources and reading them. A half century later, in 1870, Luke Tyerman, in a prefatory exercise that unashamedly advanced the merits of his own biography of John Wesley over the weakness that he attributed to his predecessors’ efforts, took aim at Southey’s work and conceded (with a certain degree of accuracy) that volume “has literary charms; but, unintentionally, is full of errors, and for want of dates and chronological exactitude, is extremely confusing.” A paragraph or two below he simply declared Southey’s tome to be, “defective in details, and is incorrect and misleading ....” Finally, Tyerman asserted that, “Southey acknowledges that he ‘had no private sources of information’; and in the list of books from which his materials were chiefly taken, we find nothing but what is in the hands of most Methodist students.” That might well be the most accurate of all criticisms leveled at Southey by Tyerman. However, Tyerman generated his own problems, of course, the principal one being the sainted throne onto which he placed his subject, defending John Wesley’s actions and seeking to preserve, almost without qualification, his reputation among the angels. Thus, on the issue of the strange and seemingly supernatural occurrences that dogged the legitimacy of 18th-century Methodism in the minds’ eyes of its detractors, Tyerman pushed forward and into the trenches of Rev. William Hales (1747-1831) and that Irish divine’s Methodism Inspected (Dublin, 1803, 1805), declaring that Hales; “accounts for these paroxysms on ‘natural grounds; the sympathetic nature of all violent emotions being well known to those who have studied the physical and moral constitution of man.” To illustrate the ignorance of the opposition,
Tyerman inserted a paragraph from Southey’s biography of Wesley on that very issue:

A powerful doctrine [writes Southey], preached with passionate sincerity, produced a powerful effect upon weak minds, ardent feelings, and disordered fancies. These are passions which are as infectious as the plague, and fear itself is not more so than fanaticism. When once these bodily affections were declared to be the throes of a new birth, a free license was proclaimed for every kind of extravagance; and when the preacher encouraged them to throw off all restraint, and abandon themselves before the congregation to these mixed sensations of mind and body, the consequences were what might be anticipated.

"Southey forgets," countered Tyerman, "That ‘powerful doctrine’ was preached, with as much ‘passionate sincerity,’ by [George] Whitefield and by Charles Wesley, as by [John] Wesley himself; but without the same effects. Besides, it is untrue that [John] Wesley ever ‘encouraged’ the affected people ‘to abandon themselves to these mixed sensations of mind and body.’" 20 To bolster his defense, against charges of enthusiasm by Methodists, Tyerman hurled headlong into the rhetorical skirmish Richard Watson, Isaac Taylor (1759-1829), and Wesley himself — the common thesis of all of their arguments being, simply, that excitable persons will, when the proper occasion arises, become excited, and such emotion ought not to be considered evil or even negative behavior.

However, when Tyerman wished to do so, he could find in Southey a useful means by which to raise the intensity of the halo placed atop John Wesley’s head. At the end of his final volume, Tyerman declared that, "In the literature of the age; in its lectures and debates; in chapels and in churches; in synods, congresses, and all sorts of conferences; by the highest lords and the most illustrious commoners, the once persecuted Methodist is now extolled ...." He further maintained that, "... the judgement of Southey, in a letter to [William] Wilberforce [1759-1833], is tacitly confirmed; ‘I consider [John] Wesley [wrote Southey] as the most influential mind of the last century, — the man who will have produced the greatest effects, centuries, or perhaps millenniums hence, if the present race of men should continue so long.’" 21

Interestingly, sixteen years following the publication of the first edition of Tyerman’s biography of John Wesley, in his own 1886 biography of the founder of Methodism, John Telford, a more temperate advocate of Wesley

20 Quoted in Tyerman, 1:265.
21 Tyerman, 3:656.
than Tyerman, referred to "Southey's beautiful and appreciative Life of Wesley [that] has one blot which he himself afterwards recognized and was prepared to remove."

