Robert Southey (1774-1843)

Life and character.-
Robert Southey was born at Bristol, August 12, 1774. He was expelled from Westminster for writing an article against school-flogging. He entered Oxford with his head full of Rousseau and the Revolution and joined Coleridge in his scheme of Pantisocracy and on the collapse of this paid a long visit to Spain and Portugal, where he laid the foundation of his knowledge of the literature and history of the peninsula. He married Edith Fricker in 1797, and, making literature his profession, settled down to a life of unremitting industry. His home from 1803 was Greta Hall, Keswick. He became poet laureate in 1813, and in 1839 took as his second wife Caroline Bowles, herself a writer of verse. He died in March 21, 1943. Southey was a man of beautiful character, upright, tender, true-hearted, brave. His poetry may be neglected, but literary biography is the richer for the memory of his blameless and unselfish life.

Works.-
Southey’s principal works in verse are:

*Wat Tyler* (1794)
*Poems* (‘795, 1797, 1801)
*Joan of Arc* (1796)
*Thalaba the Drestroyer* (1801)
*Madoc* (1805)
*Metrical Tales* (1805)
*The Curse of Kehama* (1810)
*Roderick* (1814)
*A Vision of Judgement* (1821)
*A Tale of Paraguay* (1825)

Prose works.-

*History of Brazil* (1810-19)
*History of the Peninsular War* (1823-32)
*Life of Nelson* (1813)
*Life of John Wesley* (1820)

Views.-
Like Wordsworth and Coleridge, Southey began as a Revolutionist and ended as a Tory, but even in his Tory days he remained a zealous social reformer. There was nothing striking about his literary opinions. On the whole, he sympathized with Wordsworth’s naturalism and Coleridge’s romanticism. In the latter case, however, with qualifications. He was a strong supporter of simplicity against ornateness in style. Poetry, he held, should aim rather to elevate than to affect – a tenet in harmony with the ethical spirit of his own work.

Poems.-

*Wat Tyler* (surreptitiously issued in 1817 by a piratical publisher into whose hands the forgotten manuscript of twenty three years before had passed) and *Joan of Arc*, celebrating the glories of French patriotism when England was a war with the Republic, are full of Southey’s early radicalism. *Thalaba the Destroyer, The Curse of Kehama,* and *Madoc* are portions of his gigantic scheme (inspired by the reading at school of Picart’s *Religious Ceremonies*) of turning the great mythologies of the world into heroic poems. They illustrate the tendency of Romanticism to go far afield in quest of fresh material. While the irregular rhymeless measure of *Thalaba* (adopted from Dr. Sayers of Norwich, and in turn imitated by Shelley in *Queen Mab*) is an extreme example of the breaking up of the formal regularity of 18th century verse. Southey’s minor poems include some admirable lyrics and a number of ballads which connect themselves with the romantic movement by their free use of the supernatural.

Characteristics.-

Southey was a most industrious poet, and a careful scientious craftsman. His work has a fine spirit and a certain air of distinction. His narrative poems are far more interesting than is commonly supposed. But in inspiration and the higher qualities of poetry he is conspicuously wanting. Except for a few minor poems, little of his enormous output is now really alive.