

## Lord Byron (1788-1824), George Gordon

Byron is the most notorious Romantic poet and satirist. Byron was famous in his lifetime for his love affairs with women and Mediterranean boys. He created his own cult of personality, the concept of the 'Byronic hero' - a defiant, melancholy young man, brooding on some mysterious, unforgivable event in his past. Byron's influence on European poetry, music, novel, opera, and painting has been immense, although the poet was widely condemned on moral grounds by his contemporaries.

George Gordon, Lord Byron was born with a club-foot and became extremely sensitive about his lameness. His life did not become easier when he received painful treatments for his foot by a quack practitioner in 1799. Eventually he got a corrective boot. He is believed to have been sexually abused by a female governess at the age of nine.

In his writing, short and stout Byron glorified proud heroes, who overcome hardships. The poet himself was 5 feet 8 inches tall and his widely varying weight ranged from 137 to 202 pounds. 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."

Byron spent his early childhood years in poor surroundings. His father died in 1791. After Byron inherited the title and property of his great-uncle in 1798, he went to school in Harrow, where he excelled in swimming, and Cambridge, where he piled up debts, aroused alarm with bisexual love affairs and kept a bear as a pet. At the age of fifteen he fell in love with Mary Chaworth, his distant cousin, to whom he wrote the poem 'To Emma'.

In 1807 appeared Byron's first collection of poetry, HOURS OF IDLENESS. It received bad reviews. The poet answered his critics with the satire ENGLISH BARDS AND SCOTCH REVIEWS in 1808. Next year he took his seat in the House of Lords, and set out on to visit Spain, Albania, Greece, and the Aegean.

Success came in 1812 when Byron published the first part of CHILDE HAROLD'S PILGRIMAGE (1812-1818). "I awoke one morning and found myself famous," he later said. He became an adored character of London society, he spoke in the House of Lords on liberal themes, and had a hectic love-affair with Lady Caroline Lamb. "Mad - bad - and dangerous to know," she wrote in her journal on the evening she first saw him. But the love of Byron's life is thought to have been a poor choir boy.

During the summer of 1813 Byron apparently entered into a relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh, who was a mother of three daughters. In 1814 Augusta gave birth to Elizabeth Medora, who was generally supposed to be Byron's. THE CORSAIR (1814), sold 10,000 copies on the first day of publication. Byron married Anne Isabella Milbanke in 1815, and their daughter Ada was born the same year. The marriage was unhappy, and they obtained a legal separation the following year.

When the rumors of his incest started to rise and debts were accumulating, Byron left England in 1816, never to return. "The only virtue they honor in England is hypocrisy," he once wrote a friend. Byron settled in Geneva with Mary Godwin, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, and Claire Clairmont, who became his mistress. There he continued *Childe Harold* and THE PRISONER OF CHILLON. At the end of the summer Byron continued his travels, spending two years in Italy. Observing Byron in an opera box at La Scala in 1816, the French writer Stendhal later recalled: "I was struck by his eyes... I have never in my

life seen anything more beautiful or more expressive." While staying in Venice Byron proudly claimed he had different women on 200 consecutive evenings. His daughter Clara Allegra was born to Claire in January 1817 in England - Byron abandoned Allegra and placed her in a convent near Ravenna; she died in 1822. In 1819 Byron wrote in a letter to his publisher John Murray: "I am sure my bones would not rest in an English grave, or my clay mix with earth of that country. I believe the thought would drive me mad on my deathbed, could I suppose that any of my friends would be base enough to convey my carcass back to your soil."

During the years in Italy, Byron wrote LAMENT OF TASSO MAZEPPA, THE PROPHECY OF DANTE, and started DON JUAN, his satiric masterpiece. Byron lived with Teresa, Countess Guiccioli, in Venice. Teresa left her husband for Byron. In Italy, Byron became deeply interested in drama, and wrote among others THE TWO FOSCARI, SARDANAPALUS, CAIN, and the unfinished HEAVEN AND EARTH. After Byron started to support the Italian movement against Austrian rule, the Austrian secret police started to follow his movements. On January 21, 1821, the day before his 33rd birthday, Byron wrote in his diary:

**Through life's road, so dim and dirty,  
I have dragg'd to three and thirty.  
What have these years left to me?  
Nothing - except, thirty-three.**

He cooperated in the production of *The Liberal* magazine. After a long creative period, Byron had come to feel that action was more important than poetry. Byron armed a ship and sailed to Greece to aid the Greeks, who had risen against their Turkish overlords. However, before Byron saw any serious military action, he contracted the fever from which he died on 19 April 1824. Memorial services were held all over the land. The Greeks wished to bury him in Athens, but only his heart stayed in the country. Part of his skull and his internal organs had been removed for souvenirs. Byron's body was returned to England but churches refused to bury him. Finally Byron's coffin was placed in the family vault.

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.**