

Roderick Beaton
BYRON'S WAR
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Roderick Beaton's book is the best account yet written of Byron's final expedition to Greece, and of the long preliminaries to that sad end. Having a better knowledge of the Greek documents, he outclasses Harold Nicolson in his 1924 *Byron: the Last Journey*, the only previous book to be devoted exclusively to the tale.

The book glides with expertise through Byron's first expedition to Greece – in part with Hobhouse, in part, to Byron's relief, without him – in 1809-11. Beaton deals discreetly with the "Turkish Tales": "Identity is not stable in these poems, but *willed* by the protagonists – or the controlling hand of their creator" (p.33). He might have said "created by a poet who often wrote too quickly, for a market he despised": what only looks "*willed*" may in fact just be sloppy construction.

Beaton often illuminates corners which have hitherto been obscure. Rigas Velestinis was not the author of the imitation *Marseillaise* which both Byron and Hobhouse translated (p.9), though he had written "a famous war song". Mamarotouris, whose translation of *The Travels of Anacharsis the Younger in Greece* he hoped Byron could have published, is "not otherwise known to Greek history or Greek literature" (p.23).

Some points may be questioned: "Byron himself would invoke its setting [*that of his great swimming feat*] in one of his 'Turkish Tales', *The Bride of Abydos*" (p.19). Except that the poem is not set anywhere near Abydos, contains no Bride, and certainly no swimming. "Lady Caroline Lamb, one of many married women with whom he had affairs [*in London*]" (p.31) There were no others.¹ He didn't bed Frances Wedderburn Webster, though Wellington did, for which Byron hated him. "... forbidden love (with clear echoes of his incest with Augusta in *Bride*, and pederastic relationship with Giraud in *Lara*) ..." (p.33: see also p.243). But Giraud didn't cross-dress, as Kaled does: that was Caroline Lamb's game.

Beaton's most important new idea, prior to the 1823 expedition to Greece, concerns the influence of Shelley. I don't go along with Beaton's hint of a sexual attraction for Shelley on Byron's part, when they shared a hotel room on the shore of Lake Geneva: Shelley doesn't seem to have been "handsome" (p.46) so much as weird-looking. Beaton also suggests "an unstated homoerotic element" on Byron's part, in his friendship with Pietro Gamba (p.60); if it were so, it would have been more hopeless still than a passion for Shelley. But that Shelley's ideas and other-worldly attitude to politics and morality (though not his poetry), affected Byron deeply, there can be no doubt. Guilt at the way he ignored Shelley's constant defence of Claire Clairmont, plus the fact that Shelley showed more interest in Allegra than he did, coupled with guilt at the way he had accepted Hoppner's rumour about Claire's and Shelley's supposed bastard child ("It is just like them"), would have lain heavily on his mind.

It's true that Mary reports that Byron "seem[ed] pleased with" *Hellas* (p.87), but he never mentions it himself, and, as a great admirer of Hope's *Anastasius*, would have queried Shelley's statement, in his preface, that that satirical book was no longer an accurate depiction of modern Greece. The idea that, with the ethnic cleansing (to use an apt modern term) of virtually all the Turks in Greece, and the counter-massacre of all the Greeks on Chios, "The world's great age begins anew, / The golden years return", would have struck him, as it should strike us, as evidence, not of mystic vision, but of mental derangement. But its rose-tinted view of Greece ancient and modern would have matched an ideal which Byron harboured in secret, despite all his disillusioned-in-advance disclaimers. Beaton analyses *The Deformed Transformed*, with Arnold taking over Achilles's shape, as Byron taking Shelley into himself, having "St. Bartholomewed" himself in preparation (p.111), by his swim in the hot sun after Shelley's cremation.

Beaton discusses *The Isles of Greece* very intelligently, as "part of a performance" (p.58), dismissing Medwin's interesting claim that it was pasted-in, having been written simultaneously with *Childe Harold II*. But he doesn't treat *On this Day I complete my Thirty-Sixth Year* as a performance, describing it as "mawkish", "self-pitying", and as "tawdry, worn-out rhetoric" (pp.219-20). Surely that poem is a performance, too – one designed to cheer the poet up??

Beaton suggests, of the final, fatal expedition, "The truth is, he [*Byron*] may well not have known, himself, why he did it. Some of the explanations he gave, afterwards, sound almost as though he is trying to explain himself to himself" (p.137). I disagree. Two motives about which he was definitely aware – but about which he could neither write nor speak – were the need to get away from Teresa Guiccioli, who, by Genoa, was only coming to him by appointment: and the desperate need he felt, now that he was going bald,² to satisfy

1: There's a remote possibility that he had a brief affair with Lady Melbourne: but the rumour is from Annabella.

2: Though his teeth were still in excellent shape: see what Fletcher writes, at 2001 NABSR p.42: "I ... never saw a more perfect set of teeth without spot or blemish" [*at Missolonghi*].

his need for a young male lover. Beaton writes (p.205), “Perhaps, in his new life at Missolonghi, he would be able to resume the idyll that had begun with Nicolo Giraud” – implying that the idea didn’t occur until he arrived and met Loukas Chalandritsanos. I believe the dream was part of his motivation in setting out. My own, further, theory, is this (of which Byron was probably unaware): throughout his life, he had an infantile need to spend as much money as possible. His praise, in *Don Juan*, of avarice and misers, is an attempt at moral self-correction: he’d love to have been a miser, but could never discipline his expenditure. The Greek “Cause” gave him the perfect excuse to spend all his money at once – and then die.

