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LETTERS FROM ENGLAND by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella [Robert Southey]



Ed. Carol Bolton
(Routledge / Taylor & Francis: The Pickering Masters Series, 2016)
Reviewed by [Stuart Andrews](#) on 2016-11-10.

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This is the first critical edition of Southey's *Letters from England* since Jack Simmons's Cresset Press edition of 1951, republished by Alan Sutton in 1984. In his brief editorial introduction (supported by quotations from the only collections of Southey's letters then available), Simmons cites Southey's own advance notice of the work in a letter to Charles Wynn from J. W. Warter's *Selections from the Letters* (1856): "I am writing letters from England by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella, in which will be introduced all I know and much of what I think respecting this country and these times. The character personified that of an able man, bigoted in his religion, and willing to discover such faults and such symptoms of declining power here as may soothe or gratify the national inferiority which he cannot but feel" (Simmons xv, citing Warter 1: 282). Following Warter, Simmons dates the letter 28 July 1804, but part 3 of the Romantic Circles online edition (2011) of the [Collected Letters of Robert Southey \(CLRS\)](#) confirms Kenneth Curry's later dating of 28 July 1805. Yet [Part 2 of the online letters](#) reveals an even earlier reference. On 29 October 1803, Southey wrote to his brother Tom: "I shall write the volume of letters which you have heard me talk of -- an omnium-gatherum of the odd things I have seen in England" (*CLRS* 2: 847). Southey does not yet name the fictitious Catholic Spaniard, but the implication is that Espriella's comments on English oddities are Southey's own.

This new edition, commissioned by Pickering & Chatto but now appearing under the Routledge imprint, demonstrates just how far the methodology of literary criticism has advanced in the past 65 years. Carol Bolton's 60-page introduction is footnoted with frequent references to recent scholarship and to the *CLRS*, which Bolton herself has helped to edit. In addition, the 1807 text of *Letters from England* is supported by a chronology of Southey's life, editorial endnotes to the text itself, a bibliography separating newspapers and periodicals from books and articles, and (as appendices) a description of the original manuscript together with foreshadowing excerpts from Southey's *Commonplace Book*.

Apart from the much expanded critical apparatus of this new edition, there is a notable contrast in emphasis between Simmons and Bolton regarding religion. Published in 1807, with a second edition in 1808, *Letters from England* appeared at a time of intense religious controversy. Reciting the political events of 1801 in Letter XII, Espriella reports Pitt's resignation over George III's opposition to Catholic Emancipation. By the time the *Letters* were published, another Prime Minister, Lord Grenville, had just resigned in response to George III's refusal to allow Catholics to serve as officers in the armed forces. This second resignation triggered a "No Popery" election, which led to the continuance of a ministry now committed to denying any further concessions to Catholics -- a course that Southey approved (*CLRS* 3: 1318). Espriella's comments on Catholicism must be read in this context.

Esriella is amazed at the number of religious orders that have been granted asylum in Protestant England following the nationalization of the Catholic Church in France. "Who would have hoped to live to see these things in England?" he asks (Letter XXVIII). "Who indeed?" is Southey's unspoken response. Although Espriella mentions only the Benedictine monks from Dunkirk, he lists communities of refugee nuns from Brussels and Bruges, Liege and Louvain, Cambrai, Ghent and Montargi, together with the Poor Clares, Teresians and Carthusians. The length of the list is Southey's way of deploring the extent of the Catholic invasion -- not least because (as Espriella notes with satisfaction) the convents are recruiting novices from respectable English families. Similarly, Southey begins Letter XXIX with Espriella's list of more than 40 "heretical sects in this country."

Not surprisingly, reviewers pointed to the implausibility of a Spaniard's possessing such detailed knowledge of English Protestant Dissent, but they were also alarmed by the revelation of the sheer multiplicity of sects -- as Southey doubtless intended. Understandably, Southey devotes whole chapters to Methodists (Letter LIII) and Quakers (Letter LVIII), but more surprisingly, he also accords separate chapters to the self-styled millennialist prophets Richard Brothers (LXIX) and Joanna Southcott (LXX). Yet Southey himself had a collection of Southcott publications, while Brothers's prophecy that an earthquake would destroy London led to a temporary exodus from the city. Such hysteria was certainly sufficiently destabilizing for Espriella to declare that the English are not only unbelievers but "miserably prone to superstition" (369). [Readers consulting first printings of this edition need to know that a last-minute change in pagination has shifted by four pages all quotations from the *Letters (LE)* that are cited in the introduction. Thus a reference to page 365 in the introduction corresponds to 369 in the text. The discrepancy has been corrected in more recent printings.]

