

BYRON AND POLITICS: SOME RECENT BOOKS

Byron in Geneva, by David Ellis, Liverpool University Press, 2011, ISBN 978-1-84631-643-2

Byron and the Politics of Freedom and Terror

Eds. Matthew J.A.Green, & Piya Pal-Lapinski, Palgrave Macmillan 2011, ISBN 978-0-230-2-46461

Byron's Romantic Politics - the Problem of Metahistory

by Peter Cochran, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, ISBN 978-1-4438-3283-0

These three books provide a welcome divagation from the usual purlieu of Byron scholarship, that is of him as an indefatigable Romeo, source of licentious scandals, and gay icon – could it be that Byron exhausts these stereotypes? – as it is all three provide an account of Byron in the context of the political thought of his era and in line with developments of modern literary theory.

The first book, *Byron in Geneva* by David Ellis examines the crucial period in Byron's life in summer 1816 when he visited Switzerland and met the Shelleyan circle, which became the nucleus of the romantic movement – emotional excess laced with fear of Promethean stolen fire which reached its popular expression in the prescient fable of Frankenstein by Mary Shelley. It is the locus of Byron at his most civilised – Mme de Staël was a neighbour – and also at his most existential – his crisis in the aftermath of his affair with Augusta, which had deepened into anguish and guilt with the composition of “Manfred” – this is a useful source book for Byron scholars who want to develop studies of these complexities which has given birth to the modern nightmare both of nihilism and horror while having a soft emotional centre at its core

That nightmare had actually begun with the French revolution and the Reign of Terror, and in the book *Byron and the Politics of Freedom and Terror*, edited by Green and Pal-Lapinski, some fresh insights are brought to bear on Byron as a poet and thinker caught at that time in history, where individuals seeking freedom and equality had to deal with the burden of history and the unresolved conundrums of revolutionary philosophy. This book is a collection of essays which show formidable scholarship both in treatment of these themes and in their elegant expression – bookended by Green and Pal-Lapinski, academics like Gonsalves (who writes with originality and aesthetic unity of terror by committee and the background in Venice), Gross (who writes movingly of the Orphic body), Stabler (who writes lucidly on the images of terror Byron might have seen), Dennis (who conveys a brilliant piece of anthropological dissection on the group mind), and Minta (who writes of Byron's political convictions and

his inconsistencies), are alongside others, all deep-level critics from the academy on both sides of the Atlantic – while editor of this book, Green, writes an acute philosophical account influenced by Badiou and Butler, on the idea of freedom *from* the body, in a riveting tour de force, while at the end of the book, the co-editor, Pal- Lapinski herself, mines new ore from the theoretical constructs such as those of Baudrillard which interrogate these philosophies and which have given weight and context and contributed so much to recent Byron Conferences. Every essay is a notable development in the history of these ideas by eleven distinguished scholars, around which is the configuration of the Byronic hero, the price of that freedom, its danger and allure captured pithily and poignantly in scrupulous detail.

The third book, *Byron's Romantic Politics - the Problem of Metahistory* is a labour of love, but one written after the affair – it is a courageous attempt to match the life of Byron and his works, but Yeats has warned us of the dangers of seeking perfection in both the life and the work of an artist, that one suffers at the expense of the other. None more so than Byron in this factual analysis of the real historical accounts left behind in the wake of the rumours. While acknowledging the genius behind *Beppo* and *Don Juan*, and *The Vision of Judgement* Cochran is sceptical of Byron's real actions, motives and intentions as recorded and blames metahistory in constructing a false idea of what he was about. But the Byron legend is so potent, because indeed it is in that quality of imagination that distinguishes poets, and therefore absolves them from too close an interpretation and scrutiny in what testament they left behind to objective history. The imagination wins every time, as this rigorously and completely researched study shows in spite of its best efforts by the distinguished scholar Peter Cochran. To quote Einstein: "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind a faithful servant: we have created a society that honours the servant and has forgotten the gift." – not forgotten, in Cochran's case, rather put to one side in a valiant attempt to historicise Byron in line with the rigours of factitude and exactitude.

These books are priced in line with scholarship publication, but are worthwhile additions to the Byron library which I am certain will have enduring importance.

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