

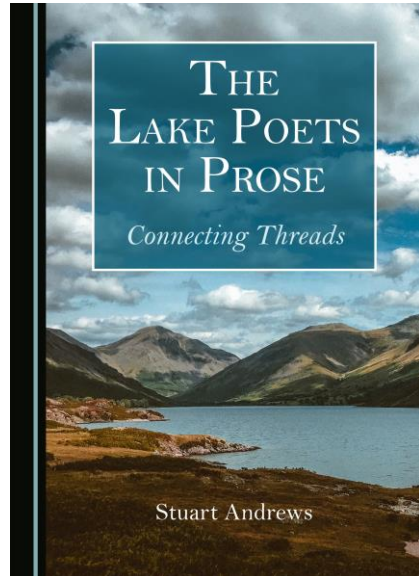
Christopher Corbin

reads

The Lake Poets in Prose: Connecting Threads

by Stuart Andrews¹

IN *THE LAKE POETS IN PROSE: CONNECTING THREADS*, historian Stuart Andrews offers readers a tour through his twenty-five-year scholarly engagement with English Romanticism. This work gathers together previously published or presented pieces appearing between 1996 and 2018, of which eighteen are essays and one a book review. As a collection of pieces published or presented independently of each other, this volume offers not so much a central claim or thesis as themes or loci that come into focus in looking at Andrews's extended and careful engagement with Robert Southey, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. As the title suggests, a primary interest is exploring these figures through their prose work, especially their journalism, letters, pamphlets, and public lectures. Three primary themes emerge from engagement with that prose: locating the thinkers and their ideas within their larger contemporary context, clarifying the nature and development of their revolutionary politics, and exploring their religious thought, especially as it impacted political and social arrangements. That Andrews would look at religion as connected to politics and society exemplifies his desire to find or forge various connections as alluded to in the book's subtitle. These connections appear in comparing Lake Poets to each other, to figures outside their group, and to themselves, looking at earlier and later forms of an individual's thought. This last point, of positing continuity between these thinkers' younger and more mature positions in the face of what Andrews contends was a scholarly consensus for a wide gap between them, shows another theme that comes through at several points in this volume—a desire to challenge conventional scholarly wisdom and enter controversial interpretive territory. Finally, there is the emphasis on the Lake Poets' relationship to Bristol. As Andrews says in his preface, 'Southey himself was a Bristolian, while in the 1790s both Coleridge and Wordsworth had links with the city', and many of the essays highlight Bristol as a location where ideas were developed and relationships formed (ix).



¹ Stuart Andrews, *The Lake Poets in Prose: Connecting Threads* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021).

The essays in *The Lake Poets in Prose* are arranged into four thematic sections. The first contextualizes certain aspects of the Lake Poets' political views and aspirations. The first two essays deal specifically with the formulation of Coleridge and Southey's unrealized pantisocratic venture, in particular showing that what is often dismissed as a 'youthful and essentially West-Country aberration' actually germinated in the soil of a broader enlightenment and especially Unitarian landscape of Utopian visions of North American settlement (3). The concluding essay of this section shifts from the specific context of Pantisocracy to a biographical sketch of the anti-Jacobin pamphleteer William Cobbett to show at several points the intersection of his life with Coleridge's, including Coleridge's admiration for Cobbett's *Political Register* and his desire to imitate Cobbett's production methods in printing *The Friend*.

The second section offers five reflections on Southey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth's relationships to revolutionary politics, particularly attempting to show that there is not so great a distance between these thinkers' radical politics in the 1790s and their supposed reactionary turn in the early nineteenth century. The first essay does this by moderating claims to Coleridge's early radicalism, showing the Jacobin label an unfair description of his vision of a revolution brought about through a progressively more and more educated populace supported by a Christianity purified of superstition. The second and third essays on revolutionary politics seek to bring the earlier and more mature views closer together from the other end, moderating claims of a conservative drift with age. Affiliation with eccentric physician Thomas Beddoes and his concern for the poor meant that the *Lyrical Ballads* were unlikely to represent 'a retreat from social and political protest' on Wordsworth and Coleridge's part (54). Similarly, support for the liberation of Spain and Portugal, including the overthrow of their monarchies, during the Peninsular War shows that 'by 1810, whatever their critics might say, the Lake Poets had not abandoned libertarian causes' (64).

Andrews then continues to pull on the thread of the Lake Poets' relationship to Arthur Wellesley, first Duke of Wellington. The period of the Peninsular War saw Southey, Wordsworth, and Coleridge heap harsh criticism on the Duke for what they saw as undue leniency toward the French in the Cintra Convention. The very next chapter, however, has our thinkers seemingly reverse course, or at least significantly mitigate their early disdain, coming to hold the Duke in considerably higher esteem for his essential role in the victory at Waterloo and Napoleon's defeat. The final essay of this section on revolutionary politics looks at how, after the domestic upheavals starting in 1816, Southey and Coleridge warmed to greater press censorship, with Coleridge entertaining the possibility in theory if not in practice and Southey actively advocating for it, including draconian punishments for infractions. It is unclear whether these last two essays were meant to further the claim of a smaller distance between the early and late politics of the Lake Poets—if anything, they do the opposite by showing a rise in patriotic sentiment and

support for civil order over liberty consonant with an increasingly conservative politics. In any case, the volume's introductory essay does not clearly link these chapters, as it does with the first three of the section, to an attempt to counter the scholarly consensus. *The Lake Poets in Prose* is, after all, an anthology, and one cannot expect articles written decades apart for different audiences and purposes, even if addressing similar themes, to offer a tight, sustained argument.