In 1951, Simmons considered that "to a modern reader the one fault of the *Letters*, is that they contain too much about religion, so as to overweight the book" (xxi). He concedes that Southey himself believed that "the most compleat part will be the view of the different religious sects in the country -- in which I think no former historian of heresies has equalled me" (xxi; see *CLRS* 3: 1267). Simmons nevertheless thinks that the imbalance is "a serious fault." In 1975, Kenneth Curry's biography of Southey repeated the complaint: "The greatest flaw in *Letters from England* to a reader of the present day is the excessive number of letters devoted to religious groups...and to these must be added accounts of churches and cathedrals, where curious bits of ecclesiastical history or biography are often interpolated." And Curry echoes Simmons in finding that the proportion of space delivered to religious aspects of English life is "out of balance" (Curry, *Southey*, 79-80).

Yet Southey was not writing for a future secular-minded readership. This is the Southey who had dreamed as a schoolboy of writing epic poems on all the religious mythologies that shaped the western world; who wrote a two-volume history of the English Church from the Anglo-Saxons to 1688, and defended the book's anti-Catholic bias in *Vindiciae Ecclesiae Anglicanae*; who wrote a life of John Bunyan as an introduction to an edition of *Pilgrim's Progress*, telling a correspondent in January 1830 that it was "a task not of lucre but of love" (*Life and Correspondence*, ed. C.C. Southey [1849-50] 6: 85). Southey also wrote a two-volume life of John Wesley that has stood the test of time, and (on the eve of Catholic Emancipation) he rightly argued in the *Quarterly Review* that allowing Catholics to sit at Westminster would not solve the problems of Ireland.

So it is reassuring to find that Bolton unapologetically devotes nine pages of her 60-page introduction to the religious content of the *Letters*. Southey undoubtedly drew on his time in Spain to apply a Catholic perspective to his view of English religion. But he was not merely trying to sound like a Spanish Catholic. As Bolton suggests, Espriella sometimes expresses Southey's own ambivalence toward the Anglican Church. In Letter XIX, for instance, Espriella observes that "the popular preacher is to be seen at the theatre, and at the horse race, bearing his part at the concert and the ball, making his court to old ladies at the card table, and to young ones at the harpsichord" (*LE* 146). By contrasting Anglicanism with "a more dominant, passionate faith that is attentive to its worshippers," Bolton suggests, "Southey shows that it needs to compete for souls against the enthusiasm of popular religion like Catholicism and Methodism" (39). In 1805 Southey had predicted that, if the Test Acts were repealed, the Dissenters would "die away." Yet in the meantime Espriella can see that Methodist meeting-houses "fill by draining the churches" (43, citing *LE* 299). While Southey's fears of Catholicism and Methodism proved to be exaggerated, they seemed real enough in the early decades of the nineteenth century, when the worldwide Jesuit Order was restored and working-class Methodists became involved in the nascent trade union movement.

Besides re-valuing Southey's emphasis on religion, the introduction offers many new insights. Bolton contrasts Southey's Espriella as narrator with other non-English observers -- specifically with the narrators of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*, Voltaire's *Candide*, Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* (whose Chinese traveller visits England), and Hamilton's *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*. Also, linking Southey's *Letters* to the new popularity of travel literature in the period, Bolton remarks that Southey's book was among the first to spark British nineteenth-century interest in Spain and that he had thus "unknowingly tapped into an important literary marketplace" (18). Bolton also shows how his earlier Peninsular travels reinforce Southey's pride in "Englishness." She concedes that Espriella is not "a fully rounded character," and that, to Southey's contemporaries, the narrator was transparently an Englishman and not a foreigner. But Southey's ambition, she writes, "was less to create a compelling fictional psyche than to promote his own, often highly contentious views" (21). As he wrote to John May in 1807: "You will easily distinguish what is written for Espriella from what is written thro him" (*CLRS* 3: 1342).

