

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

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SOUTHEY, Robert (Bristol, 1774 – Keswick, 1843)

Robert Southey is undoubtedly an indispensable figure for understanding the complexities of the nation-formation processes that occurred in Brazil, Portugal, and Great Britain, as well as for appreciating the practices of modern historiography and literature. Evoking his name immediately entails engaging with concepts, languages, narratives, and sensibilities that infused his work as a historian, poet, biographer, and essayist. His intense production as a writer involved the development and articulation of disputed nation-building projects within the Portuguese-speaking and British worlds, which significantly influenced public opinion. Robert Southey was a complete and multifaceted man of letters, making his work and personality defy any simplistic schematisation or fixed categorisation, given that his sensibilities were formed amidst fluid spatial, historiographical, and literary boundaries. Robert Southey was born in Bristol, England, on 12 August 1774. He was the son of the modest merchant Robert Southey and Margaret Hill. His maternal uncles exerted a great influence on his life. During his childhood, Southey spent extended periods with Margaret's half-sister, Elizabeth Tyler, living with her in Bath, Bedminster, and Bristol.

In 1788, he started his studies at Westminster. There, he met Grosvenor Bedford and Charles Wynn, who became his lifelong friends and correspondents. Wynn, who came from a noble family, supported Southey throughout his career, whether by providing financial assistance or exerting political influence. At Westminster, he was expelled for objecting to the corporal punishment to which the students were subjected.

In January 1793, he was admitted to Balliol College, Oxford. His father died bankrupt in December 1792, and his maternal uncle, Herbert Hill, financed his studies. Whilst Hill hoped his nephew would follow in his footsteps as an Anglican clergyman, Southey was instead fervently enthusiastic about the popular developments of the French Revolution.

He began his friendship with Samuel Taylor Coleridge in June 1794 at Oxford. They soon envisioned the Pantisocracy, a communal society inspired by the works of William Godwin and David Hartley. His plan was for the community to be established in Kentucky, though the destination was later changed to Pennsylvania. The sisters of humble background, Edith and Sara Fricker, whom Southey—against his aunts and uncles' wishes—and Coleridge, respectively, married in 1795, were involved in the project from the very beginning. Throughout 1795, Southey's enthusiasm waned due to differences with Coleridge and familial pressures,



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>

particularly from Hill, the chaplain of the British Navy in Lisbon.

Hill persuaded Southey to accompany him on a journey through Spain and Portugal, aiming to distance his nephew from republican and pantisocratic ideals. Hill and Southey arrived in A Coruña on 13 December. They then travelled to Lisbon, arriving on 27 January 1796. Returning to Bristol on 14 May 1796. Shortly after his departure for the Iberian Peninsula, the epic poem *Joan of Arc*, imbued with strong republican inspiration, was published. The stays and travels around the Iberian Peninsula were pivotal for the publication of *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Spain and Portugal* in 1797.

The 1797 edition of the *Letters* comprises 30 letters, detailing the young traveller's impressions of everyday life, customs, and institutions in Spain and Portugal. These are interspersed with poetry by Southey himself, as well as poetry, fables, dialogues, epigrams, statistical tables, and prose texts by Iberian authors. Despite the unsystematic nature of the work, Southey had a clear objective in publishing it: to illustrate how unpleasant touring and living in Portugal and Spain was for a civilised man.

After his return from Portugal, he began writing about Iberian literature for British periodicals, reviewing translations, and commenting on travel accounts. In 1796, the *Monthly Magazine* published two short reviews by Southey, one on the poet Félix Lope de Vega (1562-1635) and another on the English translation of Camões by the Scottish poet William Julius Mickle (1735-88). In 1797, he published short reviews on the Spanish poets Esteban Manuel de Villegas (1589-1669) and Bartolomé Leonardo de Argensola (1562-1631). The following year, he reviewed the travelogue of the Irish architect James Cavanah Murphy (1760-1814), *General View of Portugal*, as well as an anonymous tragedy about Inês de Castro (A. Cabral., *Southey e Portugal...* [Southey and Portugal...], 1959, pp. 501-522).

In 1799, he planned to return to Portugal to address the health issues that troubled him—insomnia, lack of appetite, palpitations, and an inability to work. He also intended to use his stay to conceive an ambitious philosophical and scholarly history of the Portuguese nation on an imperial scale and to draw inspiration from the epic battlefields to reconstruct scenes for his poems (*Idem*, p. 318; W. Speck, *Robert Southey...*, 2006, p. 81). Another motivating factor, which should not be overlooked, was his lack of interest in continuing the legal studies he had started in Bristol in 1797. If his first journey to the Iberian Peninsula was prompted by his uncle as a means of distancing him from the controversies surrounding his revolutionary zeal, his second stay in Portugal was motivated by his desire to establish himself as a man of letters (M. Z. Castanheira, "Speaking in Portuguese and Writing in English," 2011, pp. 143-151).

