Peter Cochran

The Ireland that Thomas Moore came from would not seem to have been an environment conducive to writing easy, sentimental and mellifluous verse. Vindictive, materialist Protestant Christianity went side by side there not just with Catholicism but with virtual paganism. In her excellent new biography of Moore, Linda Kelly quotes a letter from Moore to James Dalton from Tipperary, dated August 22, 1815:

A sick house and a dull ugly country render our visit here rather a melancholy proceeding … the only stimulants here are the Shanavests [local banditti] who enter the houses here at noonday for arms and start out, by twenties and thirties, upon the tithe-proctors in the fields, stark naked and smeared all over with paint like Catabaws … The rector of this place has just passed the windows on a tithe-hunting expedition, with a large gun in his gig. (quoted Kelly, p.120)

Catabaws are Native Americans from Virginia. In fact Moore is being unfair to the Shanavests, who were so called not because they eschewed raiment, but because they wore old waistcoats. Strictly speaking they weren’t “banditti” (the word is Kelly's): they were a Tipperary faction whose primary activity was attempting to bash out the brains of their enemies. Their enemies were not the English tithe-proctors, either, but another Tipperary faction called the Caravats (a corruption of “cravat”, i.e., “noose”). No-one who lived locally was neutral, except a retired army doctor whose name really was Going, and who had great skill in the insertion of silver plates into fractured skulls.1 No-one quite knew what the quarrel was about (modern economic historians have tried to dignify it with motives), but it was a central fact of cultural life in Tipperary at the time.

The style of patriotic poetry Moore wrote could bear little relationship to such a “dull ugly country”. But that didn’t stop him:

Erin, thy silent tear never shall cease,
Erin, thy languid smile ne’er shall increase,
   Till, like the rainbow’s light,
   Thy various tints unite,
And form in heaven’s sight
   One arch of peace! (Irish Melodies I, third lyric)

His was an Ireland conceived with an eye to the market, and of course it was, in the market, an enormous success. In Ireland, partly as a consequence, he was esteemed a great patriot, and fêted wherever he went – or, whenever he went, for he lived in England. Even Byron was – in public print, at least – taken in by the bluff:

It is said among those friends, I trust truly, that you are engaged in the composition of a poem whose scene will be laid in the East; none can do those scenes such justice. The wrongs of your own country, the magnificent and fiery spirit of her sons, the beauty and feeling of her daughters, may there be found; and Collins, when he denominated his Oriental, his Irish Eclogues, was not aware how true, at least, was a part of his parallel.2

Byron never set foot in Ireland.

But, as Linda Kelly points out, when Moore’s Oriental poem Lalla Rookh came out, Byron seemed unable to maintain the polite fiction, and was silent. As Jeffery Vail has written, the letter (of September 15 1817), in which Byron reports his first reading of Lalla

Rookh, is also the one in which he denounces “Scott, Southey, Wordsworth, Moore, Campbell”, and “I,” as having been on “a wrong revolutionary poetical system”. Linda Kelly does not cover the full extent of Byron’s reaction: “Significantly,” she writes, “he [Byron] made no further comment on the poem” (p.137). The significance lies in the shame he felt in his association with Moore, both by encouragement, and by emulation.

As Vail (again), argues, it’s in his satirical work that we can see Byron being encouraged by Moore. Often Moore often goes farther than Byron’s discretion will allow Byron to go. Here is Moore, addressing Castlereagh (from behind a persona), in The Fudge Family in Paris (Letter II):

... England, too, the more her debts,
The more she spends, the richer gets;
And that the Irish, grateful nation,
Remember when by _thee_ reigned over,
And bless thee for their flagellation,
As Heloisa did her lover!

Market considerations dominated Moore’s motives in writing: he had a family to support, and a bad law case in Bermuda, which he lost. Money almost outweighed social success, as Kelly (pp.150-1), relates: when his 1819 satire Tom Crib’s Memorial to Congress created a hostile reaction among his society friends, he determined to write no more satire: after it reached a third edition, he changed his mind.

