

BYRON—AFTER ONE HUNDRED YEARS

BY J. V. NASH

THE opening years of the nineteenth century in England were illumined by the work of five poets of rare genius—all apostles of the Romantic revival. They were, in the order of their age, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. By a strange coincidence—if it be philosophical to speak of *coincidences*—these five men were destined to die in the reverse order of their birth. Keats was to go first, in 1821, followed by Shelley in 1822, Byron in 1824, Coleridge in 1834, and Wordsworth—full of years and honors—last of all, in 1850, a date within the lifetime of many now living, though at the time of his birth Voltaire still had eight years to live.

While all five of these poets were heralds of the new age ushered in by the French Revolution, Byron alone was a man of action as well as of song. Writing impassioned poems about Freedom and hymning the praise of Nature were in the end unsatisfying; he longed for some taste of the heroic life—to be in the thick of the fray where Liberty waged warfare with Autocracy and sword clashed upon sword. And yet, exalted ideals were in Byron strangely mixed with egotism, vanity, love of excitement, and an inherently theatrical attitude toward life, which exposed both himself and his work to suspicions of insincerity.

It is safe to say that there is no other poet in the whole history of English literature whose life affords such a fascinating study to the psychologist as that of Byron. His was the tragedy of a dissociated personality, a soul torn by conflicting emotions and impulses. The cause of the inharmonious mental states which were a source of constant torture to the poet and cast a pall of futility over all that he undertook, will be made clear by an examination of the abnormal and in many ways deplorable heredity and environment by which his personality was molded.

To most people today the name Byron calls up vague images of a voluptuous poet and fiery radical of the early nineteenth century. But this tumultuous incendiary of popular imagination was a Peer of England by right of blood, who claimed and actually occupied a seat in the House of Lords, at that time the very citadel of aristocracy and privilege.

The Byrons were an ancient noble family of England, the founder of the line having been a Norman by the name of de Burun who came over with William the Conqueror. In the reign of Henry II (1155-1189) the name was modified to Byron, the form which it has since retained.

It was the fourth Lord Byron (1669-1736) who seems to have started the strain of eccentricity and passionate violence for which the family during the next one hundred years acquired an unenviable reputation.

As his third wife, he married Frances, daughter of Lord Berkeley and it was from this union that the wild and erratic race which culminated in the poet sprang.

The fifth lord, who was born in 1722, entered the Navy, narrowly escaped death by shipwreck when his vessel, the *Victory*, was lost on the rocks of Alderney; subsequently he took to a life of fox-hunting and gambling. In a sordid quarrel following a card game he ran through with his sword and killed his neighbor and kinsman, a Mr. Chaworth. This was in 1765, the year famous for the passage of the American stamp act. Byron was committed to the Tower and tried on a charge of murder. The trial, which was held in Westminster Hall, was one of the *causes celebres* of the day. It is said that the interest which it aroused was so great that tickets of admission sold for six guineas apiece. A verdict of manslaughter was returned, but Byron, by pleading his privileges as a Peer and paying costs, regained his liberty.

The slayer was, however, thenceforth shunned by his former friends. He became haunted as if by spectres, and shut himself up in his ancestral home, Newstead Abbey, going abroad from time to time by stealth and under assumed names, and at other times being locked up like a wild beast behind the thick walls of the ancient pile. Many sinister stories began to circulate regarding him. It was said that he shot a coachman and flung his body into the carriage beside his wife, whom on another occasion it was alleged that he tried to drown. Finally his wife was forced to flee, in mortal dread for her life.

It was rumored that "the wicked lord," as he became known, was in league with Satan himself, and was waited upon in his castle by imps of his Sooty Majesty. The poet himself tells how, after his wife left him, "the wicked lord's" only companions were a troop of tame crickets, which he had trained to crawl over his body and which he used to punish with blows of a tiny straw when they misbehaved. After their master's death, the story was told how these insects solemnly marched out of the castle, in military procession, and disappeared from view.

"The wicked lord" survived his three sons, his brother, and his only grandson, killed in Corsica in 1794. Consequently, on his death in 1798, his estates and title passed to George Gordon Byron, then a boy of ten, who was the grandson of the fourth lord's second son, John. The latter had led an adventurous life in the British Navy, in the course of which he was shipwrecked in the straits of Magellan, and reached England again only after two years of the most extraordinary adventures in the wilds of South America, including a period of captivity in the hands of the Spaniards in Chile. Several years later he circumnavigated the globe, taking possession of the Falkland Islands in the name of England, which has held them to this day.

