

A Regency Case Study George, Lord Byron and "*Don Leon*"



George, Lord Byron — or to give him his full title, George, Lord Byron, 6th Baron of Rochdale — is sometimes claimed by the more chauvinistically gay web sites as a “gay poet” for much the same reason they also claim many other notable figures from history, that is, that they were known to have some homosexual experience. More accurately, he should be described as a “bi-sexual poet” or more accurately still perhaps, as a “polymorphous perverse poet”. Some modern scholars attribute his apparently athletic sex life to bi-polar disorder (still better known under its old name, manic-depression). Certainly, in the manic phase of that illness, people often have greatly heightened sex drive, can be paranoid, have delusions and boundless

energy for grandiose schemes. Whether that is a fitting description for one of the greatest poets of his generation is arguable, but if nothing else, his claim to have had sex with 200 women in 200 consecutive nights in Venice¹ would seem to give the lie to his inclusion as a “gay” poet....

These days, Byron is celebrated as a great Romantic poet, as the charismatic and devilishly handsome if chubby² *enfant terrible* of the British aristocracy and the hero of the liberation from Ottoman rule of “The Isles of Greece, The Isles of Greece, where burning Sappho lived and sang...” In his own lifetime people were rather more ambivalent in their appreciation of him. His poetry and his heroic stance when the liberation of Greece became a popular subject among readers of the daily newspapers had to be balanced against the scandals which surrounded him and which eventually drove him from Britain for ever.



A frontispiece portrait of Lord Byron, from an 1841 edition of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage

Perhaps the best-known of those affairs was the one he had in 1812 with Lady Caroline Lamb. He called her “*Caro*”, which was not only short for her proper name, but is also the Italian masculine for “*dear*”, the gender in this case appropriate because she often came to meet him on their assignations dressed as one of her own page boys. He apparently tired of her incessant demands and some say, to escape her, in 1815 married the rather dour Annabella Milbanke, one of Lady Caroline’s cousins, with whom he had a daughter, Augusta Ada. This daughter, later known as Ada Lovelace, became famous in her own right as a mathematician whose work with Charles Babbage we nowadays celebrate as one of the pioneers of the computer.

The marriage however was spectacularly unsuccessful and ended after only a year. Many biographers claim at this stage Annabella, Lady Byron who wanted custody of her daughter, was busy spreading accusations that Byron had had an incestuous affair with his half-sister Augusta Leigh. It is true he wrote many passionate poems

¹ Don Giovanni, in Mozart’s *Catalog aria*, was said to have had 640 women “in Italy alone”

² Louis Crompton, writing in the GLBTQ Encyclopedia says that Byron was only “5 feet 8½ inches tall and his widely varying weight ranged from 137 to 202 pounds - he once said that everything he swallowed was instantly converted to tallow and deposited on his ribs. One of his friends noted that at the age of about 30 he looked 40 and “the knuckles of his hands were lost in fat.” (http://www.glbtc.com/literature/byron_gg.html). He also was born with a club foot of which he was immensely sensitive. However, the French author Stendhal (1783-1842) once reported seeing him in 1816 when he was : “... struck by his eyes... I have never in my life seen anything more beautiful or more expressive.”

for and about his sister and seemed delighted in 1814, three years after she had separated from her husband, when she gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth Medora, generally believed to have been his. In 1816, virtually ostracised by society, Byron left Britain and never returned.

There were many other well-publicized affairs after Byron left Britain, including one in Switzerland with Mary Shelley's step-sister, Claire Clairmont, with whom it seems he had yet another daughter, but the longest-lasting and apparently most sincere relationship was the one Byron had with the Italian Countess Guiccioli. It was during this time also that Byron became embroiled in the failed Carbonari movement.

In 1823 representatives of the Greek independence movement contacted Lord Byron and asked for his support. He agreed, and apparently bored with the Contessa and looking for adventure, he left Genoa where they had been living, and sailed to Kefalonia in the Ionian Islands. There he spent £4000 of his own money refitting the Greek fleet before sailing to Messolonghi to join the Greek rebel forces.

In some ways, Greece to Byron meant boys. It was in Kefalonia that he met Loukas Khalandritsanos, who was to prove the last in the line of his Greek pederastic attachments although in this case, apparently in a one-sided and unconsummated relationship — Loukas it seems constantly demanded more money and gifts and gave nothing in return.

