

Andrew O. Winckles

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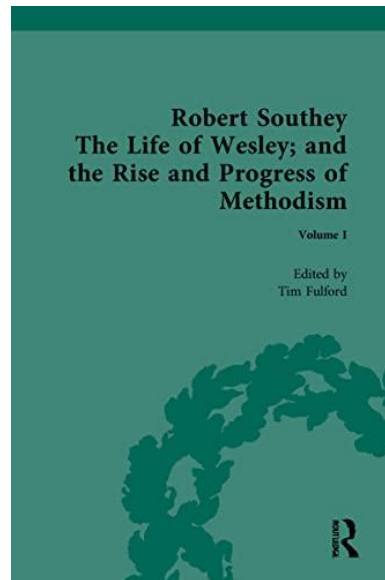
The Life of Wesley; and the Rise and Progress of Methodism

by Robert Southey

edited by Tim Fulford¹

IT IS, PERHAPS, NOT SURPRISING that Robert Southey's *The Life of Wesley; and the Rise and Progress of Methodism* has been relatively little studied by both historians of Methodism and Romanticists. On the one hand, Methodist historians (many of whom have been Methodists themselves) tend to be suspicious of the objectivity of Southey's sometimes critical biography of Methodism's founder; while on the other hand, Romanticists have often not quite known how to place the book in the context of Southey's other works. In this light, Tim Fulford's new critical edition of *The Life of Wesley* is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the relationship between Methodism and Romanticism and will undoubtedly become a critical source for the further exploration of how these two movements were in conversation with one another.

In his excellent Editorial Introduction to the volume, Fulford clearly lays out the ways in which Southey's biography (the first by a non-Methodist) acts not so much as a history of Methodist theology, but instead a psychological study of Wesley's temperament as well as a sociological exploration the ways in which he learned how to manipulate the beliefs and actions of others. While Southey comes to admire many of Wesley's characteristics, and particularly his ability to organize large groups of people into a movement, he nonetheless is extremely suspicious of the ways in which Wesley encouraged and then validated enthusiasm and enthusiastic behavior among his followers. As Fulford points out, Southey's 'deepest concern, throughout, was Methodism's power to generate, on a mass scale, irrational conviction—"enthusiasm" and "fanaticism". In the hands of a charismatic "consul" like Wesley . . . Methodism seemed to Southey a tremendous social force that could be used for good or bad' (xv). He is particularly suspicious of the physical manifestations of spiritual conviction—the convulsions, trembling, crying out, prophesying, trances, etc. that accompanied many of the early Methodist meetings and which Wesley came to see as evidence of the effectiveness of his



¹ Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley; and the Rise and Progress of Methodism*, ed. Tim Fulford, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 2022) (all citations will appear in text; the volumes are numbered consecutively).

work and a validation of himself as a great spiritual leader, instead of a manifestation of potentially destabilizing social and religious forces.

In this, Southey rightfully recognizes that the power of Methodism and, in his view, its greatest danger, was not in its theology (he even includes a long chapter on the history of the Church of England leading up to the advent of Methodism, which ultimately concludes that Methodist theology is fundamentally orthodox), but in the ways in which Wesley and his followers learned how to affect, even manipulate, the feelings and outward behaviors of his followers through media technologies. It was the immediacy of the social experience of field preaching, hymn singing, and Methodist class meetings that fueled Methodist enthusiasm and which left audiences, according to Fulford, 'prone to manipulation by demagogues who were able, by exciting speeches, to whip their hopes and fears into an unthinking "enthusiasm"' (xvi) and leave listeners susceptible to misdirection into the type of mob violence that Southey identified with the latter stages of the Revolution in France.

Southey also recognized the fundamental danger of a charismatic leader like Wesley (or Robespierre) evoking such a degree of reverence among his followers and, as a result, such a degree of control over their lives and behaviors. While he does not question Wesley's good intentions, he recognizes that Wesley himself was perhaps not always aware of how his actions were influenced by his own (often sublimated) desires and his particularly rigid expectations for human behavior. A signal example of this, which Southey devotes a lot of space to, is Wesley's extremely troubled relationships with women. From his doomed relationship with Sophia Hopkey in Georgia, to his disastrous marriage to Mary Vazeille, who left him and publicly accused him of inappropriate intimacy with other women, to the accusations of sexual impropriety from Elizabeth Briggs (which Southey did not publish but Fulford documents in an Appendix), to the many ways in which Wesley invited intimate communication from his female followers, Southey views Wesley's relationships as a leading example of how an individual with so much power could consciously or unconsciously manipulate others for their own purposes under the guise of spiritual direction. His interest in these accusations of sexual impropriety is not prurient or sensationalist, but, as Fulford puts it, 'related to his central need to understand what he saw as the key new trend in world history—fanaticism. In much of his writing, he was trying to understand the psycho-social conditions that produce fanaticism—that, for instance, foment fanatics' belief that they are being supernaturally guided' (xxvii). This critical focus on Wesley's relationships is no doubt one of the many reasons that Southey's biography was so negatively received by Methodist readers and reviewers, and yet Southey's purpose was not to expose Wesley (a man whom he in many ways admired) but instead get at the fundamental contradictions of his nature, which are reflected in the movement he inspired.