Kelly tells her story well; her accounts of such mythical episodes as Moore’s Chalk Farm “duel” with Jeffrey, and the destruction of Byron’s memoirs, are full and balanced: though she understates both the assiduity of Hobhouse in making sure the memoirs were burnt – he bullied Augusta Leigh daily over the fatal weekend – and the cunning of the press campaign Moore conducted to make sure he emerged from the affair of the memoirs with his reputation enhanced: “… we confess,” said the _Times_, whose editor was a friend of his, “we admire the proud and delicate self-denial of Mr MOORE, in declining the fair indemnification offered him for a loss which he incurred on the account of others”.

To do justice to Moore’s versatility, Kelly gives plenty of space to his prose works, such as The Memoirs of Captain Rock, which was a great success in its day, the necessarily guarded Life of Sheridan, and, for its age, the remarkably unguarded Life of Byron.

Moore had great charm and social gifts. Disraeli thought his conversation the most brilliant he’d ever heard. No-one said that of Robert Southey, subject of another excellent new biography, by W.A.Speck. Speck quotes his subject as saying (p.65), “The repellent coldness of my manners will protect me from any acquaintance for I cover the milk of human kindness with as rough an outside as a cocoa nut”.

Moore had a sense of humour. When Wordsworth said of his work, “We should hardly call it _poetry_, should we Mr Moore?” the much better-selling Moore answered, “No! indeed, Mr Wordsworth, of course not!” Whereas Speck writes of Southey (p.86), that his “frequent comparisons of his own genius with that of poets such as Milton and historians such as Gibbon, often claiming superiority, make one wonder whether he suffered from self-delusion, or was ironically mocking his own abilities”. The former seems the stronger possibility. Southey had, to complement his arrogance, a capacity for crude mockery, rather than wit. He described his book-reviews as “mere eructations of a full stomach”. “Few candidates for Tyburn,” he wrote of his own brother, “have started with a better chance”. His new baby daughter “would look better in a bottle than on a white sheet.”

Speck’s is the best biographical account of Southey since Jack Simmons’ of 1945. Still, Southey, for all the new book’s sympathetic advocacy, is best viewed as a leader _doppelgänger_ to Byron (who dominated the market), and Shelley (who had no market). When he first came face to face with Shelley, Southey was amazed at the mirror-image, and many who knew them both later commented on the resemblance. As we read Speck’s book, the parallels and near-parallels multiply. Southey, like Byron, couldn’t dance, though from poor co-ordination, not lameness. Like Shelley, he was expelled, though from school, not university (and for an abuse – flagellation – of which he had, writes Peck, no experience).
Like Byron, his father provided him with a poor role-model: his uncle, Herbert Hill, was a better guide. Like Byron, he wrote a juvenile poem about Virgil’s Euryalus and Nisus (not “Nilus”, as Peck has it: p.26); like Byron, he was revolted by Lisbon, but entranced by Cintra (he thought it too good for the Portuguese). He had a passion for Mary Wollstonecraft: Shelley married her daughter. Both he and Shelley admired Landor’s Gebir … the coincidences go on.

Southey was indeed most unlike Moore – he was violently anti-Catholic, and wrote of “the utter and almost irreclaimable barbarity of” the population of Ireland. But in verse he too was a slave to the marketplace – even such unlikely products as The Fall of Robespierre were designed for sale first, for political purposes second (though the young Southey and Coleridge hoped Robespierre would finance Pantisocracy). He had two families to support: his own, and Coleridge’s. When he realised that his prose sold better than his verse, he concentrated on the prose: without Landor’s encouragement and backing he would have finished neither Kehama nor Roderick.

Speck passes little comment on Southey’s verse. On p.76 he writes, his head making a rare appearance above the parapet, “Southey must have been hurt by the claims of novelty made in the advertisement to the Lyrical Ballads, which overlooked his own contributions to the ballad form ...” Elsewhere (p.125), he ventures to judge that Southey was “more impressive as an acute and critical observer of English history and society than as an epic poet of past and remote cultures”; but does not give an opinion as to how much more. He reports (p.145), Southey’s gleeful exclamation (in 1812), “… it will not be long before we shall have other Blenheim[s]!” but then asks, “What would old Kaspar have said to that?” – showing a misreading both of Kaspar’s innocence, and of Southey’s ironical presentation of it (in 1799).