There’s no doubting the anger he felt when the London Greek Committee published his willingness to be their representative: he felt badly compromised, for now he couldn’t stay in Italy without looking foolish.

Other points could be elaborated: “There was certainly something ghostly about this expedition [*to Ephesus*] as he and Hobhouse experienced it” (p.16). Byron would describe the ghostliness in his unfinished story *Augustus Darvell*, published with *Mazeppa* in 1819, which gives it from Hobhouse’s viewpoint, a fact which seems to have upset Hobhouse. “... he more than once wrote to Hobhouse in England, urging him to bring with him his copy of Pausanias ...” (p.41). He needed Thomas Taylor’s Pausanias for the notes, which he uses in *Manfred*: see *Manfred and Thomas Taylor, Byron Journal 2001*, pp.62-71. Beaton dwells too briefly (p.53) on the 1627 Cretan romance *η βοσκοπούλα (The Fair Shepherdess)*. Byron makes two references to this work – sent to him by John Galt – in letters to Hobhouse of October 4th 1810 and January 10th 1811 (BLJ II 22 and 33), and although he speaks very disparagingly of it (he renames it “*Herdswoman*” and calls it “*damned nonsense*” and “*the worst Romaic & the vilest nonsense ever seen*”) the parallels between it and *Don Juan II* remain striking, and are more substantial than here stated.

Roderick Beaton has a delicate balancing act to perform. On page 90, while not understating the horror of what the Greeks did to the Turks and Jews in Tripolitza in 1821, he gets it out of the way quickly – in part because Byron never mentions it (though I think it inspires his description of the massacres at Ismail in *Don Juan VIII*). But on page 257 he does more than justice to what Byron felt after the conviction, for treason, of Georgios Karaiskakis, at Missolonghi in 1824:

According to Millingen’s testimony, he had been prepared to cope with almost any depravity, but ‘he was not prepared to meet with black-hearted treachery; or to see Greeks conspiring against their own country; courting the chains of their former masters; and bargaining the liberties and very existence of their own brethren’. Compared to this, the treachery of the Suliots he had thought his friends, and who then had subverted the expedition against Lepanto, was as nothing.

Byron’s motives in going to Greece are complex, and debatable: but the reason for his acute depression after he’d been there for three months, and his consequent low resistance to infection, could not be clearer. It’s an issue to which, in his final chapters, Roderick Beaton does full justice.

Longer notes 1)

Veli received him even more graciously than his father had done at Tepelena – and was more blatant, too, in making a sexual advance that Byron seems to have found disturbing (p.5).

This is what Byron writes:

He [*Veli*] said he wished all the old men (specifying under that epithet North, Forresti, and Stranè) to go to his father, but the young ones to come to him, to use his own expression “vecchio con vecchio, Giovane con Giovane.” – He honored me with the appellations of his friend and brother, and hoped that we should be on good terms not for a few days but for Life. – All this is very well, but he has an awkward manner of throwing his arm round one’s waist, and squeezing one’s hand in public, which is a high compliment, but very much embarrasses “ingenuous youth”. – The first time I saw him he received me standing, accompanied me at my departure to the door of the audience chamber, and told me I was a παλικαρι and an εὐμορφω παιδι. – He asked if I did not think it very proper that as young men (he has a beard down to his middle) we should live together, with a variety of other sayings, which made Stranè s<l>tare, and puzzled me in my replies. ³

In the context of a letter to Hobhouse, which Byron expected Hobhouse to show C.S.Matthews, I’d suggest “a sexual advance that Byron seems to have found amusing”.

3: B. to Hobhouse, from Tripolitza, August 16th 1810: text from NLS Ms.43438 f.15; BLJ II 9-11.

2)

... Veli, having read his father's letter of introduction, reserved the highest favours for another English Lord, the young Marquis of Sligo, with whom Byron shared some of his travels during that summer and autumn. The Marquis, Veli wrote to inform his father, was related to King George III, and had been sent to him on a secret mission from the British government ... Poor Byron was just a playboy, who might amuse the Pasha. Whatever Byron may have hoped or believed, the Ottoman authorities in Greece harboured no illusions that he might be a person of political consequence (pp.5-6).

This would interpret as vain imagination what Byron writes to his mother:

He [*Ali*] had heard that an Englishman of rank was in his dominions & had left orders in Yanina with the Commandant to provide a house & supply me with every kind of necessary, gratis ... ⁴

But what happened was that Veli had mistaken *Sligo* for *Byron*. Sligo writes to *his* mother:

I had about fifty Messages from him by his Prime Minister in the course of the Evening and the painter found out in conversation the [*sic: for "he"*] took me for the Kings Nephew and that I was come on a secret mission of importance, accordingly he said that if My Mission was of importance & secrecy that I should come at night secretly but I assured him of the contrary that it was merely a visit to show my respect to him, ...⁵

Veli Pasha may have heard from his father that Byron ("the King of England's nephew") had come to *him* at night, and, supposing Sligo to be that same Byron, have anticipated a corresponding visit to himself.

4: B. to Catherine Gordon Byron, from Prevesa, November 12th 1809: text from Morgan Library, photocopy from microfilm; BLJ I 226-31.

5: The Marquis of Sligo to the Marchioness of Sligo, from Tripolitza, August 3rd 1810: text from Yale Beinecke, OSB MSS 74 Box 1, Folder 1.