In this characterization, Wesley himself becomes a fundamentally Romantic figure. He is a man torn between reason and emotion, between immediate sense impression and considered temperate reflection. He believes in the power of mediated communication to build a mass movement and is also terrified of the ill uses to which such a movement could be put. This is the fundamentally unresolvable conflict at the heart of Methodist belief and which we see over and over again in the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and

Southey. They all *want* to believe, but ultimately shrink back from the implications of that belief. As Fulford puts it, ‘Southey’s Wesley reflected aspects of the author that he did not recognize about himself . . . [he] condemns but also illustrates enthusiasm so often that he begins to protest too much, and the reader suspects his fascination by and even identification with it—as if it revealed a religion of the heart and a supernatural communication in which he desired to believe but that he would not allow himself to indulge’ (xxx). This tension within both Methodism and Romanticism is illustrated throughout the text and is itself a direction for further scholarly exploration that Fulford’s edition will help make possible.²

Indeed, Fulford’s editing of the two volumes of the *Life*, complete with an Editorial Introduction, extensive notes, and helpful appendices that include materials on Brigg’s accusations of sexual impropriety, contemporary reviews of the *Life*, and other important primary sources, is comprehensive and adept, but not intrusive. He works from the first edition (1820) as a copy text, but the volumes are a collated text of the first, second, and third editions, which is particularly notable as the third edition (1846) included many of the marginalia that Coleridge wrote on his copy of the *Life*. In this, we get to see not only Coleridge in conversation with Southey, but also in conversation with Wesley and, in many cases, the three men in conversation with each other.

Coleridge is often even more suspicious of Wesley’s motives and character than Southey. For example, he writes the following inscription in response to Southey’s opinion that Wesley fundamentally loved God with all his heart:

Rooted ambition, restless appetite of power and primacy, with a vindictive spirit, breaking out into slanders against those who interfered with his ruling passion, and a logical shadow-fight with notions and words, sustained by the fervour of the game, with an entire absence and unsusceptibility of ideas and tranquil depths of being,—in short, my, myself, in a series of disguises and self-delusions. Such is the sum of Southey’s statement: and are these compatible with the same Wesley at the same time assuredly loving God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his strength? If it were right and possible for a man to love himself in God,—yet, can he love God in himself, otherwise than by making his-self his God?—S.T.C. (253)

In other places Coleridge defends Wesley’s theology when Southey critiques it, arguing that it was fundamentally in line with the Church of England. In many ways Coleridge understands even better than Southey that it is not Wesley’s theology that offends, but the means through which he communicates this theology to the masses. Thus, the Coleridge marginalia are one of the best sources we have for understanding the influence of Wesley on British life and the ways in which some contemporary non-Methodists viewed the movement.

Fulford also extensively documents the many sources that Southey consulted while writing the biography, which included all the major published biographies of Wesley at the time, along with Wesley’s extensive published

² See also Jasper Cragwall, *Lake Methodism: Polite Literature and Popular Religion in England, 1780–1830* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2013).

works, including many of his letters, journals, and sermons. It has always seemed strange to me that, despite his meticulous research, Southey does not appear to have consulted the living members of the Wesley family, which included Charles Wesley's wife, Sarah Gwynne Wesley, and children: Charles Wesley Jr., Samuel Wesley, and Sarah (Sally) Wesley. Sally Wesley, in particular, was somewhat known in literary circles at the time and was also friendly with William Wilberforce, whom Southey consulted while researching the *Life*. In fact, Sally Wesley published her own *Lines to the Memory of the First Methodist Preachers* in 1826 and there is evidence that Anna Letitia Barbauld (who was also her fourth cousin through Wesley's grandmother, Susannah Wesley) consulted her about the accuracy of Joseph Nightingale's critical 1807 *Portraiture of Methodism* (which was one of Southey's sources for the *Life*).³ Perhaps Southey did not have the time or means to contact the Wesley family, or perhaps the family, which was very protective of John Wesley's legacy, had no interest in participating in a non-Methodist biography of the man and his movement.

All in all, Fulford's new edition of *The Life of Wesley* is a tremendous contribution to our understandings of Wesley, Southey, Methodism, and Romanticism. For the first time we have a comprehensive, critical text that makes this much neglected but important text easily accessible to scholars in multiple disciplines. My hope is that this volume will continue to spark critical exploration of the nexus between religion, social movements, and literature in the long eighteenth-century.

³ See Andrew O. Winckles, *Eighteenth-Century Women's Writing and the Methodist Media Revolution* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019).