And so it was, while still at Messolonghi and before he was able to lead the planned attack on Lepanto at the mouth of the Gulf of Corinth, Byron caught a chill while out riding, this developed into a violent fever, and he died on April 19, 1824 at the age of 36. Although the Greeks wanted to bury their hero in Athens, his body was returned to England, but minus his heart which remained in Greece, and his skull and some other parts which were taken as souvenirs. In London, despite his fame as a poet and romantic hero, the deans of both Westminster and St Paul's refused to allow his burial in their precincts. Finally, what remained of his remains were buried in the family vault at Hucknall Torkard, near Newstead Abbey in Nottinghamshire.

SO WE'LL GO NO MORE A ROVING

So we'll go no more a roving
so late into the night
Though the heart be still as loving
And the moon be still as bright.

For the sword outwears the sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,

And Love itself have rest.

Though the night was made for loving,
And the day returns too soon,
Yet we'll go no more a roving
By the light of the moon.

It is a sad commentary that Byron's tomb is not as grand as that of his dog, a Newfoundland named *Boatswain*. His epitaph, written by Byron, reads in part:



Near this spot
Are deposited the Remains
of one
Who possessed Beauty
Without Vanity,
Strength without Insolence,
Courage without Ferocity,
And all the Virtues of Man
Without his Vices.

Byron's "Boatswain"

While there had been rumours of homosexual affairs surrounding Byron from an early age, for the most part these were not known to the public until 1957 when Leslie Marchand³, the doyen of Byron's biographers, published his 3-volume work "*Byron: A Biography*". It was understandable that Byron and his associates kept their homosexual affairs quiet because in England at that time, sodomy was not only still a capital offence⁴ and executions at an all-time high with roughly 2 men hanged every year. This figure however, does not give the full picture because an untold number of men were brought before the courts each year who could have been charged with sodomy but who, since their cases were clearly consensual between adults, were usually charged with a non-capital offence and transported to Australia.

The old convict, William Williams, whose biography I once researched and published⁵, was a contemporary case in point. Although I could not prove it, I believe that he was charged with theft and transported to New South Wales rather than being charged with sodomy with his employer. William, the earliest convict we

³ Leslie A Marchand, *Byron: A Biography*, Knopf, 1957.

⁴ Sodomy came into English criminal law in 1533 after Henry VIII nationalised the Church and with it, Ecclesiastical Law.

⁵ Discussed at length in Lecture 19.

can demonstrate to be homosexual in our terms, was employed as a caretaker of a London house. When the owner's wife came to check it over one day she found many curtains and other household articles missing, she called the police and the items were found at William's house. Williams maintained throughout the brief trial that his employer had given the articles to him. The trial glossed over the question why a gentleman of substance would give such expensive gifts to a Welsh cook? Handled this way, two men were saved from the gallows, a scandal involving a propertied gentleman was avoided, and Williams went on to be the most sought-after and best cook in the Colony. He died in Port Arthur after a series of brushes with the law in New South Wales for crimes described by one policeman as "something unnatural".⁶

Byron seems to have almost welcomed the chance to thumb his nose at Society with his affairs with women but was much more circumspect about his homosexual dalliances. He had attended Harrow Public School and later University at a time when a cult of romantic friendships between young men was at its height. Leigh Hunt, Percy Bysshe Shelley and later, even the Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, acknowledged that they too had had such relationships. These however were not sexual, no matter how much hand-holding and attestations of loyalty and undying love the young man made to each other.

Well, perhaps most were Platonic — at least the ones spoken about publicly were not hanging offences. Byron himself wrote a number of poems inspired by his feelings for younger boys at Harrow which were published first, in *Fugitive Pieces* (1806) and later, in 1807, in *Poems on Various Occasions*, this latter being printed at his own expense while at Cambridge. Lady Caroline Lambe (whose motives must be suspect since she confided to Lady Byron what Byron himself seems to have confided to her) said that Byron admitted he had had "unnatural connections" with some of the boys who had inspired his poems.

Some of these poems were re-published later that year (1807) in *Hours of Idleness*. However, on that occasion he significantly omitted one poem, "*The Cornelian*", which we know now was written in response to an intimate event in a love-affair he had with a Trinity College chorister, John Edleston when the 15 year old youth had given him a heart-shaped cornelian... The opening stanzas are as follows:

The Cornelian

No specious splendour of this stone
Endears it to my memory ever;
With lustre only once it shone,

⁶ Bob Hay: *A Charge of Something Unnatural: A brief History from the Records of Australia's Earliest Known 'Homosexual' Convict*, in *Gay Perspectives II – More Essays in Australian Gay Culture*, Robert Aldrich (ed), Dept. Economic History and The Australian Centre for Gay and Lesbian Research, University of Sydney, 1994, Pp63-82.