Telford then walked over the familiar ground of the "ambition" issue raised and retracted (at least in his correspondence) by Southey. "Southey never published a second edition himself," continued Telford, and thus the alterations were not made. "His son, the Rev. Cuthbert Southey, gave a similar promise to a member of the Wesley family, but it was never fulfilled." For the non-Methodist (and non-religious) cultural and literary historian Sir Leslie Stephen, writing in 1872 and commenting within the context of the journals and letters of Wesley, concluded only that "The detailed accounts of his [John Wesley's] labours surpasses in interest even the charming biography of Southey." 

Nehemiah Curnock, a contemporary of Stephen, Tyerman, and Telford, occasionally found Southey's biography of Wesley a convenient tool for his not always successful attempts at expanding his reader's knowledge of persons and places. Unfortunately, instead of "expanding" an issue, the editor of Wesley's journals occasionally confused it. Curnock, by the way, cited from the 1889 "Cavendish Library Edition" edited by J.A. Atkinson (see note 2 above). Thus, for example, visiting the Moravians in July-August 1738, Wesley and his party, on their trek to Herrnhut, "came [Monday, July 31, 1738] to Neustadt; but could not procure any lodging in the city. After walking half an hour we came to another little town [one that Wesley failed to identify] and found a sort of inn there. But they told us plainly we should have no lodging with them, for they did not like our looks. About eight we were received at a little house in another village, where God gave us sweet rest. At three in the afternoon [Tuesday, August 1, 1738] I came to Herrnhut, about thirty English miles from Dresden."

In a note to that entry on July 31, in which he explains the "house in another village" as having been, "Built by the roadside, for the instruction of travellers passing by," Curnock directed his reader to Southey, who, for his part, had aimed at a mark somewhat wide of the Rev. Curnock's target: "This place [Herrnhut]," wrote Southey, "the first and still chief settlement of the Moravian Brethren, consisted at that time of about an hundred houses, built upon the great road from Zittau to Lobau [see Wesley's journal entry for August 1, 1738]. The Brethren had chosen to build by the roadside, because they expected to find occasion for offering instruction to travellers as they might be passing by.

23 Telford, 360-361. Telford does not identify by name the "member."
The visitors were lodged in the house appointed for strangers. Here Wesley found one of his friends from Georgia [Johann Christian Adolf von Hermsdorf (1709-1767)] ...." 26 Clearly, Southey had directed his reference to Wesley's residence while he remained in Herrnhut, while Curnock tried to apply that same reference to a house in a totally different place in which Wesley lodged on the day prior to his arrival at the Moravian settlement. Thus, "We had a convenient lodging assigned to us in the house appointed for strangers," wrote Wesley in his journal for August 1, 1738. 27

A second of Curnock's bridges to Southey's biography also related to the Moravians, this one in reference to the conversation between Wesley and Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) at Gray's Inn Walks, London, on Thursday, September 3, 1741. According to his journal for that day, Wesley reported that, "James Hutton [1715-1795] having sent me word that Count Zinzendorf would meet me at three in the afternoon, I went at that time to Gray's Inn Walks. The most material part of our conversation (which I dare not conceal) was as follows — to spare the dead I do not translate [from the Latin]." 28 To avoid confusion here, one should realize that the final sentence of the preceding journal did not appear until its inclusion in the errata sheet for the 1774 edition of John Wesley's Works. Zinzendorf did not die until 1760. The fourth Extract of Wesley's journal, covering the period November 1, 1739 - September 3, 1741 reached publication in 1744. Wesley translated a significant portion of his conversation with the Moravian leader for insertion (pp. 7-8) into A Short View of the Difference between the Moravian Brethren Lately in England, and the Reverend Mr John and Charles Wesley (1741). Henry Moore, in the first volume of his The Life of the Rev. John Wesley (1824-1825) provided a full translation. Curnock left the reader to his or her own devices (or dictionary) for a translation, while Ward and Heitzenrater offered, as a running footnote to the original Latin, Moore's full "literal" translation. 29 Having digested all of that, we now return to Curnock, who, in a footnote following the sentence immediately preceding the Latin dialogue between Wesley and Zinzendorf — "To spare the dead I do not translate" — referred the reader to Southey's chastisement of Wesley for not translating the dialogue. 30 In explaining the separation of Wesley from the Moravians, Southey stated that, "On their part [the Moravians] the separation was not desired: upon the first intelligence of the difference, Count Zinzendorf sent over [August Gottlieb] Spangenberg