The eldest son of this sailor adventurer, born in 1751, was the father of the poet. He was educated at Westminster School and became a captain in the guards. Fundamentally unprincipled, he developed a degree of blackguardism that alienated him from his family. "Mad Jack" he was known in the circles which he frequented.

In the year 1778, in circumstances of peculiar shamelessness, "Mad Jack" seduced the wife of the Marquis of Carmarthen, afterwards Duke of Leeds. The affair was discovered by the marquis through Byron's financial demands upon the lady. In reverse of the usual relations in such cases, he was constantly clamoring for money from his innamorata.

The pair then eloped to the continent of Europe, and when the marquis obtained a divorce in 1779 they were regularly married. The life of one who had sacrificed her honor at his behest he proceeded to make so miserable that in five years she died. Two daughters had been born to the pair, of which one survived. This was Augusta, half-sister to the poet and destined to become a constructive influence in his checkered life.

John Byron was not long a widower. He succeeded in bagging a second wife in the person of Miss Catherine Gordon of Gight,

whose extensive estates in Aberdeenshire attracted the needy and greedy adventurer. "The property of the Scotch heiress," says Nicol, "was squandered with impetuous rapidity by the English rake."

It was on January 22, 1788, in Holles Street, London, that Mrs. Byron No. 2 gave birth to her only child, George Gordon, the sixth lord and the stormy petrel of literary England in the days when the nineteenth century was young.

Soon after the birth of his son, the father, being pressed by importunate creditors, abandoned wife and child and fled again to France. The mother took her young son to Scotland, where she found shelter at Aberdeen. The father, meanwhile, having spent his last shilling in dissipation, decided to return to his wife. They lived together in humble lodgings until their incompatible tempers compelled a separation. For a time, they occupied separate apartments at opposite ends of the same street, within visiting distance. But even this arrangement was destined not to last. His creditors found him out. He extracted sufficient money from his wife to pay his passage once more to France, and left the country, never to return. The curtain fell on his wretched career at Valenciennes, in August, 1791, just as the French Revolution was breaking.

One would suppose that to the wife who had found it impossible to live with him, and whose fortune he had dissipated, his demise would have been in the nature of a relief. Yet when news of Byron's death reached the lady, it is said that her piercing shrieks disturbed the repose of the quiet neighborhood.

As to the character of the poet's mother, we are told that she was not only proud, impulsive, and wayward, but hysterical, that her affection and anger were alike demonstrative, her temper never for an hour secure. "She half worshipped, half hated," says Nicol, "the blackguard to whom she was married, and took no steps to protect her property. Her son she alternately petted and abused."

Such were the jarring, neurotic and tainted psychical streams which united in the poet. Though a handsome lad, he was afflicted with a deformity of one foot which, while it did not seriously interfere with walking, was a source of extraordinary mental suffering—"a lame brat," his mother in her brutal moods used to dub him.

But our limited space bids us hurry on. We cannot linger over Byron's school life, except to note that he was deficient in technical scholarship, low in his class, and apparently without ambition to rank high, but that he eagerly devoured history and romance and reveled in the Arabian nights. Like many another poet, he is reported as

disliking mathematics, and he was an indifferent penman. Yet he was fond of declaiming, and "noted by masters and mates as of quick temper, eager for adventures, prone to sports, always more ready to give a blow than to take one, affectionate, though resentful, and romantically devoted to his friends. The story is told how on one occasion he offered to take half the thrashing a bully was giving to a lad who later was known as Robert Peel.

Such was the little boy who, when the ogre at Newstead Abbey died in 1798, became the sixth Lord Byron. The news came to him at School, and when at the morning roll-call, his name was called, prefixed by the Latin "Dominus," he was so overcome with emotion that he was unable to answer and burst into tears.

It was at Harrow School, too, that he experienced his first love affair—an intense attachment for his cousin and senior in year, Mary Ann Chaworth, daughter of the victim of "the wicked lord." The lady soon married, leaving the future poet disconsolate, and it appears that he never quite forgot her.

From Harrow, Byron went in October, 1805, to Trinity College, Cambridge, as a nobleman scholar. We learn that he took full advantage of his privileges as a lord, quickly got into debt notwithstanding an allowance of 500 pounds (\$2,500) a year—a handsome sum in those days, indulged in gambling, hobnobbed with prize-fighters, won fame as a swimmer, traveled about in great style, and after terrible quarrels with his redoubtable mother successfully asserted his claim to independence.