Southey and his wife Edith arrived at the Tagus on 30 April 1800 and remained in Portugal until the end of June 1801. During this period, the British scholar undertook two excursions: the first covered Batalha, Alcobça, and Coimbra, while the second explored Évora, Beja, Ourique, and the towns along the Algarve coast. Before these excursions, during the autumn and winter of 1800, he devoted himself to gathering materials and conducting studies for the preparation of the *História de Portugal* [History of Portugal]. He settled in Lisbon after spending the summer in Sintra. In Lisbon, following the recommendations of his uncle, Herbert Hill, and the British literary scholar John Bell, he established a wide network of contacts that proved



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>

essential for gaining access to the necessary documentation. Among the renowned scholars to whom he was introduced, Southey mentioned the book censor and member of the Royal Academy of Sciences, João Guilherme Cristiano Müller, and expressed his gratitude to him: "Müller has given me access to the library of manuscripts, and I look forward to a daily introduction to *magistrate* [António Ribeiro dos Santos], my next-door neighbour, head librarian, a *curious person* in the poetry of the nation, whose collection is rich with duplicates from Jesuit libraries" (R. Southey, *Journals of a Residence in Portugal 1800-1801...*, 1960 [1801], p. 144). Southey also extended his gratitude to the sub-librarian, Agostinho José da Costa Macedo, who surprised the British scholar by revealing himself to be an "intelligent man—more interested in speaking freely than I was in encouraging him." "He wouldn't be alarmed to see me engaged on records that he religiously abhors as much as I do" (Idem, 145-146).

Southey undertook excursions that enabled him to expand his network of contacts. In Coimbra, he was welcomed by scholars who familiarised him with the city: "Our letters went to Francisco Soares Franco—a doctor—and to the Professor of Botany, Felix Avelar Brotero, from whom we experienced all the useful and alternative civility. They guided us to the Botanical Garden, the Museum, and the University Press [...]" (Idem [1800], p. 26). In Beja, he was received by the renowned Manoel do Cenáculo Vilas-Boas, Bishop of the city, described as "small, cheerful, with big eyes—a little saint with a staff, they call him—loved and recognised by everyone around him" (Idem [1801], pp. 38-39). After his visit to Beja, Southey sent a letter to the bishop, written in Portuguese, demonstrating both his fluency in the language and his occasional lapses in spelling and grammar (Idem [1801], p. 163).

The warm reception from Portuguese literati reflects their interest in the composition of a scholarly and philosophical history of the nation. Within the Royal Academy of Sciences in Lisbon, founded in 1779, efforts were underway in the Portuguese Literature Class to produce such a work (T. Silva, *Maquinações da Razão Discreta...* [Machinations of Discrete Reason...], 2010). For Southey, the historiographical aims of the academics closely aligned with his own project, leading him to acknowledge: "The Academy made my work much easier by publishing many of its old chronicles at a purchasable price, as well as the laws of Portugal" (R. Southey, *Journals of a Residence in Portugal 1800-1801...*, 1960 [1801], p. 138). This praise was also extended to the University of Coimbra, which had "acted very wisely" in publishing the "Ordenações de Afonso 5º" [Ordinances of Afonso V] (Idem [1801], p. 119).

Southey returned to Portugal with the aim of establishing himself as a man of letters. His revolutionary fervour was dampened by the series of events in France. William Speck explains how Southey's political positions fluctuated during the course of the Revolution, highlighting his repudiation of the widespread violence while also expressing a positive regard for the personalities of the Jacobin Robespierre (1758-94) and the Girondin Brissot (1754-93), whose deaths he mourned (W. Speck, *Robert Southey...*, 2006, pp. 37, 46, 64). Amidst the disorientation caused by the Revolution, his scepticism about the present grew. While the past could serve as a refuge for the poet's imagination to some extent, its idealisation was equally barred due to the barbarities from the past (Idem, p. 73). Faced with this complex sensitivity to temporality and the

oscillation of political adjustments, combined with the rise of Napoleon, it delivered the fatal blow that distanced Southey from revolutionary ideals (Idem, p. 81).

Simultaneously with his study of canonical Lusitanian historiographical and literary works and his dialogue with Portuguese scholars, Southey assessed his endeavour to write the *História de Portugal* given the achievements of Edward Gibbon, David Hume, William Robertson, William Roscoe, and Samuel Johnson, as his intention was to compose the work in English. In this way, the scholar aimed both to make a profit and achieve critical success through the sales of the work in Great Britain (R. Southey, *Journals of a Residence in Portugal 1800-1801...*, 1960 [1801], pp. 149, 166).