In his excellent book on Southey for Twayne, Ernest Berhardt-Kabisch writes that Southey’s tragedy as a writer was that “His imagination could not surrender to this world, nor create another out of itself” (Kabisch, p.46). Speck does not have the confidence in the overall interest of his author’s life to make such a statement, or to say, as Kelly does (p.135), about her author’s most famous work: “Lalla Rookh as a whole is almost unreadable today”.

Instead, he takes refuge in understatement. At an early climax of Roderick (Book X), the hero faces the heroine, Florinda, who’s been leading him on:

… in the passionate argument he grew
Incensed, inflamed, and madden’d or possess’d. …
For Hell too surely at that hour prevail’d.

“Quite what happened next is obscure,” writes Speck (p.161), “but it seems that Roderick forced himself on her”. Whatever happens, it brings about the Moorish invasion of Spain, which was, in Southey’s eyes, one of the great disasters of European history. His ascription of such a thing to an act of sexual transgression, in which, though the man must bear the responsibility, the woman created his opportunity, is typical of Southey’s ethic. His cunning-if-strained presentation of the event, however – for we learn of what happened from a confession made by Florinda to a priest, who is in fact Roderick in disguise – does show Southey “confront[ing] reality without barricading himself behind moral absolutes” (Kabisch p.136).

Understatement of another kind is visible on p.180, where Speck writes of George III’s death, that Southey “was not wholly unprepared for this event”, which is a discreet way of saying that the Laureate started A Vision of Judgement before the King had passed away. He died on January 29th 1820; Southey writes to Herbert Hill that he has “formed a plan” for a commemorative work on December 19th 1819.3

Speck makes no play with the idea, popular today, of Kehama as a plea for more missionary work in India. His background as a historian, rather than a historicist, may account for this. Nor does he try to answer the ultimate Southey question: did Southey spread rumours about the “League of Incest”? All my own research has uncovered so far is a

3: Bodleian MS Eng. Letters d. 47. 178.
**faux-naïf** letter from Grosvenor Bedford to Southey on January 6th 1822, denying any knowledge of the matter and asking for enlightenment.  

For a good critical account of Southey’s work, Bernhardt-Kabisch’s 1977 volume remains unbeaten: indeed, for all the studies listed in Speck’s bibliographical note, he has no full-length rival. It will be interesting to see if Linda Pratt’s excellent new edition of Southey’s poetry, for Pickering and Chatto, encourages one.

**[SEE PRATT’S NEW VOLUME ROBERT SOUTHEY AND THE CONTEXTS OF ENGLISH ROMANTICISM, ASHGATE, AUGUST 28TH 2006: NOT OUT YET??]**

Meanwhile, Speck gives many intriguing biographical details. In 1826 Southey arrived home from the continent to find himself, via Old Corruption, MP for Radnor, though he lacked the property qualification to be an MP: in fact, Speck reveals, he lacked even the property qualification to be a voter – he’d considered buying a freehold, but decided against it. As Bernhardt-Kabisch puts it (p.126), he “lost his way in Utopia to find it in Old Sarum”. Twice Speck finds Southey in situations which are potentially adulterous. Once he goes alone in a carriage with Mary Barker: “One wonders what they discussed” is Speck’s comment (p.198). A few pages later he stays, unaccompanied by Edith, with Caroline Bowles: “what they talked about can only be conjectured” ventures Speck (p.206). Speck is, it seems, tempted to be ironical – yet we sympathise when he draws back. For Southey to do anything as “flagitious” as having illicit sex (“flagitious” is one of his most-favoured words), is clearly inconceivable. His stoicism was one feature he did not share with either Shelley or Byron.

These two books are excellent as biographies: as criticism, they’re a bit shy.

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4: Bodleian MS Eng. Letters d. 54. 117.