Apparently Byron had little affection for his Alma Mater. Speaking of Cambridge, "the place," he said, "is the devil." "Cambridge did him no good," adds Ernest Coleridge. It is hard to think of Byron as an M.A.; yet it is a fact that he received the degree of Master of Arts, by special privilege as a peer, in 1808.

Byron was now twenty. Already, nearly two years before, he had published a little volume of verse, entitled *Fugitive Pieces*, subsequently destroying all but two or three copies on account of a clergyman friend having criticized one poem as "too free." Practically all of the material, however, was included in *Poems on Various Occasions*, which came out early in 1807.

Shortly afterwards he published another edition with some revisions, under the title, *Hours of Idleness*. This appeared in an altered second edition in March, 1808. Two months earlier his youthful poetic efforts had been torn to pieces in a criticism by Brougham appearing in the famous *Edinburgh Review*. The *Edinburgh*, however, soon felt the mettle of the young poet when Byron

brought out his scathing satire, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, in March, 1809. Within two years it passed through five editions. Even today it repays reading. Its play of wit and its poetical technique recalled the days of Pope.

It was the scorn which the *Edinburgh Review* had heaped on Byron's youthful verses that stung him into a fixed resolve to prove himself a real poet. Had this criticism never appeared, the name of Byron might be unknown today in English literature.

In the meantime, Byron had managed to borrow money enough to repair to some extent his ancestral estate—Newstead Abbey. There he now settled, "if," as one biographer remarks, "such a word may be used of his riotous occupation of his domain." Although much of the place was falling into ruin, Newstead Abbey was a magnificent inheritance. Byron fitted up two suites of apartments, one for himself and the other for his mother.

The vista from the Abbey was enchanting. In the large adjoining park there sparkled a chain of lovely lakes, and from the casement of his chamber the poet enjoyed a view of a cascade falling from the lakes.

Here Byron held high revel with boon companions, the members of his house parties sleeping until one in the afternoon, then spending hours at the chase, followed by a long night of festivity in which wine was quaffed from a human skull and the merrymakers "buffooned about the house" in monkish garments.

On attaining his majority, in 1809, Byron laid claim to his rights as a Peer of the Realm by taking his seat in the House of Lords.

A few months later, accompanied by his friend Hobhouse and a small retinue, he left England for a tour of Southern Europe. The Napoleonic wars were at their height and the trip promised an abundance of thrills. Landing at Lisbon, he visited Cintra and other points of interest, passing thence into Spain, and on to Seville and Cadiz. The "Peninsula Campaign," in which Britain was seeking to drive the French out of Spain, was in full swing, the battle of Talavera being fought and won during Byron's sojourn in the country. "Being against the government," Ernest Coleridge tells us, "he is against the war." Seemingly he is fascinated by Napoleon's genius and believes that nothing can withstand "the scourge of the world."

Leaving Gibraltar on August 16, Byron stopped long enough at Malta to enter into a love affair with a lady who figures as "Fair Florence" in his poem, *Childe Harold*.

In the Fall, we find him wandering on horseback through the wild and then almost unknown interior of Albania, entertained by

Moslem magnates. One of the most notable Turkish leaders, Ali Pasha, conceived a great admiration for the dashing young Englishman. "He told me," Byron wrote home to his mother, "to consider him as a father whilst I was in Turkey, and said he looked on me as his son. Indeed, he treated me like a child, sending me almonds, fruit, and sweetmeats twenty times a day."

Byron was greatly disillusioned shortly afterwards to find that the fatherly old gentleman was a notorious poisoner and assassin.

Late in November he reached Missolonghi, the fateful spot which fifteen years later was to be the scene of his own death.

In December, by a land journey from Larnaki, he came to Athens. It was at about Christmas time that, from the ruins of Phyle, he caught his first glimpse of "the city of the violet crown." The view inspired the following well-known lines:

"Ancient of days, august Athena! where,
Where are thy men of might? thy grand in soul?
Gone, glimmering through the dreams of things that were.
First in the race that led to glory's goal,
They won, and pass'd away: is this the whole—
A schoolboy's tale, the wonder of an hour?"

Then he points his favorite moral:

"Men come and go; but the hills, and waves, and skies, and stars endure."

"Apollo still thy long, long summer gilds;
Still in his beam Mendeli's marbles glare;
Art, glory, freedom fail—but nature still is fair."