Southey believed that Johnson's descriptive and refined language was insufficient to convey the grandeur of the Portuguese military achievements in the Middle Ages. A similar critique was applied to the works of Gibbon and Hume, as Southey perceived these scholars to be excessively bound by classical decorum, which he believed impeded the expression of individuality. In contrast, Southey considered the literary expressions of figures such as Francis Bacon (1561-1626), John Milton (1608-1674), and Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667) to be analogous in their rusticity, simplicity, and clarity to the style employed by Portuguese chroniclers. Southey regarded these literati as classically superior to both the old and contemporary, as they had not been tainted by the "metaphysical taste" that dominated the 17th century. His works embodied the rusticity characteristic of 14th, 15th, and 16th-century writings.

Using the appropriate language for composing the work in English was crucial for Southey, as the deeds narrated from the distant past could not be conflated with the refinement of the present. Mediaeval Portuguese rusticity needed to be reclaimed on its own terms, and restoring its distinctiveness was deemed worthwhile. Southey recognised that the literate English-speaking public would likely be interested in the history of Portugal, particularly its foundation myths, due to their similarities with the history of Great Britain, whose origins were also enveloped in popular myths and fantasies.

In his initial project, Southey expressed his intention to develop a universal pedagogy from the history of Portugal, aiming to illustrate both the positive and negative potential of the nation for civilisational progress. The scholar's expectation was that, by writing the *História de Portugal*, it would be possible to access a universal pedagogy on the development of nations. Southey was thus engaged in the dual challenge of restoring the significance of Portugal's past to Europe, addressing the prejudices of 18th-century literati against its mediaeval roots, while also critically examining the historical actions that could lead to decadence. In this context, the past was both the source of great deeds to be celebrated as monuments of European Gothic cultural heritage and the origin of the missteps that led to the nation's decline in the 16th century, exemplified by the "miserable expedition of [King] Sebastião" to Africa (R. Southey, *Journals of a Residence in Portugal 1800-1801...*, 1960 [1801], p. 146).

After returning from his stay in Portugal, Southey worked as a private secretary to the Minister for Finance in Ireland for a few months. In September 1803, he moved to Keswick in the Lake District to share a house with Coleridge and Sara, who were already living there. Southey lived in Keswick until the end of his life,



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>

where he cared for his large family—Edith gave birth to eight children. The scholar lived twelve miles away from William Wordsworth, his friend and collaborator. Southey also maintained a good relationship with Walter Scott, who nominated him for the position of poet laureate, a role he took on in November 1813.

Southey became a state official only after distancing himself from revolutionary ideals and his criticism of the Anglican Church. In 1807, Wynn secured a government pension for Southey to support his work as a man of letters, replacing the financial support he had personally provided to his friend. In 1807, Southey began to adopt a more resolute stance against Catholic Emancipation, the granting of full political rights to Catholics. This position influenced the writing of his fictional work, *Letters from England by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella*, published in July of that year.

Between 1809 and 1813, he was funded by the periodical *Edinburgh Annual Register* to write a history of contemporary events in Europe. In 1809, he began his long-standing collaboration with the *Quarterly Review* periodical. In international politics, he advocated for the war against Napoleon, while within the British Empire, he focused on opposing constitutional reform aimed at enabling Catholic Emancipation. These issues were pivotal in the subsequent publication of works including *History of the Peninsular War* (1823-1832) and *The Book of the Church* (1824).

Southey derived more satisfaction from his work as a historian than as a poet, and his greatest ambition was to write the *História de Portugal*. In 1804, his project envisioned writing three volumes on the European history of Portugal; two or three volumes on the history of the Portuguese Empire in Asia; one volume on the history of Brazil; one volume on the history of the Jesuits in Japan; two volumes on the literary history of Spain and Portugal; and one volume on the history of monasticism. Of this ambitious project, Southey only completed his *História do Brasil* [History of Brazil], which was published in three volumes in 1810, 1817, and 1819, respectively. Alongside his project to write the *História de Portugal*, he reissued the chivalric romances *Amadis of Gaul* (1803), *Palmerin of England* (1807), and *Chronicle of the Cid* (1808).

