

Tim Fulford, ed., *The Life of Nelson, by Robert Southey*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021. Pp. xxxi + 368. £115. ISBN 9780367023089.

Few Romantic-period biographies have been republished and reprinted as frequently as Robert Southey's *Life of Nelson*. The first edition was published in 1813, eight years after the death of its subject, Horatio Nelson. In a letter to his uncle Herbert Hill, Southey noted that 'this was a subject I should never have dreamt of touching, if it had not been thrust upon me', and proceeded with the aim of 'making the narrative continuous & clear'. As Southey predicted, this has undoubtedly been integral to the biography's success, and is an aspect that Fulford's new edition celebrates.

Fulford's editorial introduction acknowledges Southey's discipline as a writer. Focused, well-researched, and attentive to deadlines, Southey noted the limitations offered by previous biographies of Nelson, such as those by James Harrison (1806), John Charnock (1806), and T. O. Churchill (1808). These biographies were written to respond to the public appetite and offer personal insights into the developing idolatry of Nelson as a war hero. Fulford discusses how Southey, however, seemed sensitive to Nelson's still-living wife Frances Nelson (1759-1831), and saw his role as biographer as an ethical one, which excluded details of Nelson's marital infidelity whilst also attempting to include Emma Hamilton's 'positive effects on Nelson in his last years' (xv).

Through this discussion of politics, networks, and the responsibility of the biographer, Fulford recovers Southey as an author who worked in collaboration with others to achieve the accurate and concise narrative he aspired to. As Fulford discusses, a dedication to the patriotic poet and First Secretary of the Admiralty John Wilson Croker enabled Southey to publicly align his biography with an individual who had both naval and poetic experience, whilst also thanking Croker for the promotion of Southey's brother Thomas which he had supported. Thomas Southey, in turn, helped with proof-checking, which was of particular importance for naval terminology.

By detailing the composition and construction of Southey's *Life of Nelson*, Fulford makes the reader critically aware of what the narrative tells us about Southey as a writer, and not just Nelson as the subject. This is complemented by sections on the Romantic-period and later reception of the biography, and Fulford includes details of how even Byron – who would later write about dunking Southey in Derwentwater, amongst worse things – admired Southey's 'perfect' prose.

Of course, this biography did not just popularise Southey as a talented biographer but marked a significant moment in the formation of the Nelson myth. Fulford's discussion of key themes in the text opens with how it contributed to the popularisation of 'the Romantic hero; because it relocates patriotism in the professional middle classes; because it idealises the nation; and because it pioneers psychological biography' (xxvii). Within this, the paradox of Nelson's naval victories causing the decline of his physical health but the increase of his mental resolve became a key argument in the developing narrative of the Nelson myth. Fulford articulates this as 'bravery and effectiveness are relocated from the martial body to the determined mind', consequently accruing 'some of the mythic power traditionally possessed by Christian martyrs' (xvii).

Much like the developing myth of Nelson during the Romantic period, Fulford ensures that the reader is aware that the *Life of Nelson* was an evolving text, adapted by Southey to reflect his changing politics, exhibiting a 'sceptical independence, critical of government past and present whilst also alarmist about popular democracy' (xxix). This is when Fulford makes one of the most important points about Southey's depiction of Nelson: the admiral resembles Southey himself. In Fulford's words, 'Southey made Nelson a romantic embodiment of the national character as he wished it to be' (xxix).

The text of this edition is from the first edition published in 1813, critically justified by the cultural impact of its initial publication, but also by the correspondence and ephemera in which Southey discusses the process of composition and publication, which rightly inform the notes and editorial introduction of Fulford's edition. The last words of this review must be given to Southey himself, who in the introduction to the *Life* exhibits his motivations for undertaking the role of biographer, and the research-driven focus for his work which we, as literary historians, can empathise with: 'the best eulogy of Nelson is the faithful history of his actions, and the best history must be that which shall relate them most perspicuously' (4).

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