And blushes modest as the giver.

Some, who can sneer at friendship's ties,
Have, for my weakness, oft reprov'd me;
Yet still the simple gift I prize,
For I am sure, the giver lov'd me.

He offer'd it with downcast look,
As fearful_ that I might refuse it;
I told him, when the gift I took,
My only fear should be, to lose it.

On July 5, 1807, Byron wrote to a friend, Miss Elizabeth Bridget Pigot

My dear Eliza, at this moment I write with a bottle of Claret in my Head, & tears in my eyes, for I have just parted from "my Cornelian" who spent the evening with me; as it was our last Interview, I postponed my engagements to devote the hours of the Sabbath to friendship, Edleston & I have separated for the present, & my mind is a Chaos of hope & Sorrow. . .

. . . I rejoice to hear you are interested in my "protegé", he has been my almost constant associate since October 1805, when I entered Trinity College, his voice first attracted my notice his countenance fixed it, & his manners attached me to him forever, he departs for a mercantile house in Town, in October, & we shall probably not meet, till the expiration of my minority, when I shall leave to his decision, either entering as a Partner through my Interest, or residing with me altogether. Of course he would in his present frame of mine prefer the latter, but he may alter his opinion previous to that period, however he shall have his choice, I certainly love him more than any human being, & neither time or Distance have had the least effect on my (in general, changeable Disposition. -- In short, We shall put Lady E. Butler & Miss Ponsonby to the Blush, Pylades & Orestes out of countenance, & want nothing but a Catastrophe like Nisus & Euryalus, to give Jonathan & David the "go by".-- He certainly is perhaps more attached to me, than even I am in return, during the whole of my residence at Cambridge, we met every day summer & Winter, without passing one tiresome moment, & separated each time with increasing Reluctance. I hope you will one day see us together, he is the only being I esteem, though I like many. . .

John Edleston died in May, 1811 while Byron was in Malta on his Grand Tour so he did not know of the loss until October of that year when Edleston's sister got the sad news to Byron. When he received the news of Edleston's death, Byron wrote October 10, 1811_ to his former tutor at Cambridge, Francis Hodgson:

"I have heard of a death the other day that shocked me more than any, of one whom I loved more than any, of one whom I loved more than I ever loved a living thing, and one who, I believe, loved me to the last."

In a poem called "To Thyrza", which is more a number of elegies collected together, and pretending that he is writing to a woman, Byron expressed his loss. He also demonstrated how clandestine it had been:

*"Ours too the glance none saw beside
The smile none else might understand."*

In 1809 after he graduated from Cambridge Byron left on a Grand Tour which took him on his first trip to Greece. He wrote back to his university pals, Charles Skinner Matthews and John Cam Hobhouse, using a Latin code to hide his reports of his pederastic affairs with Greek youths. These letters were de-coded by Leslie Marchand⁷ for his huge 1957 biography already mentioned.



Byron welcomed at Messolugi (Vrizakis, 1861)

Although he seems to have cast his lustful — but beautiful — eyes over all the youths at the convent where he was lodging, Byron seems first to have become enamoured with an effeminate youth named Eustathius Giorgiu and then, a little later, to have entered a reputedly torrid love affair with Nicolò Giraud, a youth of

⁷ ibid

15 or 16 whom Byron not only later sent to Malta where he attended a school at a monastery, and also bequeathed him £7,000, a huge sum in those days — Byron refitted the Greek fleet for just over half the amount!

Don Leon

Much of the claim that Byron was “gay” however, rests on rather spurious evidence. In 1866, 42 years after the poet’s death in 1824, a poem finally appeared in print which was attributed to Lord Byron. This was called “*Don Leon*” and certainly reads as though Byron could have written it. It also includes information which would have been known only to a very few intimate boyhood friends. However, since it also mentions events which happened long after the poet died, it is clearly a poem, if not a criminal forgery, then passed off as the dead poet’s work for a different purpose. It is known “*Don Leon*” must have been written some time before 1853, but the original edition is lost. An edition printed in 1930 by the Fortune Press was destroyed when the courts declared it obscene.