Thence the poet journeyed on to Constantinople and Asia Minor, where he rambled among the reputed ruins of Troy. It was at this time, too, that, while detained at the Dardanelles by unfavorable winds, Byron performed the feat of which he never tired thereafter of boasting—he swam the Hellespont, from Sestos to Abydos. It was what we should call nowadays a publicity stunt, valuable because of the opportunity which it would give him for classical allusions in his writings.

Byron's behavior during this tour was bizarre in the extreme. He affected an exotic costume of scarlet and gold, and his attitude was a strange mingling of democracy and hauteur. At the court of the Sultan we find this fiery radical engaged in a disgraceful squabble with the English Ambassador over a point of social precedence.

During two years he wandered again and again through the Grecian peninsula and among the islands of the Archipelago, conversing with all sorts and conditions of men among the motley assemblage of races which then as now peopled the Levant—shepherds, farmers, villagers, sailors, monks and priests, chieftains, brigands, and pirates. He noted having crossed the isthmus of Corinth no less than eight times on his way from Attica to the Morea. He fell ill, and was nearly killed by native quacks, but his servants got him away from the doctors in time to allow Nature to cure him.

Byron next planned an expedition to Egypt, but his remittances from England ceased and his creditors at home became threatening. He would fain remain indefinitely by the shores of the Archipelago, looking out over "the wine-dark sea," and "the bright, bright track of the sun," still unchanged since the days of the ancient Greek poets. "Where one is well off, there is one's country," expressed his philosophy, and besides, he felt himself now a citizen of the world.

Still, his affairs in England were getting desperate and he must needs return. "In short," he wrote, "I am sick and sorry; and when I have a little repaired my irreparable affairs, away I shall march, either to campaign in Spain, or back again to the East, where I can at least have cloudless skies and a cessation from impertinence. . . . Howbeit, I have written some 4,000 lines, of one kind or another, on my travels."

Returning at last to England, he gave to the press the first two cantos of *Childe Harold* (1812), a work which was received with acclaim and at once placed him among the greatest poets of his day. Seven editions of the book were called for in four weeks.

The next two years witnessed the publication of *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Corsair*, and *Lara*.

Shortly before Byron's return home, his mother had died. She expired in a fit of rage superinduced by reading an upholsterer's bill. The poet now resumed his seat in the House of Lords, as a Liberal, making speeches on a number of bills in which he was interested. On April 21, 1812, we find him speaking in behalf of Catholic emancipation. Yet despite all his protests of Liberalism, Byron makes us aware that while he is *for* the people, he is not *of* them, nor does he wish to be.

Seeking escape from the harassed life which he was now leading, Byron decided to marry, in the frame of mind in which one might decide to hire a cook. "A wife," he impersonally observed in his journal, "would be my salvation."

The lady of his choice was a Miss Milbanke, daughter of Sir Ralph. He led her to the altar on January 2, 1815. "Byron," Nicol tells us, "was married like one walking in his sleep. He trembled like a leaf, made the wrong responses, and almost from the first seems to have been conscious of his irrevocable mistake. . . . In handing his bride into the carriage, he said: 'Miss Milbanke, are you ready?'—a mistake said to be of evil omen."

As Macaulay remarked anent Voltaire and Frederick the Great, it was easy to foresee the end of a relationship which had such a beginning. In fact, to quote again from Nicol: "Byron never really loved his wife; and though he has been absurdly accused of marrying for revenge, we must suspect that he married in part for a settlement. On the other hand, it is not unfair to say that she was fascinated by a name, and inspired by the philanthropic zeal of reforming a literary Corsair. Both were disappointed. Miss Milbanke's fortune was mainly settled on herself; and Byron, in spite of plentiful resolutions, gave little sign of reformation."

The ill-assorted union lasted only a year. Shortly after the birth of their only child, the little daughter Ada, Lady Byron left her husband forever. Neither Byron nor his wife would divulge the actual cause of the break, and in the thick fog of gossip and slander which sprang up around the affair, no gleam of truth can be discerned.

The next year Byron took his final departure from England. His popularity had suddenly changed into extreme unpopularity. "I was accused," he wrote, "of every monstrous vice of public rumor and private rancor. . . . My name, which has been a knightly or a noble one since my fathers helped to conquer the kingdom for William the Norman, was tainted. I felt that if what was whispered and muttered and murmured was true. I was unfit for England; if false, England was unfit for me. I withdrew."