In spite of Southey's anxiety to conceal his own identity, he nearly betrays himself by Espriella's authoritative description of the Lake District. Before embarking on their tour, Espriella and his travelling companion order "A guide to the Lakes," which Simmons suggests was Thomas West's *Guide to the Lakes in Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire* (1778), republished in 1784 with a preface encouraging leisure travel. By 1802 -- the year of Espriella's supposed arrival in England -- it had reached an eighth edition. According to Bolton, Southey drew not only on West, but also on Thomas Gray's *Journal of a Visit to the Lake District in 1769*, parts of which West incorporated in his guidebook. Primed for the Lake District by West and Gray, Southey's Espriella not only marvels at the "wild mountains" seen from lake Windermere, but also exults that "wooded hills and crags rising one above the other, harmonized the whole into one accordant and lovely scene" (*LE* 232). On the novelty of walking for pleasure, Bolton cites Robin Jarvis's *Romantic Poetry and Pedestrian Travel* (1998), adding that "pedestrianism could also provide a unique, subjective perspective that is integrally linked to the Romantic aesthetic itself" (52).

While saluting the beauties of the Lake District, Espriella also focuses on the less endearing agricultural and industrial changes that England has undergone. He notices that the landscape is "much injured by inclosures" (*LE* 91) and thinks it compares poorly with that of Spain: "England seems to be a paradise of sheep and cattle; Valencia of the human race" (*LE* 94). Endorsing what is clearly Southey's stern critique of his age, Bolton writes: "The soulless materialism of Goldsmith's age is still rampant in the early nineteenth century, driving industry, hardening hearts against the poor and impoverishing English culture and heritage" (27). When Espriella reaches London he comments on the extreme social disparity: "The wealth of this nation is their own boast, and the envy of all the rest of Europe; yet in no other country is there so much poverty -- nor is poverty anywhere else attended with so much pain" (*LE* 172). In Manchester he sees that wealth does not flow "equally & healthily through the whole system; it sprouts into wens and tumours, and collects in aneurisms which starve and palsify its extremities" (*LE* 219). By thus depicting England through Espriella's eyes, Bolton explains, "Southey could evince graphical physical disgust, without seeming disloyal or alarmist in the way that an English commentator would" (34). By 1816 -- the year without a summer -- when Southey was Poet Laureate and a regular contributor to the *Quarterly Review*, he would have no inhibitions about sounding the alarm in very similar terms (*CLRS* 5: 2873).

Letters from England sold quickly. On December 1, 1807, Southey reported that "about 300 are left of a thousand" (*CLRS* 3: 1387), and three weeks later that "they go to press again immediately" (*CLRS* 3: 1402). Southey attributed this success to Daniel Stuart's "puffs in the Courier" (*CLRS*: 3: 1427), and Bolton cites other reactions in the periodical press. In the *Edinburgh Review*, where the first notice appeared, Francis Jeffrey correctly judged that it could not be the work of a foreigner but did not identify Southey as its author. Although Jeffrey deplored its anti-industrialism and objected to its multiplication of detail, he thought its description of the Lake District "by far the best part of the book" (55, citing *ER* 11 (1808) 370-90). The *Monthly Review*, which identified Southey as the author, supported Espriella on "manufactories" and on the plight of the poor -- while dwelling on the Dissenting sects and the "religious madness" of the English (55, citing *MR* 55 (1808) 380-86). From Espriella's reference to Gilbert Wakefield (in Letter IV) *The British Critic* infers that the authors (one

of whom is recognized as Southey) are "democrats and jacobins" (55-6, citing *BC* 31 (1808) 168-78. Surprisingly, however, the *Anti-Jacobin Review* considers "the avowed production of Mr Southey" as "affording very salutary practical suggestions for the political and moral amelioration of society," while "the account of the artifices and zeal of the Papists to propagate their superstition is drawn with great truth and fidelity" (57, citing *AJR* 34 (1810) 135-8; 274-89).

By contrast, the *Critical Review* refuses to give *Letters from England* "a full and candid review" until it can be established "whether it is a forgery" (56, citing *CR* 13 (1808) 282-3). In thus highlighting the ambiguity of the *Letters*, Bolton writes, the *Critical Review* illustrates its "generic diversity and unique status in its own time and the modern period" (57).

Carol Bolton's careful situating of the *Letters* in the literary, social, political and religious context of Southey's time is a work of exemplary critical scholarship. It is also a welcome feat of rehabilitating a much undervalued text.

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