The original purpose for the poem itself was political. It opens thus:

*Thou ermined judge, pull off that sable cap!
What! Cans't thou lie, and take thy morning nap?
Peep thro' the casement; see the gallows there:
Thy work hangs on it; could not mercy spare?
What had he done? Ask crippled Talleyrand,
Ask Beckford, Courtenay, all the motley band
Of priest and laymen, who have shared his guilt
(If guilt it be) then slumber if thou wilt;
What bonds had he of social safety broke?
Found'st thou the dagger hid beneath his cloak?
He stopped no lonely traveller on the road;
He burst no lock, he plundered no abode;
He never wrong'd the orphan of his own;
He stifled not the ravish'd maiden's groan.
His secret haunts were hid from every soul,
Till thou did'st send thy myrmidons to prowl,
And watch the prickings of his morbid lust,
To wring his neck and call thy doings just.*

Don Leon is a protest against the severe punishments for what the unknown author might have called a “victimless crime” if he had lived in a later era. It continues as Byron might have done, contrasting the hypocrisy of society which hangs he who hurts no one but rewards those who do.

*When greedy placemen drain a sinking state,
When virtue starves and villains dine off plate;
When lords and senators untouched by shame,*

*For schemes of basest fraud can lend their name;
When elders, charged to guard the pauper's trust,
Feast on the funds, and leave the poor a crust;
When knaves like these escape the hangman's noose,
Who even to Clogher a pardon would refuse?
Who would not up and lend a hand to save
A venial culprit from a felon's grave!*

He throws a glance over his shoulder at the usual justification in the Bible for the persecution of sodomites:

*I grant that casuists the Bible quote,
And tell us how God's tardy vengeance smote
Lot's native town with brimstone from the sky,
To punish this impure delinquency,
Unmindful that the drunkard's kiss defiled
(Whilst yet the embers smoked), his virgin child.
But reason doubts the Jewish prophet's tale.
Does history then no other place bewail?*

Or the veniality of the Church:

*Her rites as means of revenue are prized:
For mammon's sake our infants are baptised.
With golden offerings marriages are made;
Woe to the union where no fee is paid.
Who weds or fornicates, no matter which,
Children begets, and makes the altar rich;
But, where no offerings to the surplice fall,
The taste forthwith is anti-physical.
Hell-fire can hardly expiate the guilt
Of that damned sin-the church's rubric bilked.*

And now, pleading what purports to be Byron's own cause and begins what seems to be an autobiographical account of youthful exploits:

*The tree we plant will, when its boughs are grown,
Produce no other blossoms than its own;
And thus in man some inborn passions reign
Which, spite of careful pruning, sprout again.
Then, say, was I or nature in the wrong,
If, yet a boy, one inclination, strong
In wayward fancies, domineered my soul,
And bade complete defiance to control?
What, though my youthful instincts, forced to brood*

*Within my bosom seemed awhile subdued?
What, though, by early education taught,
The charms of women first my homage caught?
What, though my verse in Mary's praises flowed?
And flowers poetic round her footsteps strewed,
Yet, when her ears would list not to my strain,
And every sigh was answered with disdain,
Pride turned, not stopped, the course of my desires,
Extinguished these, and lighted other fires.*

After admitting to a burning boyhood passion for a girl called Margaret, the author has Byron say:

*Among the yeomen's sons on my estate
A gentle boy would at my mansion wait:
And now that time has almost blanched my hair,
And with the past the present I compare,
Full well I know, though decency forbad
The same caresses to a rustic lad;
Love, love it was, that made my eyes delight
To have his person ever in my sight.*

Now he moves on

*I bade adieu to school and tyro's sports,
And Cam received me in his gothic courts.*

and enters into the Edleston relationship:

*Oft, when the evening bell to vespers rung,
When the full choir the solemn anthem sung,
And lips, o'er which no youthful down had grown,
Hymned their soft-praises to Jehovah's throne,
The pathos of the strain would soothe my soul,
And call me willing from the drunkard's bowl.*

and a few verses later,

*Among the choir a youth my notice won,
Of pleasing lineaments named Eddleston.
With gifts well suited to a stripling's mood,
His friendship and his tenderness I wooed.
Oh! how I loved to press his cheek to mine;
How fondly would my arms his waist entwine!
Another feeling borrowed friendship's name,*

*And took its mantle to conceal my shame.
Another feeling! Oh! 'tis hard to trace
The line where love usurps tame friendship's place.
Friendship's the chrysalis, which seems to die,
But throws its coil to give love wing to fly.
Both are the same, but in another state;
This formed to soar, and that to vegetate.*

*Of humble birth was he – patrician I.
And yet this youth was my idolatry.
Strong was my passion, past all inward cure
And could it be so violent, yet pure?*

But why should this be when it is thought so wrong?