26 Southey, 105.
28 Curnock, 2:487-488.
30 Curnock, 2:488; Southey, 189.
[1704-1792] to act as mediator; and Spangenberg having pronounced that the Moravians had been blamable, and had injured Wesley, the Count gave orders that they should ask his forgiveness; and when he found that Wesley had rejected the preferred reconciliation, he came to England himself. The meeting between these personages was arranged by Hutton and took place in Gray’s Inn Walks. They conversed in Latin.”

The [*] in the preceding passage directs the eye to Southey’s footnote which reads: “It is not to the credit of Wesley that these circumstances [i.e., the Moravians’ admission of blame and their apologies to Wesley] are not stated in his journal, and not otherwise recorded than in the conversation with Count Zinzendorf, which, he says, he dared not conceal. But as he [Wesley] printed it in the original Latin, and did not think proper to annex a translation, it was effectively concealed from the great majority of his followers. Neither are they noticed by any of the biographers of Wesley.”

Curnock merely responded that Southey, “had not seen Wesley’s reason for leaving it untranslated.” Essentially, Wesley, for the benefit of both parties, wanted to control, as best he could, both the sound and the sense of his differences with Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians.

Finally, Curnock turned to Southey, the titled laureate of Romanticism, to provide the proper background to an already tender scene. On Friday, April 5, 1782, at 1:00 p.m., John Wesley preached at Oldham, Lancashire, “and was surprised to see all the street lined with little children — and such children as I never before saw till now. Before preaching they only ran round me and before me; but after it, a whole troop, boys and girls, closed me in and would not be content till I shook each of them by the hand.” At that point, Curnock pointed his reader to Southey’s description of the seventy-nine-year-old Wesley, which might or might not have any connection with the incident at Oldham: “Mr. Wesley still continued to be the same marvellous old man [Curnock excluded that first sentence of the paragraph]. No one who saw him, even casually, in his old age, can have forgotten his venerable appearance. His face was remarkably fine; his complexion fresh to the last week of his life; his eye quick, and keen, and active. When you met him in the street of a crowded city, he attracted notice, not only by his band and cassock, and his long hair, white and bright as silver, but by his pace and manner, both indicating that all his minutes were numbered, and that not one was to be lost.”

Within the first half of the 20th-century historians and biographers of Methodism considered Southey slightly or not at all. For example, Arnold

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31 Southey, 189.
32 Southey, 189.
33 Curnock, 2:488.
34 Curnock, 6:347.
35 Southey, 537. Again, Ward and Heitzenrater (23:235) chose not to be distracted by Curnock’s nod toward Southey.
Lunn (1929) promised, in his “Index,” that he would quote from Southey on p. 206, but a close reading of that page reveals that he failed to keep his word — and life proves too short to attempt an excursion through his entire tome.36 A year earlier, Umphrey Lee had reminded his reader that, “Southey’s admirable ‘Life’ (1820) remains the only biography of Wesley written by a distinguished man of letters”37 — which had little or nothing to do with the substance of either volume. Later in the century, Frederick C. Gill (1964), asserted that Southey, “is not always sympathetic or reliable in his Life of Wesley,” but at the least he credited the biographer with accuracy in identifying the various divisions within 18th-century Methodism, as well as underscoring the external threats to the unity of that organization.38 To no one’s surprise, Ward and Heitzenrater (1988) devoted significant space, in the “Introduction” to the initial volume of their edition of John Wesley’s journals and diaries, to a discussion of Wesley’s biographers and editors, and their observations on Southey do indeed merit attention:

