

**THE FREETHINKER**  
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**Charles Southwell.**  
**A Protest and a Vindication**

Mr. J.M. Robertson's *History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century* has given us so much pleasure, both for its matter and its manner, that it seems ungrateful to complain about it. But frequently we differ so strongly from the erudite author that it is imperative to speak out. Many names that are to us worthy of full and sympathetic treatment are slurred over as mere incidentals, while others are given, we hold, far more space than their owners' achievements warrant. The work as a whole, excellent though it be, is strongly overweighted on the side of Respectability.

Mr. Robertson would be the first to agree with us that every serious writer has his special affinities or "pets" amongst his fellows. This is temperamental, and neither to be explained-away nor deplored. It is "natural," and there is an end to it. We know too that no historian can be absolutely impartial; but we do expect him to be sympathetic to his fellow-soldiers of the past. It is here that Mr. Robertson sometimes lets his readers down badly. His treatment of Charles Southwell (1814-1860), to which we shall for the moment confine our selves, is a case very much in point.

The tragedy is this: not one in a thousand of the readers of this *History* knows anything of Southwell beyond what Mr. Robertson chooses to tell him; to many he is not even a name. The dust of nearly seventy years has settled on his memory. He is all-but-forgotten; and so, in the exquisite phrase of Sir Thomas Browne—"remembering the early civility [he] brought upon these countries, and forgetting long-passed mischiefs, we mercifully preserve [his] bones," . . . Hence this attempt at vindication, of which, in the interests of justice and of truth and of honour, we ask Mr. Robertson to be heedful in his Second Edition.

In the case of great, or even odd, artists, these little matters of justice frequently adjust themselves, sometimes very curiously. For instance, Percy Bysshe Shelley, who devoted his

life and art to advocating the cause, and demanding the emancipation, of the penniless underdog, and who, eighty years or so ago, was being issued at a few pence by James Watson (another forgotten hero), is now ridiculously being "done" at Three Guineas a Volume by a firm of millionaire publishers for the use and pleasure of millionaire readers, who have as much business with Shelley as a porcupine has with a shaving-brush. But in the case of men who are not primarily artists this posthumous justice is frequently lacking.

Here are the quotations from Mr. Robertson's *History* whereto we object:—

Like the Churches, the English Freethinking Movements had their imperfectly white sheep. Charles Southwell, an unbalanced and unstable young man, who had been a soldier and actor, and had a gift for quarrelling, broke with the Owenites, and established the first avowedly atheistic English periodical, *The Oracle of Reason* (1842-3). In its fourth number he inserted an article which he entitled "The Jew Book," and which, as he afterwards declared, he made as offensive as he possibly could. He was duly prosecuted, fined £100, and imprisoned for a year. (*History*, p. 73.)

In a footnote Mr. Robertson generously adds that "The most memorable biographic item about Southwell is that he was the youngest of thirty-three children."

Southwell afterwards broke with Atheists on the score that there was no sense in taking a title from the negation of a [*sic*] hallucination; quarreled with Holyoake on that ground; published an unpleasant biography without a publisher's name; emigrated to New Zealand; worked there on a Methodist journal, and on his death-bed informed his employers that he was still an Atheist. (*History*, p. 74.)

To this passage also, a footnote is appended "Compare Mr. McCabe's *Life of Holyoake*, I, 58." We will obey Mr. Robertson's injunction, and very gladly; for he had enabled us to kill two birds with one stone.

Now, if Mr. Robertson, who is writing for the future, and who is master of a sound, if seldom sparkling, prose, cannot be

fairer than this, it would have been better to omit all mention of Southwell, except possibly his name. But the Historian of Free-thought knows as well as we do, and even better, that the omission of the name would be impossible, owing to Southwell's essential importance to his History. As, then, he *must* be mentioned, why not try to do him justice? Are we, as keen students of early English Freethought, asking too much?

For many years we have been readers and admirers of Charles Southwell; and we shall try to rehabilitate him in history, that he may not appear the bedraggled and feckless ragamuffin depicted by Mr. J.M. Robertson and Mr. Joseph McCabe. Yet the latter *has* been known to contribute to the unrespectable *Freethinker*; and the former. Years and years ago, wrote a series of pamphlets for the late Mr. J.W. Gott, who disgraced himself and his cause by dying for Freethought.

The charges brought by Mr. Robertson against this "imperfectly white sheep" are that he was "unbalanced and unstable?" Well? Could not the same be said of more than half the great ones of the world? So many names crowd in upon ones mind that a catalogue would be almost endless. We will content ourselves, and—we may hope?—our readers, by recalling the facts that George Jacob Holyoake, one of Mr. McCabe's and Mr. Robertson's heroes, was not invariably stable, and that there were times, in his earlier days, when Charles Bradlaugh was not perfectly balanced.

Poor Southwell, "imperfectly white sheep"! What are his achievements? We will remind Mr. Robertson of them; and they are many. He has the distinction, a distinction that will gain him a statue within a century or two, of being the first editor of the first avowedly Atheist periodical, *The Oracle of Reason*, ever published in this country, or probably on this planet. He was the first, so far as we know, of the modern agnostics, preceding Huxley and Holyoake by years. For proof of this we cite his *Impossibility of Atheism Demonstrated* and *Another Fourpenny Wilderness*. He was a debater of marvelous—yes; marvelous—skill and wit, as may be seen in his published debate with Alexander Jamieson (1854). According to G.J. Holyoake, who knew Southwell and his work, intimately, he was "incomparably the best speaker that arose in our time in the Socialist or Free-thinking ranks." (*Hal-Hours with Freethinkers*, Second Series, No. 24 (1865); quoted from *The Reasoner* of December 2, 1860). He made a superb defence at his trial for Blasphemy in 1842, as the report abundantly shows. In spite of his lack of balance and instability, he taught himself French well enough,

according to his intensely candid autobiography, to write tolerable love-letters in that tongue; and his translation of Dupuis shows his skill as a "renderer", according to W.H.J. Seffern, who claims to have been "very intimate" with Southwell, and who knew him in Auckland, New Zealand, at the close of his life, "he was a well-educated man, and a good Latin and Greek scholar."

For this piece of information we are indebted to *Our Corner* for May 1888. The March, 1888 issue of this magazine (to which, by the way, Mr. Robertson was perhaps chief contributor), contains a very sympathetic, thou very incomplete, article on Southwell, by the late George Standring. The last achievements that we shall name here were the production, by this piously-maligned hero, of two very able Freethought papers, in addition to the *Oracle*; *The Investigator* (1843), and *The Lancashire Beacon* (1849-1850; and also one of the most moving pieces of autobiography in the language, Mr. Robertson's "unpleasant" *Confessions of a Freethinker*, undated, but about 1850. (Standring says, "about 1845"; but by internal evidence, he is badly "out." His error is repeated by J.M. Wheeler on page 303 of his *Dictionary*.) This little book of ninety-eight pages is one of the frankest and bravest pieces of life in the English tongue. Southwell lacks, of course, Rousseau's charm; but, in his degree, he may claim to be the nearest approach to an English Rousseau that our race has so far produced. His little book is ill-arranged, perhaps; it is certainly tantalizingly incomplete, and the printing is dreadful; but it is in its curious minor way, a little classic. It is so rare that it never appears in booksellers' catalogues, and our own copy is the only one that we have ever seen. We owe it to the courtesy of our old friend Mr. A.G. Barker, of Walthamstow.

(*To be concluded* [in the 15 September 1929 *Freethinker*])

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