*So questioned I myself: What light this fire?
Maids and not boys are wont to move desire;
Else 'twere illicit love. Oh! sad mishap!
But what prompts nature then to set the trap?
Why night and day does his sweet image float
Before my eyes? or wherefore do I dote
On that dear face with ardour so intense?
Why truckles reason to concupiscence?
Though law cries "hold!" yet passion onward draws;
But nature gave us passions, man gave laws,
Whence spring these inclinations, rank and strong?
And harming no one, wherefore call them wrong?*

And, after enumerating the famous dead who also loved this way,

*To this conclusion we must come at last:
Wise men have lived in generations past,
Whose deeds and sayings history records,
To whom the palm of virtue she awards,
Who, tempted, ate of that forbidden tree,
Which prejudice denies to you and me.
Then be consistent; and, at once confess,
If man's pursuit through life is happiness,
The great, the wise, the pious, and the good,
Have what they sought not rightly understood;
Or deem not else that aberration crime,
Which reigns in every caste and every clime.*

In Part II of this long poem, the author recounts what is clearly one of Byron's Greek loves, this time with the youth Nicolò Giraud whom he educated and left a huge legacy.

*Close to the spot a Grecian dwelling reared
Its modest roof. A courteous man appeared;
And, bowing low, with invitation pressed
To enter in, and on his sofa rest.
I crossed the threshold of the courteous man,
And smoked and chatted. Close by the divan
His son, as Eastern usages demand,
In modest attitude was seen to stand.
And smiling watched the signals of my will,
To pour sherbet, or the long chibook fill.
Grace marked his actions, symmetry his form;
His eyes had made an anchorite grow warm,
His long attire, his silken anteri,
Gave pleasing doubts of what his sex might be;
And who that saw him would perplexed have been,
For beauty marked his gender epicene.
Day after day my visits I renewed,
His love with presents like a mistress wooed;
Until his sire with dreams of greatness won,
To be my page made offer of his son.
I took him in my train, with culture stored
His mind, and in it choice instruction poured;
Till like the maiden, who some budding rose
Waters with care and watches till it blows,
Then plucks and places it upon her breast,
I too this blossom to my bosom pressed.*

.....

*How many hours I've sat in pensive guise,
To watch the mild expression of his eyes!
Or when asleep at noon, and from his mouth
His breath came sweet like odours from the south,
How long I've hung in rapture as he lay,
And silent chased the insect tribe away.
How oft at morn, when troubled by the heat,
The covering fell disordered at his feet,
I've gazed unsated at his naked charms,
And clasped him waking to my longing arms.*

.....

*Oh! how the happy moments seemed to fly,
Spent half in love and half in poetry!
The muse each morn I wooed, each eve the boy,
And tasted sweets that never seemed to cloy.
Women as women, me had never charmed,
And shafts that others felt left me unharmed.
But thou, Giraud, whose beauty would unlock
The gates of prejudice, and bid me mock
The sober fears that timid minds endure,
Whose ardent passions women only cure,
Receive this faithful tribute to thy charms,
Not vowed alone, but paid too in thy arms.
For here the wish, long cherished, long denied,
Within that monkish cell was gratified.
And as the sage, who dwelt on Leman's lake,
Nobly his inmost meditations spake,
Then dared the man, who would like him confess
His secret thoughts, to say his own were less;
So boldly I set calumny at naught,
And fearless utter what I fearless wrought.*

Louis Crompton⁸, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Nebraska, says in his very readable and learned article in the “glbtq encyclopedia” that

Don Leon is of interest to Byron studies because it gives accurate details of Byron's love for John Edleston (without the author's realizing, however, that the Thyrza elegies mourned him) and of his consummated affair in Greece with Nicolo Giraud, a part of Byron's life on which the Leon poet seems especially well informed. It also presents, in a sensitive and insightful fashion, a psychological portrayal of the adolescent Byron's awakening awareness of his interest in other boys.

Nevertheless, the main impetus behind the poem and its real raison d'être was to protest the continued hanging of homosexuals in England in the years following Byron's death. Such executions had been common during Byron's lifetime, averaging about two a year. But in 1832, despite passage of the Reform Bill and the extensive law reforms introduced by the new liberal parliament, there was no change in the law that made homosexual acts capital offenses, and the statute was still enforced in its full rigor. Consequently, the poem opens with a strong protest against a sentence of

⁸ http://www.glbtc.com/literature/byron_gg,4.html

death, which the notes identify as that pronounced on Captain Henry Nicholls in August 1833.

Crompton concludes by saying that:

The poem is forceful satire in the style of Byron's own "The Curse of Minerva", with many striking passages. It makes an impassioned and eloquent plea for law reform, despite its odd use of contemporary homophobic language. All in all, "Don Leon" may justly be described as one of the most remarkable documents in gay literary history to appear between the end of the classical period and the twentieth century.