In short, "the fashionable world was tired of its spoilt child, and he of it. Hunted out of the country, bankrupt in purse and heart, he left it, never to return; but he left it to find fresh inspiration by the 'rushing of the arrowy Rhone,' and under Italian skies to write the works which have immortalized his name."

A long chapter was now closed and Byron's life entered upon its last phase, stretching over a period of eight years. With the advent of this period, and the poet's emancipation from all the hateful conditions by which he was pursued in England, a fresh access of power came into his literary work.

After quitting England, Byron spent some time at Geneva under the stimulating influence of Shelley. At last he found a congenial

refuge by the waves of the Adriatic, "like the stag at bay who betakes himself to the waters."

He now turned out a large amount of poetry, including the remaining cantos of *Child Harold*, *Cain*, *Manfred*, and *Don Juan*. Then he seemed to weary of writing. He lacked the capacity for sustained effort at anything. Poetry he decided was not his vocation. He longed for action, and a field for heroic adventure opened immediately to his view.

The Greeks were struggling to throw off the Turkish yoke. In 1823, Byron chartered a ship at Genoa and set sail for the theatre of war. The Greeks welcomed their distinguished volunteer with great acclaim. With his usual inconsistency, Byron showed little real respect for these Greeks whose cause he was now enthusiastically advancing. Yet he brought with him to Missolonghi 4,000 pounds (\$20,000) of his own personal loan. "The people in the streets," wrote Stanhope, "are looking forward to his lordship's arrival as they would to the coming of a Messiah." He was received with salvos of musketry and triumphal music, and was given the freedom of the city. He strove manfully to end the internal dissensions in Greece, in order that the leaders might present a united front to the Turks.

Finally, it was arranged that Byron should assume the post of commander-in-chief of an expedition against Lepanto. But the hand of death was already upon him. On his thirty-sixth birthday, while still at Missolonghi, he wrote:

"If thou regret'st thy youth, why live?
The land of honorable death
Is here . . .
Then look around, and choose thy ground
And take thy rest."

Stricken with illness before he could get into action, in his delirium he fancied he was leading his troops on to the charge at Lepanto. "Forward, forward!" he called to his phantom legions. Then the fire of life slowly flickered out, like the flame in a dying coal. "Now I shall go to sleep," he murmured to a faithful attendant. These were his final words.

The tides of literary reputation ebb and flow like those of the ocean. The tremendous impact of Byron's fame in the flood tide of his literary popularity is difficult for us to realize, now that the tide has been ebbing so long.¹ To his own generation, Byron was

¹ Byron's literary reputation is still very high on the Continent.

an inspired spokesman. In masculine and, though declamatory, none the less powerful speech he voiced the chaotic yearnings and strivings of his day—its passion for liberty, its despairs, its doubts and questionings, its blind gropings toward new ideals and new values. All the strength and all the weakness of his generation are found in Byron.

And it is just because his was the voice of his generation that it lacked the quality which transcends time, and echoes so faintly in the ears of a generation busied with other problems. Byron was not a Shakespeare, but he was supremely himself, in all his virtues and all his vices. His work, dashing, brilliant, effective, and rich in content as it is, is marred by faults of technique and displays marked inequalities in merit. His thoughts welled out faster than he could put them down, and if he paused he could not recapture the fleeting mood. And so he is careless of form, of finish, of detail, and at times even of grammar.

‘He is the poet of the mountain-peak, the sea, and the tempest. A contempt for his fellow-men mingles curiously with his love of nature and her solitudes. Unlike Wordsworth, he does not efface himself in her presence, but finds a congenial spirit in her moods of fierceness and of power.’

The tumult of his own life and emotions is mirrored in his verse, which he made “the memorial of his imperious and colossal egotism.” His heroes follow the same general type and are born of his own personality. They are not chastened by suffering. “They stand solitary in the midst of the sufferings of the world, in their own woes, sullen and defiant until the last.”

Byron’s ideal of freedom was not the freedom dreamed of by philosophers and by the political leaders of oppressed peoples. It was largely a concept of personal license. “I have simplified my politics,” Byron confided, “into an utter detestation of all existing governments.”

It was Byron’s lack of any constructive social faith, any vision of a redeemed and uplifted humanity such as inspired Shelley, that makes his reputation a tarnished thing today. But the striking force and beauty of many a passage in his writings will give enjoyment to lovers of literature as long as English is a living tongue.