



# DISCOVERY

Edited by  
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## A Lost Letter Leads to a Research Project

I lost a valuable letter by Robert Southey, one time poet-laureate of England. I do not mean that I mislaid the letter, or that I threw it away, or that I carelessly left it on a street car or in a taxi. The fact is I never actually owned the letter. A friend who knows of my interest in John Wesley phoned me that he had just received a catalogue in which a letter written by Robert Southey was advertised. In the letter, the catalogue stated, Southey commented on the evangelical and particularly the Methodist reaction to his book, published in 1820, on the life of John Wesley. Unfortunately, when we telephoned the book dealer, the letter had already been sold. I had evidently lost it either to a collector of Robert Southey or a Wesleyana collector. However, the experience was helpful. It renewed my interest in Southey's *Life of Wesley* and the story of its reception by the evangelicals and especially the Methodists. In addition, I was led to several research projects in connection with the biography.

## A Singularly Curious Book

While he was working on his biography of Wesley, Southey wrote to several persons that the book bid fair to be a "singularly curious book," and in some ways it was! After the book was completed, Southey wondered whether the biography was worth all the time and effort that had gone into its writing. It had been well researched from materials that were widely scattered and it had taken considerable time to assemble and organize. However, in 1820, when it was first published, it proved to be not only the best biography of Wesley that had been written to that date, but it was also the first biography of the churchman that obtained literary standing. It was written in the impeccable style for which the author was noted, and it included thumbnail sketches of Wesley's co-workers and a picture of the rise of the whole Methodist movement. Southey looked upon parts of the work as "both in matter and manner . . . among the best things I have written." (Letter to Grosvenor C. Bedford, December 5, 1818.)

### The Evangelical and Methodist Reaction

The evangelicals and particularly the Methodists were greatly distressed by the book. On February 7, 1821 Southey, himself, wrote to Messrs. Longman and Company:

There is an entertaining account of my 'Wesley' in the last 'Evangelical Magazine' in all respects worthy of that enlightened Journal. They set me down for a book-maker, treat me with great contempt for my ignorance of Theology and ecclesiastical history, and hint, at the close, that what I can expect for such a book is - *Damnation*.

A number of other critics commented on Southey's ignorance of theology, including Cardinal Newman. On the fly-leaf of a copy of the Bohn edition of the work published in 1864 he wrote:

I have nearly finished Southey's 'Wesley' which is a very superficial concern indeed; interesting, of course. He does not treat it historically in its connection with the age, and he cannot treat it theologically if he would. . . .

At one time I owned the volume in which the Cardinal had written his appraisal, but I gave it to Drew University when I presented the University my collection of Wesleyana.

Probably the keenest criticism of Southey's work on Wesley came from the pen of Richard Watson, a prominent Wesleyan Methodist who, at the request of the Wesleyan Conference in England, published in 1821 a 228 page book offering what has been termed "a detailed and able criticism of the defects of Southey's theological knowledge and understanding of Wesley." (*Robert Southey*, ed. by Lionel Madden, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, 273.)

Watson first paid tribute to the literary worth of the book and admitted that "the facts had been collected with diligence; and the narrative [was] creditable to the literary character of the writer." He then followed this commendation with a detailed and exhaustive criticism of the statements and interpretations of Southey's appraisal of Wesley's character and intentions.

What annoyed the Methodists most was that Southey charged Wesley with ambition, and stressed the love of power as the leading, though sometimes the unconscious, motive of his actions.

In addition, the Methodists objected to Southey's explanation that mental disease may have been the cause of the strange reactions to Wesley's sermons. He was scornful also of the doctrine of the new birth and attributed much of Wesley's success to his direct preaching which was capable of producing a "powerful effect upon weak minds, ardent feelings, and disordered fancies." (*Robert Southey and His Age*, by Geoffrey Carnall, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1960, 208.)

Aside from any legitimate criticism of Southey's work, however, the biography is exceedingly well written. Because of the fame and reputation of its author, the biography was widely read, and Wesley's name and

life came to be known among a much larger audience than would otherwise have been the case.

Few people today, except scholars, read the nineteenth and twentieth century biographies of Wesley, but many people search for and read Southey's delightful work. It is considered worthy to stand beside Southey's greatest project - his life of Nelson.

Southey, himself, was not an irreligious man. His views shifted from time to time, but toward the end of his life he considered himself a Christian and an Anglican. Many persons would have challenged this idea, for Southey did not believe in the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the atonement, or the necessity of the new birth. Southey's basic belief was in the personal immortality of the soul. Geoffrey Carnall, one of Southey's biographers, wrote:

To one doctrine, at least, Southey was passionately attached - the belief in personal immortality. As his wife, hopelessly insane, lay dying, he wrote that there had been times in his life when his heart would have broken if this doctrine had not supported him. 'At this moment, it is worth to me more than all the world would give.'

### Research Projects

Southey once stated that he had received from a Methodist reader, interpretations, corrections and other material that, were he to include all of it in a later edition, would increase the size of his book by one third. It would be interesting to compare the various editions of the biography - and there were many - to discover what changes, if any, Southey made in the various drafts. It is said that he withdrew the charge that Wesley was motivated by his love for power.

It would also be instructive to study the footnotes of the various editors to discover what their reactions were to the more debatable portions of Southey's work.

It would be informative to go through Southey's letters and cull out his references to Wesley and his book. In a two volume work entitled *New Letters of Robert Southey*, edited by Kenneth Curry and published by Columbia University Press in 1965, for example, there is a communication in which Southey claims to have been forwarded a letter which supposedly had been written by one of Wesley's female disciples which very seriously affected Wesley's character. The missive is a copy of one of those letters which Mrs. Wesley carried off when she finally separated from him. As such, however, it would be considered suspect, although the Dean of Worcester, from whom Southey received the letter, vouched for its authenticity.

At any rate, there is still plenty of research to be done in connection with this - one of the best of the early biographies of John Wesley.