In December 1806, Herbert Hill advised Southey to begin the History of Portugal with the History of Brazil, given the international crisis brought about by Napoleonic expansion. In line with Luso-Brazilian enlightened reformism, Southey recognised that a potential political separation between Brazil and Portugal could be a decisive factor in the fragmentation of American territory, potentially triggering revolutions. In this context, Southey's *História do Brasil* presents an ambivalent macronarrative of formation. On one hand, it critiques the actions of the "barbaric" and "fanatical" Portuguese colonisers; on the other hand, it emphasises the crucial role of the Portuguese in the civilisation of Brazil, which, in turn, preserved and perpetuated Portuguese cultural and linguistic heritage. Thus, his *História do Brasil* oscillates between valuing and criticising the colonising actions of the Portuguese. The work of the Jesuits, in particular, is highlighted as fundamental to the elevation of the indigenous populations from their presumed state of savagery. Southey argued that the colonising process undertaken by the Portuguese was, in many ways, more advantageous than that of the British in their territories, particularly due to the ethnic mix, which contributed to the preservation of territorial unity and chivalrous virtues imparted by the Portuguese (Cf. A. Ramos, *Robert Southey e a experiência da*



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>

história... [Robert Southey and the experience of history...], 2019; F. Varela, *Um Brasil Medieval...* [Mediaeval Brazil], 2021).

Southey was widely criticised among Portuguese, Portuguese-Brazilian, and British scholars for the excess of detail in his work, which often tired and confused the reader. In fact, the British scholar presented a synthesis of the meaning of Brazil's colonising process only in the last chapter of the final volume of his *História do Brasil* (1819), *View of the State of Brazil*. Although this work, which was meant to be part of the monumental *História de Portugal*, did not present arguments legitimising the political independence of the new Empire that emerged in 1822, Southey instead advocated for the defence of political unity. However, in 1829, he published an essay in the *Quarterly Review*, *Political and Moral State of Portugal*, in which he explained the causality between the historical "decadence" of Portugal and the inevitability of the political fragmentation of the Portuguese Empire.

Even though he was showing signs of senility, Southey continued to state in correspondence until 1839 that he wanted to publish his monumental *História de Portugal*. As early as 1838, close friends and relatives began to notice the signs of his advanced age. After spending many years in depression, Edith was hospitalised with a diagnosis of dementia in October 1834. She died on 16 November 1837. Southey became engaged to the poet Caroline Bowles in 1838 and married her on 4 June 1839. In the months that followed, the signs of senility worsened, leading him to cease his previously active correspondence on 6 September 1839, due to the progression of his mental illness. He died on 21 March 1843 in Keswick, apparently from typhoid fever.

The memory of Robert Southey and his *História do Brasil* was undoubtedly important to the process of nation-building in Brazil in the 19th century. It became fundamental to very different historiographical projects, such as the *História dos Principais Sucessos Políticos do Império do Brasil* [History of the Main Political Successes of the Brazilian Empire] (1826) by José da Silva Lisboa, which emphasised the continuities between the present of the new Empire and its colonial past, and the *História do Brasil* (1836) by the British author John Armitage, which focused on deepening the historical distance between Brazil and Portugal after the abdication of King Pedro I. The monumentality of Southey's *História do Brasil* inspired Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen to diligently search for unpublished sources in archives, which played a crucial role in the writing of his *História Geral do Brasil* [General History of Brazil] (1854-1857). Furthermore, the publication of the Portuguese translation of *História do Brasil* in 1862, which included annotations by Canon Fernandes Pinheiro, occurred within a context of heated historiographical disputes among the members of the *Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro* [Brazilian Historic and Geographic Institute] (IHGB). These debates were driven by differing projects for indigenous policies to be developed by the Brazilian Empire. In this context, Brazilian literati connected to the Romantic heritage viewed Southey's work as a more agreeable interpretation of the historical dignity of indigenous peoples, in contrast to Varnhagen's highly critical assessments of the issue.

Southey was admired by Almeida Garrett, who successfully requested Queen Maria II to grant him the



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>

honour of Knight of the Tower and Sword in April 1838, in recognition of his contribution to the history of Portugal, as systematised in his *História do Brasil* (Cabral, A., "Garrett, Southey e a Torre e Espada" [Garrett, Southey and the Tower and Sword], 1957, p. 10). Such admiration for his work was also expressed by Capistrano de Abreu and Gilberto Freyre. On the other hand, in Victorian Britain, Southey was relegated to relative obscurity. However, in recent decades, the intensification of studies on his work has been accompanied by the reissue of *Letters from England* (2016) and *Sir Thomas More: or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society* (2018), as well as significant ongoing publishing projects, such as the edition of part of his unfinished *History of Portugal* by researcher Alexandre Dias Pinto and the project to publish all of his correspondence by Linda Pratt, Tim Fulford, and Ian Packer. The publication of these works, which bring previously unpublished material to the public, will undoubtedly contribute to the development of more complex interpretations of Southey's work and his legacy, which richly interconnect different temporalities and spatialities on transatlantic scales.

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DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>

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