This section offers the opportunity to highlight one of the great strengths of Andrews's work, namely his attention to factual detail. His engagement with primary source material is impressive, and his authority as a careful and diligent historian comes through clearly. He seems at his best in offering context—historical, social, and political—for the lives and ideas of the Lake Poets. However, this emphasis on expounding the facts sometimes left me wondering 'so what?' and wishing for more connections between the facts and an argument about their significance for an overall understanding of the Lake Poets. A case in point is the sketch of Beddoes: Andrews thoroughly establishes the experimental physician as an enlightenment humanitarian and opponent of Pitt, accomplishing his primary goal of giving 'Beddoes due credit for the breadth of his social and political concerns' (53). However, I found myself wanting a much more developed argument for what appears, in my estimation, to be the real takeaway of Beddoes's being in the Bristol circle, namely, that this pushes against the perception that the *Lyrical Ballads* show an initial retreat on the part of Coleridge and Wordsworth from the politics of protest that characterized that group. The actual argument takes up only two paragraphs and requires the reader to accept both that Coleridge, against the evaluations of Southey, Lloyd, and Lamb, correctly assessed Beddoes's parody of the *Lyrical Ballads* as affection *and* that Beddoes's acceptance of the work implied his understanding and acceptance of its political implications.

The discussions of revolutionary politics yield to a third section dedicated to exploring the role of religion in the thought of the Lake Poets. Excepting the final essay detailing Southey's considerable engagement with Islam occasioned by research for his romance, *Thalaba the Destroyer*, as well as a shorter description of Coleridge's interest in the religion, this section focuses on the thinkers' own religious views, especially as they came to understand the role of the Church of England and wrestled with the question of Catholic emancipation. Beginning with an exploration of Coleridge's early Unitarianism, Andrews argues that Coleridge's defense of what he saw as a true and pure scriptural Christianity animated his passion for truth and political reform rather than standing as a curious and somewhat incongruous add-on. The next three essays offer insight into the Lake Poets' perspective on Catholic emancipation in the 1820s. Southey's engagement with St. Dominic helps explain his resistance to Catholic emancipation insofar as it illuminates his belief that Catholic power would mean a return to the perceived 'persecuting policies of the thirteenth century' (106). The next three chapters show how Southey's *Book of the Church*, Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, and Coleridge's *On the*

Constitution of the Church and State speak to the importance of a national church for national unity. Southey and Wordsworth paint the Church of England as a bulwark against papal tyranny, corruption, and superstition, and Coleridge could at times write in similar terms. Both Southey and Coleridge developed a sense of disdain for Catholicism, seeing it as inculcating superstition and ignorance, after spending time in majority-Catholic countries—Portugal and Malta respectively. However, Coleridge's mature position in *On the Constitution of the Church and State* offered a more pragmatic rationale that a national church needed to be free of foreign control, resulting in his more moderate position of allowing Catholic laity admission to parliament and all offices below the monarchy and a willingness after the Catholic Emancipation Act to admit that his fears never materialized.

The essays on religion provide the fullest and most fruitful evidence of Andrews's capacity as a connector of threads. He proves able not only to connect the developing positions of the various Lake Poets across time but to bring into focus the interpenetrative nature of these thinkers' concerns—politics and religion cannot and should not be easily disentangled for these Romantic thinkers. However, if there is one significant opportunity for further development in this section, it is in incorporating more of Coleridge's prose work. Significant prose works touching on Coleridge's developing unitive theological vision are hardly touched on, as with *Aids to Reflection* or the *Biographia Literaria*, or are not touched on at all, as with the 1818–19 lectures on the history of philosophy. Engagement with these lectures would have allowed Coleridge's often more nuanced views about both medieval Western Christianity and the English Reformation to stand in conversation with Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sketches* and Southey's *Book of the Church*.

The book concludes with a kind of potpourri of essays connected mainly by a focus on Southey followed by an epilogue consisting of Andrews's positive review of Helen Boyles's *Romanticism and Methodism: The Problem of Religious Enthusiasm*. The final section's first essay walks through Southey's letters to and about Coleridge from 1799–1803. The section's second essay details Southey's interest in and continued defense of the reputation and genius of Thomas Chatterton, as well as the publication and reception of his 1803 edition of Chatterton's collected works. Next comes an essay contextualizing Coleridge's time in Malta from 1804–6, a time that would prove pivotal for his return to Trinitarian orthodoxy, by showing how Coleridge's desire for time in warmer climates owed much to a dream forged in common with and given definition by Southey. The section's final essay charts Southey's development and self-conception as a historian. This concluding section offers rich material to mine for a deeper understanding of Southey's own personality and disposition, offering an image of a man committed to detail and accuracy, exhibiting a paternal need to defend and direct those he cared for—whether literally with Coleridge or in terms of reputation and reception in the case of Chatterton.

In all, *The Lake Poets in Prose* is an impressive presentation of Stuart Andrews's twenty-five years of dedicated and careful engagement with some of the most important figures in English Romanticism. Readers interested in Wordsworth, Southey, and Coleridge will doubtless walk away with fruitful insights and new connections. The book's few weaknesses mainly consist in its having places where the reader is required to supply their own understanding of the significance of the still excellent historical description. While some links may be a bit looser than the introduction would suggest, Andrews indeed accomplishes his goal of connecting threads, weaving a wonderful tapestry presenting the context, development, and cross-fertilization of the Lake Poets' lives and thought.