Robert Southey’s Life, based on the whole range of printed materials available when he wrote, is much less directly dependent on the substance of the Journal than those of his predecessors, but in general shape and proportion much closer to the Journal than they. Southey has Wesley born and born again in about one sixth of his space; about the same is needed at the end to deal with America and the sum up after the Deed of Declaration (1784); the substance of the book is given to the general ministry of Wesley and to the subtitle, “the rise and progress of Methodism.” For Southey, who wished to state a case against Methodism, knew that if the charges were to lie they must be made against the general tenor of the movement. That Wesley “encouraged enthusiasm and extravagance, lent a ready ear to false and impossible relations, and spread superstition as well as piety, would hardly be denied by the candid and judicious among his own people”; these weaknesses, however, were being healed by the saving processes of time. But, “they who consider the wide-spreading schism to which [Methodism] has led, and who know that the welfare of the country is vitally connected with its Church Establishment, may think that the evil overbalances the good”; and in Southey’s view this hazard had been real, if unperceived, in the movement from an early date.39

36 Arnold Lunn, John Wesley (New York; The Dial Press, 1929), 368, 206
39 Ward and Heitzenrater, 18:96-97.
However, the extant volumes of the Ward and Heitzenrater edition of John Wesley's journals do not pay much attention to Southey's *Life of Wesley*. Indeed their comments stand, almost, as a final critical hurrah upon the 1820 biography of their subject.

If anything, Southey's biography of Wesley belongs to the literary scholars and literary historians of preceding generations as proven by the inclusion by Professor Bernbaum of a short excerpt (that being Wesley’s final days and death) from the *Life of Wesley*, under the title “The Death of John Wesley,” in the initial three editions (1929, 1930, 1933) of his *Anthology of Romanticism.*40 A Southey biographer, Jack Simmons (1945), determined, with total confidence, that although the *Life of Wesley* stood as Southey’s, “second greatest of his biographies .... [it] has never enjoyed the popularity of his *Nelson*, partly because it is a very much bigger book, partly because the subject has not the same splendor ...; but it has steadily kept its place nevertheless, and it is still alive.” Further, in considering *The Life of Wesley* to have been more of a controversial tract that a piece of pure biography, Simmons, combining a defense of Southey with a justification of him, maintained that, “*The Life of Wesley* ... shows one rather surprising virtue: a considerable measure of charity. It is as if Wesley had imparted something of his own spirit to his biographer, for it was a charity that went hand in hand with narrow-mindedness. He wished to do justice to the Methodists although he was not in sympathy with them. That might have been a bad foundation for biography, but in this case it was an excellent one: it meant that Southey was free from any tendency to worship his subject, to make the *Life* a piece of dead hagiography [a biography of a saint]; and it gave the book that quality of cold, clear daylight which makes its portrayal of Wesley so convincing.”41

On the dark but obviously realistic side of the issue, however, according to the lament offered forth by Kenneth Hopkins (1973), “Southey is generally remembered only for the *Life of Nelson*, and a few short pieces, such as the ‘The Inchcape Rock’ [1797] and ‘The Battle of Blenheim’ [1798]. His admirable biography of John Wesley is almost wholly forgotten~ his great histories are almost wholly ignored, and the very solid merits of his poems fail to secure them readers. I know of no great writer who is so sparingly read.”42 In the final determination, then, one needs to consider into which niche to place Southey’s *Life of John Wesley*: as an example of the writer’s “charming” prose style and “charitable tone,” or as an “admirable” biography intended to advance the biographer’s theological and political agenda.

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Since Southey’s work failed to achieve or sustain its potential in either of those areas, and thus even to merit a respectable degree of recognition, his overall literary reputation may deserve Hopkins’ eulogy. Along with that reputation, Southey’s *Life of Wesley* appears, sadly enough, as equally deserving, a work to be resurrected for discussion on such occasions as birth dates, anniversaries, and memorials.

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